

# Introduction

## The Good between Social Theory and Philosophy

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In one of the early chapters of his 2017 novel *The Golden House*, Salman Rushdie asks: *What is a good life? What is its opposite?* Rushdie identifies that ours is the time when ‘the grandeur of the Universal’ that the former question entails became increasingly difficult to ask. As he lays out his diagnosis:

We are so divided, so hostile to one another, so driven by sanctimony and scorn, so lost in cynicism, that we call our pomposity idealism, so disenchanted with our rulers, so willing to jeer at the institutions of our state, that the very word *goodness* has been emptied of meaning and needs, perhaps, to be set aside for a time, like all the other poisoned words, *spirituality*, for example, *final solution*, for example, and (at least when applied to skyscrapers and fried potatoes) *freedom*. (Rushdie 2017: 7)

The rest of the novel then reads more like a series of answers to the latter question about the opposite of the good life. Taking the zeitgeist of American culture and politics as his canvas, Rushdie paints our era in dark colours. There isn’t much room on the canvas for goodness.

Rushdie is not alone in such a diagnosis. Over the past two decades, similar dark tones have come to dominate many areas of social and cultural theory. This is hardly surprising. Social science modes of inquiry are profoundly intertwined with the ever-shifting realities of social life they aim to study. This kind of ‘double hermeneutics’, as Giddens describes the nature of the relationship between the production of social-science knowledge and its subject matter, is an ongoing process, constantly spiralling ‘in and out of the universe of social life, reconstructing both itself and that universe as an integral part of that process’ (1990: 15–16). This was the case for W.E.B. Du Bois, Émile Durkheim, Harriet Martineau, Karl Marx, Marcel Mauss and Max Weber as it is for contemporary social scientists. And our circumstances are indeed dire.

With the past decade of escalating planetary environmental crisis, protracted economic turmoil, the rise of exclusionary nationalisms and populism, and the global COVID-19 pandemic, set against a longer-term background of the global expansion of destructive neoliberalism, it is easy to understand the growth of a large body of work in the social sciences sounding pessimistic and often apocalyptic notes (Latour et al. 2018). These responses, as Dipesh Chakrabarty puts it, 'saturate our sense of the now' (2021: 22); and ours is a moment of an uncanny realization of how profoundly '[t]he geological time of the Anthropocene and the time of our everyday lives in the shadow of global capital are intertwined' (2021: 10). If there is any glimmer of hope, it is often situated in the tactics of resistance against such hegemonic and oppressive structures of domination, exploitation and destruction (Malm 2021; Ortner 2016; Urry 2016). Attention to such concerns undoubtedly plays a vital role in addressing the ecological, social, political and cultural problems of our age, both at the level of diagnosis and of critique (Fassin 2017; Keane 2020). This body of work resonates with Salman Rushdie's observation about putting aside the question about goodness while instead focusing on its opposites. Does this mean that the workings of aspirational and imaginative endeavours are no longer concerns in people's lives, and can thus be dismissed by social and cultural analysis? This volume contends that this is not the case and that understanding social life calls not only for focus on the darkness of our current times but also for bringing the question of the good to the centre of social science inquiry.

Recent years have witnessed a rapidly growing interest in morality, ethics and values within and beyond the social sciences (Hitlin and Vaisey 2010; Keane 2016; Tomasello 2016). This move has opened up exploration of how people create forms of the good in their actions and social relationships, how they construct and become orientated towards particular moral aspirations and imaginings of the world they want, and the tensions this can create.<sup>1</sup>

The move towards these questions can in part be seen as a reaction against the hopeless register of much social scientific writing, which has been shaped by a dominant focus on suffering (Robbins 2013a), the corrosive effects of neoliberalism and enduring precarity (Eriksen et al. 2015; Han 2018) and the 'dark' dimensions of social life (Ortner 2016). As Ken Plummer argues in relation to sociology, dark as the world

indeed is, this is not the full story. We also need ... sociology to take seriously the idea of hope and the future. Part of our work should routinely be the emancipatory project of imagining better human social worlds for all; and to engage in discussions about the values and practices which need to be developed to nudge us towards this potentially better world. (Plummer 2013)

Similarly in anthropology, a growing number of anthropologists have turned their attention to the study of care, values, ethics, morality, well-being,

empathy and hope as a new endeavour to explore ‘the different ways people organize their personal and collective lives in order to foster what they think of as good, and to study what it is like to live at least some of the time in light of such a project’ (Robbins 2013a: 457).

However, despite the increasing interest in how ideas and practices of the good are intrinsic to social life, there has been almost no sustained dialogue across the social science disciplines. Our volume attempts to foster such an *interdisciplinary* conversation in contemporary social theory and research. Bringing together contributions from anthropology, sociology, religious studies and philosophy, with ethnographic case studies of the good from diverse disciplinary debates and settings, past and present, this volume presents the first interdisciplinary engagement with what it means to study the good as a fundamental aspect of social and cultural life. Before we introduce the essays in this collection, we sketch out a map with some of the key coordinates for locating the debates on the good in anthropology and sociology, as two social science disciplines that have been particularly marked by growing interest in the good in recent years, and, in turn, we outline how these debates are situated between philosophy and social theory.<sup>2</sup>

## Anthropologies of the Good

Anthropologists have had a long, albeit not always explicitly articulated, interest in the study of the good. The rich anthropological archive consists of numerous accounts of culturally different ways people, individually and collectively, past and present, conceive and enact what is ultimately desirable and meaningful in their lives. Yet these accounts have not always been explicitly conceptualized and theorized in the language of the good. One of the rare early exceptions was Marcel Mauss. In his *Manual of Ethnography*, Mauss outlines the importance of studying moral phenomena and morality. Unlike Émile Durkheim’s view on morality, Mauss understood morality as ‘a matter of which people are clearly and organically aware’ (2007: 156), and yet as something that cannot be fully encompassed by rules and norms. Morality, Mauss argues, ‘is the art of living together, and it can be recognised by the presence of the notion of good’ (ibid.).<sup>3</sup> What Mauss gestures at when he speaks of ‘the notion of good’ around which human action is coordinated and pursued is the sphere of values that is diffused across all domains of social life and that, in turn, sets human action and social worlds in motion (Graeber 2013). Therefore, to situate anthropologists’ engagement with the questions about the good, and where and how the good can be located in people’s sociocultural worlds, we locate debates on an anthropology of the good in a wider context of anthropological theorizations of values (Robbins, this volume), and increasingly in the study of morality and ethics (Lambek, this volume). By *values*, we refer to ‘those things defined as good within a society or social group’ (Robbins 2013b:

100). Similarly, in his *Towards an Anthropology of Value*, the late David Graeber identified the study of the good – that is, culturally constructed conceptions of what is ultimately ‘desirable in human life’ – among the three broad streams of social theory on value (Graeber 2001: 1). In what follows, we distinguish between the anthropological study of *values*, which is concerned with ‘what is considered as desirable and/or good within a society’ and which focuses on the *realization* of diverse values and on value conflict, and the study of *value*, which is grounded in Marxian foci on production and capital, and which often treats value as a single thing or even substance of which there can be more or less (Elder-Vass 2016; Robbins 2013b: 100; 2019).<sup>4</sup>

Although the focus on values was one of the central themes of anthropological inquiry for a large part of the twentieth century, this never crystallized into a systematic theory (Graeber 2001: 1; Otto and Willerslev 2013). Since the 1980s, anthropologists have reoriented their interest away from the study of values. It is therefore noteworthy that when in 1980 Louis Dumont, one of the most important social scientific value theorists, delivered his Radcliffe-Brown Lecture, he decided to speak about the problem of value(s), as if bidding farewell to the debates that shaped the modern discipline in such a profound way. In just three dozen pages, Dumont (1982) covers a broad and complex conceptual genealogy of the major epistemological and cultural shifts in (European) modern thinking about values, tracing them from Plato to Clyde Kluckhohn, from Thomas Aquinas to Marcel Mauss, with detours to such thinkers as Marx, Polanyi and Voltaire along the way. But the lecture is also significant for a genealogy of an anthropology of the good, as it explicitly engages with the problem of the good and values in social life.

On a broad level, Dumont argues (1982: 209–10, 216) that the emergence of the modern episteme separated epistemology, aesthetics and morals into distinct domains of thought and action, as well as inquiry. As a contrast to modern thinking, Dumont reflects on Plato, for whom the Good was associated with the supreme Being. In this conception of social order, there was no separation between the Good, the True and the Beautiful, though these spheres were hierarchically ordered. For Plato, the Good was supreme yet active value; as Dumont writes, ‘perhaps because it is impossible to conceive the highest perfection as inactive and heartless, because the Good adds the dimension of action to that of contemplation’ (1982: 209). Here, Dumont does not suggest anthropologists should become Platonists but uses this contrast to point out the epistemic break the modern era brought about. The increasing primacy of scientific rationality and knowledge also created an unbridgeable distinction in modern epistemological positions between *what is* and *what ought to be*, a significant point to which we shall return shortly. The former, associated with scientific truths, became supreme, while the latter, associated with emotions and volition that cannot be measured, became encompassed by the former (*ibid.*).

Put differently, scientific facts, truths and material things gained primacy as more ‘real’ and valued, and thus as superior to the ideational and aesthetic

domains of human thought and action. Furthermore, the modern era was also the age of discoveries of 'other worlds,' which became disastrous for indigenous populations, and which led to the emergence of new world-system hierarchies (Sahlins 2005; Todorov 1992; Wolf 1982). As Dumont argues, the discoveries of other ways of life, cultures and religions relativized the old conceptions of the good (1982: 210). New experiences of cultural difference made talking about the universal Good more difficult for modern thinkers to accept. This was, then, the historical context in which ideas about values emerged. If talking about the good became difficult, Dumont writes, 'we can speak of the value or values that people acknowledge' across cultural difference (*ibid.*). The concept of value thus became from its inception, in Dumont's view, inherently anthropological for five main reasons: i) values are *social*; ii) configurations of values are *relative* for they vary within/between social and cultural contexts; iii) values *mediate* and intertwine the diverse domains of action, thought, experience and morals; iv) values are *comparative*; v) since we can find values everywhere, they could be considered as an anthropological *universal*. Dumont's key point is that in the concept of value anthropologists have at their disposal 'a word that allows [them] to consider all sorts of cultures and the most diverse estimations of the good without imposing on them our own: we can speak of our values and their values while we could not speak of our good and their good' (1982: 210). While Dumont's lecture draws more on the language of values than of the good, like Marcel Mauss, Dumont clearly saw the good as an inextricable part of thinking about social and cultural values and how these shape people's moral horizons of thought and action. As we shall see below, with the development of anthropological approaches to the study of morality and ethics, contemporary anthropologists have an adequate theoretical toolkit for addressing not only values but also the good. Yet in the genealogy of an anthropology of the good, Dumont's lecture *On Value*, often today considered obsolete, is an important piece.<sup>5</sup>

In the 1980s and 1990s, it was mainly Marxist-inspired anthropologists who continued writing on value. This body of work interrogated the actually existing workings of ever-expanding capitalism in various socio-political settings and ideological legitimations worldwide (e.g. Eiss and Pedersen 2002).<sup>6</sup> In response to the post-Cold War transformations and upheavals, and accelerated processes of globalization, the discipline was also changing in fundamental ways (Trouillot 2003). From the early 1990s onwards, anthropologists largely reoriented their focus away from the critical study of cultural difference and otherness (as approached, for example, through the study of values). The new dominant foci became the study of suffering, trauma and other ills accelerated by the global transformations. In particular, anthropologists documented the devastating effects of neoliberal modernity worldwide (e.g. Han 2012; Muehlebach 2012; also Eriksen et al. 2015; Ortner 2016) and increasingly the environmental devastation of the planet (Haraway et al. 2016; Latour et al. 2018; Tsing 2015). What brings these threads together, broadly speaking, are two interrelated sets of concerns.

First, it is the emergence of a shared focus on what Joel Robbins (2013a) described as 'suffering subject'. Modern anthropology was founded as a study of 'the Other', an imagery that Michelle-Rolph Trouillot (2003) aptly characterized as the savage slot, in a world epistemologically divided between the West and the Rest. The end of the Cold War era was the final straw for such an image of the world, and the discipline's epistemology. The world radically changed, and so did the practice of anthropology. According to Robbins, in response to these transformations, anthropologists started to engage with those people, communities and places who suffered, whether as a result of violence or deprivation. Put differently, the 'savage slot' was replaced with the 'suffering slot'. A key motivation for this shift was the rise of universal models of suffering and trauma that did not reconstitute the self/other divide, even as it tended to put difference out of play. Sherry Ortner (2016) offered a similar account of the developments of anthropological theories and debates since the 1990s. In Ortner's perceptive reading, the last three decades gave rise to a 'dark anthropology' that responded to the widespread suffering brought about by neoliberalism. For Ortner, the practice of dark anthropology is an ethico-political position that 'emphasizes the harsh and brutal dimensions of human experience, and the structural and historical conditions that produce them' (2016: 49). Nowadays, anthropologists pursue dark anthropology as a response to 'the increasingly problematic conditions of the *real world* under neoliberalism' (Ortner 2016: 50; emphasis added).

Ortner's reference to 'the real world' epitomizes the second set of concerns that have foregrounded the shifts in the discipline in the past three decades. As unproblematic as her statement might seem, it bundles together a number of problems. Let us consider a prime example of studying 'the real world' today, that of a dark anthropology of migration. In her critical essay on the anthropological scholarship and practice of the so-called European 'refugee crisis' of 2015–2016, Heath Cabot persuasively captured these sentiments and predicaments of conducting fieldwork 'at the front lines of suffering' (2019: 266). Cabot has a long and impressive track record of studying migration and the politics of asylum practices of the EU's border regimes. As Cabot writes, the practice of dark anthropology, here in the context of 'real' displacement, often 'takes place in the form of crisis chasing, or the propensity to take crisis as a driver of scholarship,' and continues, '[t]hese trends reinforce particular notions of public interest, usefulness, and social relevance (Greenhouse 2011: 10) that make anthropologists complicit in perpetuating the increasingly neoliberal business aspects of our discipline' (2019: 262). Put differently, Cabot identifies how through the vigorous pursuit of studying 'the increasingly problematic conditions of the *real world* under neoliberalism' anthropologists often reproduce the ills of neoliberalism that they wish to tackle. But this example also clearly illustrates, as Robbins (this volume) writes, how the practice of dark anthropology with its focus on the suffering subject became 'overly attached to attending to phenomena that

[anthropologists] thought of as “real”. What became thought of as ‘real’ is the study of politics, power, practice, suffering and resistance (ibid.). On the other hand, what became considered as unreal, or as not real enough, was not only the study of values but also ‘culture, structure, meanings, representations, and shared ideals’ (ibid.). Yet ‘imagination and reality are reverse sides of the same process’ (Graeber 2007: 314). If we return to Dumont’s point about the divide in modern epistemological positions between *what is* and *what ought to be*, we can see that with the pursuit of dark anthropology the pendulum swung towards the former position rather than ethnographically exploring specific configurations and articulations of the intertwinements between the two. Anthropologies of the good that have emerged in the past decade need to be understood against this backdrop (Knauft 2019). And here we use the plural noun advisedly to highlight not only commonalities but also some significant distinctions in attending to the good. We identify three major directions of addressing the good that have emerged in anthropology in recent years. Let us address them in turn.

The phrase ‘the anthropology of the good’ was first introduced in Robbins’ article, one we have already discussed, entitled ‘Beyond the Suffering Subject: Toward an Anthropology of the Good’ (2013a). In his essay, as discussed above, Robbins outlined how the study of the suffering subject came to dominate the discipline. Although the focus on suffering and the dark aspects of human existence gave rise to a very important and formidable body of scholarship that aims to address the burning issues of our era in order to change them, as Robbins commends, the main thrust of his argument is concerned with something else. Namely, how by doing so anthropologists abandoned ‘their longstanding tradition of studying cultural difference and putting their findings to crucial use in upending settled Western understandings’ (Robbins, this volume). Anthropologists pivoted away from pursuing critical comparison focused on cultural difference, towards ‘empathic connection and moral witnessing based on human unity’ (2013a: 453). Suffering and trauma have a universal quality. They confront us in their humanity, no matter in what context and circumstances (2013a: 455). This shift in the practice of ethnography is not concerned with how ‘people construct their lives *differently* elsewhere’ (ibid.: 455, italics added), a point to which we return shortly, but it now focuses on how anthropologists ‘offer accounts of trauma that make us and our readers feel in our bones the vulnerability we as human beings all share’ (ibid.).<sup>7</sup>

The main thrust of Robbins’ argument is not a critique of studying these topics *tout court* but rather to consider a *parallel* perspective and offer a practice of doing anthropology of the good that might enhance these important interventions. Indeed, Robbins shares with this kind of anthropology of the suffering subject the premise that all human beings have the equal right to free themselves of the dark effects of dispossession, trauma or neoliberalism. But the universalizing perspective of the suffering framework often flattens the

*diverse possibilities* of human striving, imagining and enacting a better or other life than a person has in the present (also Carrithers 2005). Anthropology of the good is, then, an attempt to ‘explore the different ways people organize their personal and collective lives in order to foster what they think of as good, and to study what it is like to live at least some of the time in light of such a project’ (2013a: 457). People’s diverse ideas and imaginings of the possibilities shouldn’t be dismissed as naive, or as a kind of bad-faith alibi. On the contrary, as Graeber (2001: xiii) tirelessly pointed out, comparative ethnography is ‘the only discipline capable of addressing the full range of human possibilities’, including envisioning possible alternatives to the actually existing oppressive structures. Similarly, Robbins argues, ‘if we assume that ideals always and only get either ignored or deployed in nefarious ways, then the anthropology of the good can never get off the ground’ (ibid.). The main challenge for the discipline is to challenge ‘our own version of the real’ and give these ‘aspirational and idealizing aspects of the lives of the others a place in our accounts’ (ibid.: 458). In other words, it is ‘a commitment to the idea that the world could possibly look very differently than it does’ (Graeber 2007: 2). Pursuing this commitment requires integrating into our perspective not only *what is* but also the diverse articulations of how people imagine *what ought to* and *could be*.

Ortner (2016) sketches a second approach to the anthropology of the good in her influential article, which we have already mentioned, entitled ‘Dark Anthropology and Its Others: Theory since the Eighties’, in which she links the emergence of ‘dark anthropology’ primarily with the pervasive influence of neoliberalism, which is transforming lives on the planet (2016: 51). In turn, contemporary anthropological practice is primarily focused on the dark effects of neoliberalism and the forms of suffering, inequalities and struggles it creates. Ortner traces the emergence of various ‘anthropologies of the good’ as a direct response to these dark trends within the discipline. On the surface, the two texts by Robbins and Ortner might look similar, and indeed these two texts are increasingly lumped together as programmatic texts in discussions of the anthropologies of the good. However, Ortner’s text differs significantly from Robbins’ original argument, and it omits several crucial points, including Robbins’ emphasis on the role of cultural difference and relativism in anthropological practice (Robbins, n.d.). Furthermore, while Robbins conceived of an anthropology of the good as an attempt to develop a complementary perspective to those focused on suffering, Ortner interprets the emergence of anthropologies of the good *dialectically* as a countermovement, and thus in tension with ‘dark anthropology’. From all the emerging and disparate anthropological foci on the good, which include care, empathy, hope, morality, temporality, values and well-being, Ortner selectively highlights only well-being and adds recent anthropological work on happiness<sup>8</sup> to express her uneasiness with the “happiness turn” in the middle of all the darkness’ (2016: 59). As a second important area, she adds the recent ‘ethical turn’ in anthropology (Laidlaw 2014; Lambek 2010). Here, however, Ortner is critical of the anthropology of



morality and ethics for drawing a sharp line between the ethical and the workings of power, inequality and violence in social life. Against this backdrop, Ortner proposes ‘a different kind of anthropology of the good: the anthropology of critique, resistance, and activism’ (2016: 60) in an attempt to integrate these divergent streams.

Ortner’s vision of such an anthropology of the good builds on her previous work on resistance (1995) and identifies three areas: i) the practice of cultural critique, ‘which includes writing about conditions of inequality, power, and violence in various parts of the world’; ii) ‘a range of mostly theoretical work addressed to rethinking capitalism as a system’; iii) social movements that have taken shape in the neoliberal period’ (2016: 61). The underlying thread running through these areas is the role of ‘activist anthropologist’ as someone directly involved in addressing the neoliberal order. Although Ortner offers a succinct diagnosis of our times, her dark vision of the neoliberal order as determining the conditions under which all humans on the planet live today, and hence experience more or less similar predicaments, has similar homogenizing tendencies as ‘the suffering subject’ argument. It is a perspective grounded in the epistemic position of the ‘real’, which through its dialectical position leaves little room for the aspirational and imaginative aspects of the human condition.

In an insightful response to Robbins and Ortner, Bruce Knauff<sup>9</sup> (2019) observes that anthropologists have engaged the question of the good more in general conceptual debates, while there has been less attempt to apply and substantiate these debates ethnographically (2019: 11). Knauff agrees that people often do meaningfully orient their lives towards some kind of positive value in spite of their actually living circumstances that might be dire and dark and structured by the conditions of inequality and domination (2019: 4). But to substantiate this relationship ethnographically in its socio-historical specificity, Knauff suggests, ‘it seems particularly important to combine a critical understanding of local and larger political economy *with* a culturally nuanced understanding of locally constructed positive meaning, resilience, and optimism or happiness’ (2019: 4; original emphasis). Our volume shares this nuancing perspective and offers different ethnographically grounded case studies.

The third direction that needs to be mentioned in the genealogy of anthropologists’ engagement with the good is in many regards akin to Robbins’, but it is nonetheless distinct. It has developed from anthropologists’ recent engagement with moral philosophy, Aristotelian virtue ethics, ordinary language philosophy, and in particular Foucault’s project on ethics and the hermeneutics of the subject in his later work (Das 2012; Laidlaw 2014; Lambek 2010, 2015; Mattingly and Throop 2018). We explore anthropologists’ engagement with philosophy later in the introduction. However, in the context of the debates outlined here so far, it is important to situate the ethical turn in anthropology over the past two decades as a response to the inadequacy of the

existing approaches – focused on political and economic structures – to engage with the ethical dimension of human life and existence (Mattingly and Throop 2018: 477). As with anthropological theorizations of values, anthropologists' turn towards the study of morality and ethics is an attempt to study ethnographically how people address in their day-to-day lives 'what it means to live in a world with ideals, rules, or criteria that cannot be met completely or consistently' (Lambek 2015: xi). This body of work showed that people even in the most trying circumstances imagine and aspire to live a life worth living – that is, to obtain some version of a good life (Mattingly 2010, 2014; also Henig, this volume). It also shows how people are evaluative (Keane 2016; Laidlaw 2014; Lambek 2010) and act with ethical criteria of what is right or good and what is wrong in mind, even if 'goodness is not always the outcome' (Lambek 2015: xvii). Such moral thriving and striving, and exercising of ethical judgement, is not just a domain of people's aspirations and imagination but rather an assemblage of imaginings, practices and actions (Mattingly 2014: 8). The anthropology of morality and ethics thus doesn't foreclose the question of the good itself but approaches it from the position of addressing what people consider worth pursuing, and what makes life worth living, through the focus on people's (evaluative) actions.

### **The Sociology of Moral Life: 'Old' and 'New'**

Within the history of sociology, there has been less explicit focus than in anthropology on 'the good'. However, questions about how people evaluate what is good and bad, right and wrong, and the social contexts shaping particular moral ideals and values are central themes within the sociology of morality and can be traced back to the founding thinkers of the discipline. Durkheim is often treated as the founder of sociological approaches to morality in his aim to develop a distinctive 'science of morality', while Weber presented social life as fundamentally value-laden, painting a vivid portrait of how social conditions subject us to the experience of value conflicts and tensions (Wilkinson and Kleinman 2016: 113). Yet the gendered and racialized dynamics of canon formation have meant that the contributions of a number of other theorists in developing sociological approaches to morality and the good have been underplayed. As early as 1838, Harriet Martineau (1802–1876), one of the early pioneers of sociology, was proposing a science of morality in her methodological treatise, *How to Observe Morals and Manners*, as discussed by Abend (2010). Emphasizing the wide variations in how morality is lived in practice, Martineau argued:

no doctrines yet invented have accounted for some total revolutions in the ideas of right and wrong, which have occurred in the course of ages. A person who takes for granted that there is an universal Moral Sense among men ... cannot reasonably

explain how it was that those men were once esteemed the most virtuous who killed the most enemies in battle, while now it is considered far more noble to save life than destroy it. They cannot but wonder how it was once thought a great shame to live in misery, and an honour to commit suicide; while now the wisest and best men think exactly the reverse. And, with regard to the present age, it must puzzle men who suppose that all ought to think alike on moral subjects, that there are parts of the world where mothers believe it a duty to drown their children, and that eastern potentates openly deride the king of England for having only one wife instead of one hundred. (1838: 22)

Each individual's 'feelings of rights and wrong', she argues, are not innate but rather 'grow up in him from the influences to which he is subjected' (ibid.: 23), and 'every prevalent virtue or vice is the result of the particular circumstances amidst which the society exists' (ibid.: 27). Martineau explored what these circumstances and influences might consist of, examining 'the Feudal System' and US Society, and identifying such features as 'extent of the commerce', life expectancy, population density, ethnicity and race, class, gender, occupation, the nature of people's dwellings, and others, and how these shape morals (discussed in Abend 2010: 571). However, despite this emphasis on social and cultural moral variation, Martineau acknowledges the idea that there are certain shared universal ethical principles, arguing that '[f]or instance, to torment another without any reason, real or imaginary, is considered wrong all over the world. In the same manner to make others happy is universally considered right' (1838: 23; discussed in Abend 2010: 569).

Writing at the same time as Durkheim was developing his science of morality, Jane Addams (1860–1935) also emphasized morality as an intrinsic aspect of social life. Writing before the compartmentalization of social inquiry into distinct fields of sociology, social policy and anthropology, Addams has often been presented as a 'social reformer'. It is only in the last three decades that her contributions to sociological theory have been acknowledged (Deegan 1988; Romero 2020; Wilkinson and Kleinman 2016). Influenced by and in turn influencing pragmatist philosophy (Seigfried 1999), Addams emphasized – echoing anthropologists' sensibilities – that understanding social and moral realities requires immersion in the experiences we are studying. As Wilkinson (this volume) describes, Addams emphasized that for sociologists to develop reflexivity about their own values and how these are shaped by factors such as institutional privilege, class and ethnicity, they need to be 'personally affected by' the conditions they seek to understand, an argument also later developed by Bourdieu (1999a, 1999b). Like Martineau and Durkheim, Addams recognized that our sense of the good is shaped by learnt, embodied social habits, but she placed greater emphasis than either on the significance of care – rather than obligation – and on the interplay between the individual and the social collective in pursuing the good. For her, this construction takes place in our everyday interactions: as social beings, she writes, 'we determine ideals by our daily

actions and decisions not only for ourselves, but largely for each other' (Addams 2002: 112).

W.E.B. Du Bois's work has also been neglected in accounts of the sociology of morality, reflecting the broader marginalization of the contribution that the Atlanta School and other historically black colleges and universities made in the development of sociology in the dominant white 'founding-father' narrative (Romero 2020: 4). Du Bois's *The Negro Church* (1903) offered an empirical study of the moral status of the African American community, exploring the perceptions of both black and white Americans. This formed the basis for his subsequent *Morals and Manners among Negro Americans* (1914), which developed an empirical study based on a survey of 'morals and manners', exploring how racism shaped moral status and moral judgements. Questions of moral judgement, striving and ideals are also interwoven throughout *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). In this, Du Bois's famous concept of double-consciousness illuminates how racialized prejudice leads to particular forms of moral experience as an interplay within the individual subject of competing 'thoughts', 'strivings' and 'ideals', shaped by the drawing of specific moral boundaries. In this sense, Du Bois's work pioneers attending to how particular moral ideals and strivings are created through experiences of suffering and the operations of power and domination, while at the same time powerfully expressing his own vision of the good in terms of a just society, in which those currently 'prisoned shall go free' (2018: 199).

Despite this early concern with morality in the development of sociological theory in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this focus waned. Steven Lukes in 1973 argued that 'the sociology of morality' was 'the great void in contemporary social science' (Lukes 1973: 432), while nearly twenty years later Craig Calhoun noted that 'sociologists have not carried forward Durkheim's tasks of creating a sociology of morality' (Calhoun 1991: 232) and echoing Weber stated that the discipline had become 'unmusical' in its engagement with morality. Calling for a renewed sociological engagement with values and morality, Andrew Sayer in 2011 argued in his *Why Things Matter to People: Social Science, Values and Ethical Life*:

We are ethical beings, not in the sense that we necessarily always behave ethically, but that as we grow up we come to evaluate behaviour according to some ideas of what is good or acceptable. We compare and admire or deplore particular actions, personal traits, social practices and institutions. How people behave and should behave with respect to one another is undeniably important to us, indeed it is hard to imagine anything more important, yet social science tells us little about our sense of what is good or bad in these matters and why it is so important to us. (Sayer 2011: 143)

Within North American sociology, the turn away from morality and questions of the good in the twentieth century has been attributed to Talcott Parsons's functionalist assimilation of 'the moral domain' within the sphere of norms and 'moral consensus' (Parsons and Shils 1951). As Hitlin and Vaisey put it,

'morality became nearly synonymous with conformity' (2013: 53). Although moral norms and values were significant in the functionalism that dominated North American sociology from the 1940s to the mid-1960s, they were understood normatively – that is, as the basis of social order – and 'were never critically examined' (Stivers 1996: 4).

From the 1960s onwards, this focus on complying with norms and values became increasingly incompatible with the discipline's broader shift 'away from supposedly soft, subjective features of social life towards hard, objective concerns such as resources and power' (Hitlin and Vaisey 2013: 53). Mirroring debates in anthropology, the influence of neo-Marxist approaches across Europe and North America explained social phenomena in terms of power, domination and conflict (Robbins, this volume). Morality was seen as 'at best an ideological reflection of power relations' (Stivers 1996: 12), which hid 'real' interests and therefore not an avenue worth pursuing (Lamont and Thévenot 2000: 6). The cultural and practice approaches that developed in the 1970s – pushing further against focusing on moral norms and morality – likewise contributed to the eventual demise of functionalism. Critics of functionalism, as Owen Abbott notes, highlighted its failure to examine moral variation and value conflict within particular societies, its inability to account for moral change, and overall, perhaps most damagingly, the normative problems of 'equating the moral with the affirmation of deeply problematic institutional norms' (Abbott 2019: 85; also Abbott, this volume). In the end, because morality 'was identified so strongly with Parsonian theory, it went down with the functionalist ship' (Hitlin and Vaisey 2013: 53). Sociological reluctance to engage with morality during this period can also, as Abbott suggests, be linked with the associations between the study of morality and the traditions of Western moral philosophy, which has in broad terms been concerned with the nature of morality, questions of moral judgement, and establishing rational foundations for universalizable principles (2019: 85). Sociologists, he argues, have rightly been 'averse to the modernist philosophic pursuit of moral abstractions via conceptions of universalism, decontextualisation, and the pristine reason of the disembedded, rationally construing subject' (ibid.).

During the 1990s, there was some revival of interest in morality. In their grand theoretical diagnoses of the (post)modern conditions of society, Zygmunt Bauman (1993, 1997) and Anthony Giddens (1991) offered divergent views of the nature of morality and values, but the writings of both of them can be seen as spurred by a sense of the 'disappearance of morality' (Shilling and Mellor 1998: 207). As Stivers put it, the sociological interest in morality that began to appear in the 1990s 'becomes a way of remembering what has been lost as a prelude to resisting the amoral present' (1996: 12). Certainly, as Abbott puts it, the pessimistic lamenting

of a new era of anomic moral decline and pervasive uncertainty (Bauman 1997), as well as the insistence of the necessity ... for the perpetual re-negotiation of the moral

parameters of our social world ... did little to enhance a research agenda around the recapitulation of morality as a social phenomenon, and contributed only opaquely to questions of how people draw upon and encounter moral perspectives in their daily lives. (Abbott 2019: 86)

The US also saw growing – although somewhat differently inflected – sociological interest in values from the late 1980s and beyond. In a Durkheimian vein, Robert Bellah and colleagues' *Habits of the Heart* (1996), first published in 1985, proposed four different moral cultures in the United States: expressive individualist, utilitarian individualist, civic republican, and biblical, aiming overall to paint a portrait of the moral character and values of the United States. Building on the Durkheimian spirit of Bellah and also drawing on Clifford Geertz's interpretive approach in anthropology, Jeffrey Alexander's distinctive work in cultural sociology developed a structural hermeneutic approach that emphasized the importance of attending to moral meanings and their textures within social life (e.g. Alexander 1988, 2003, 2006). Ronald Inglehart's influential work on value change from the 1970s onwards (e.g. Inglehart and Baker 2000), drawing on data from the World Values Survey, also explored values in relation to broader society, tracing an overall shift from materialist values such as economic security to 'postmaterialist values' such as self-expression. Alongside – although often not in conversation with – this broader macrolevel approach to morality, questions about moral meaning and the cultural constructions of morality emerged in relation to distinct social contexts, perhaps most notably economic sociology, with its distinctive focus on questions of moral values and how these relate to the nature of value (e.g. Lamont 1992; Zelizer 1994; see also Heinich 2020; Skeggs 2014). Also focusing on the question of values, Hans Joas's work in social theory (2000) explored the genesis of values, arguing that values arise in experiences of self-formation and self-transcendence, and offering a differentiation between values, norms and desires.

It has only been since the turn of the twenty-first century, however, that the sociology of morality has (re)emerged as a distinctive area within the discipline, with the establishment in 2012 of a section of the American Sociological Association on *Altruism, Morality, and Social Solidarity* and new handbooks of the sociology of morality (Hitlin and Vaisey 2010) and altruism, morality, and social solidarity (Jeffries 2014). While not often explicitly foregrounded, a focus on the good is intrinsic to this burgeoning sociological literature on morality. Gabriel Abend (2008: 87), for example, defines the sociology of morality as 'the sociological investigation of the nature, causes, and consequences of people's ideas about *the good and the right*' and argues that for sociology to improve its understanding of morality, 'better conceptual, epistemological, and methodological foundations are needed' (ibid.: 118, emphasis added). There is now increasing willingness amongst sociologists to explore morality and the good as intrinsic elements of social life. This growing body of

work is often dubbed ‘the new sociology of morality’ (e.g. Abbott 2019; Hitlin and Vaisey 2010, 2013), although several scholars have pointed out that it has much in common with the ‘old’ sociology of morality. In his insightful chapter in the *Handbook of the Sociology of Morality*, Abend, for example, notes that the logic of Martineau’s 1838 sociology of morality ‘is exactly the logic’ of much contemporary sociology of morality, as scholars today seek ‘to find out what factors account for moral rules, ideas, beliefs, institutions, practices, etc; (Abend 2010: 571). They might ask, he notes, ‘why people in a particular society or social group have a particular institution (say, slavery, or corporate social responsibility indexes),<sup>10</sup> or a prevalent conviction/value/feeling (say, that slavery is an unjust institution, or that business has moral obligations to society) rather than another’ (ibid.).

What *is* new in the ‘new’ sociology of morality, however, at least in comparison with older Durkheimian, Weberian and Parsonian approaches, is the desire to study morality through empirical studies of contemporary societies and historical sociology (Bargheer and Wilson 2018: 3; Lynch, this volume). Given the fragmentation of the discipline that occurred over the twentieth century, there is also a desire to move counter to centripetal institutional forces by drawing together sociologists from different subfields who are engaged with exploring questions of morality in order to establish the distinctive features of a sociology of morality (Hitlin and Vaisey 2010). Hitlin and Vaisey (2013) propose that the sociology of morality can make distinctive contributions in three main areas.<sup>11</sup> First, it helps define and understand what morality is through exploring ‘social and historical variations in what gets classified as moral’ (Hitlin and Vaisey 2010: 54). This approach works with a broadly formal understanding of morality, referring ‘to understandings of good and bad, right and wrong, worthy and unworthy that vary between persons and between social groups’, and encompassing how individuals or groups decide which behaviours or goals are ‘the most worthy, and what people *should* believe, feel, and do’ (Hitlin and Vaisey 2013: 55). The good, here, is thus whatever a person or group takes it to be, and the important questions following from this are empirical – exploring and accounting for moral variation, for instance. Second, it aims to explore how morality affects action (Hitlin and Vaisey 2013: 60). This includes, for instance, forms of moral motivation, with a growing body of sociological work drawing on approaches in social psychology, cognitive anthropology and neuroscience to explore how moral orientations and senses of moral identity might shape strategies of action over time (e.g. Frye 2012; Vaisey 2009). Third, it aims to explore where morality comes from and, in particular, how social processes ‘create and sustain particular forms of morality’ (Hitlin and Vaisey 2010: 54) and how and why moralities vary. This might, for instance, involve focus on the role of institutions and organizations across different fields – from medical to humanitarian to economic – or exploring the role that social inequalities or the intersections of class, ethnicity and gender play in shaping values (e.g. Hitlin

and Harkness 2018). In this latter emphasis on moral variation, Hitlin and Vaisey argue that the ‘new’ sociology of morality is more Weberian than Durkheimian in its emphasis that morality ‘belongs more to cross-cutting groups and less to society as a whole’ (Hitlin and Vaisey 2013: 53). We could also, however, see this emphasis as bringing us again back to Martineau.

In reflecting on why sociology – like anthropology – has turned (again) to questions of the good, we would suggest, as outlined above, that the ‘darkness’ of the current times is significant. Articulating the importance of a sociology of hope, Les Back notes, writing in the context of the UK, that ‘[f]rom the national self-mutilations of Brexit to our heating Earth and the polluted landscapes that thicken our oceans and the tragedy of the Covid-19 pandemic, worldly troubles loom large’ (2021: 3). In this context, Back argues for the need for ‘a different kind of attentiveness to the world... in the service of hope’ (ibid.: 4). This kind of attentiveness to hope, as a form of the good, can be seen as one of the distinctive contributions of the sociological focus on morality. Just as the early sociologists – writing in conditions of unprecedented societal upheavals and new forms of division and inequality – sought to place questions about what it might mean to live a good life within such times at the front and centre of the discipline, so also this ‘new’ concern with morality is animated by the same impulse to understand what really matters to people and why, and the social consequences of this, and to foreground the imaginative possibilities of how things might be otherwise (Sayer 2011; Wilkinson, this volume).

## **Between Philosophy and Social Theory**

While morality, ethics and values wavered as topics of inquiry within sociology and anthropology throughout much of the twentieth century, these themes remained central within moral philosophy. It is not surprising, therefore, that the resurgent anthropological and sociological approaches to questions of morality, ethics and values have drawn from debates in moral philosophy. This conversation between anthropology and philosophy could be seen as initially prompted by James Laidlaw’s influential 2001 Malinowski Memorial Lecture (Laidlaw 2002). Laidlaw argued that the reason the anthropology of ethics did not exist at that point was because ‘Durkheim’s conception of the social so completely identified the collective with the good that an independent understanding of ethics appears neither necessary nor possible’ (ibid.: 312. For a critical response, see Lukes, this volume). Jarrett Zigon likewise (2007, 2008) argued that through the influence of Durkheim a Kantian deontological approach became the anthropological norm. This equated morality and the good with rules, duties and obligations, but replacing Kant’s moral law with society, following Durkheim’s critique of Kant (for a slightly different view, see Robbins 2007). In the years since Laidlaw’s article,



anthropologists studying morality and ethics have turned to a range of philosophical interlocutors. As outlined in the earlier section, three main philosophical approaches have been especially prominent, as Cheryl Mattingly and Jason Throop (2018) identify in an insightful review of the anthropology of ethics and morality: Foucauldian and neo-Aristotelian traditions of virtue ethics, ordinary language philosophy and phenomenology.

In moving away from Durkheim, anthropologists have been especially drawn to Foucault's later work on the ethics and the care of the self, to the extent that Foucault has now 'dethroned' Durkheim in shaping anthropology's understanding of the moral (Mattingly 2014: 35).<sup>12</sup> Foucault's work has been especially influential in part, as Laidlaw argued (2002), because his approach to ethics allows a concept of 'freedom' in the ethical act while at the same time still acknowledging how modes of socially and culturally habituated embodied practice shape ethical subjects.<sup>13</sup> Foucault's attention to practices of self-cultivation has also inspired widespread attention to Aristotelian virtue ethics and its revival in twentieth-century moral philosophy in the work of Alasdair MacIntyre (1981), Martha Nussbaum (1986) and others. One of the distinctive attractions of Aristotle and neo-Aristotelian philosophies here is their location of ethics as intrinsic to human action and the attention given to the complexities of different dimensions of human activity (Lambek 2010, 2015). As Mattingly and Throop describe, Aristotle presented human action as directed 'to the human cultivation of a good life. This particular view of the good life is thus one that is necessarily enacted ... As such, it is full of frailty and uncertainty because no amount of rules, norms, or even wisdom can preclude the challenge of judging the good in the particular circumstances in which action must be taken' (2018: 481). The good, following MacIntyre, is located within specific practices and internal to them, as opposed to instrumental goals, which are external to specific practices (such as a goal of mastery over others, or a desire for honour). As Lambek puts it, 'a practice is ethical insofar as the goal is not instrumental but reaching for excellence within the particular practice – and for human good or happiness overall in the practice of practices' (2010: 21). Non-Western ethical traditions have also been drawn into this conversation, developing comparative theoretical approaches for exploring forms of virtue and what it is to be a good person or live a good life (e.g. Pandian 2009; Weeratunge 2010).

Alongside Aristotelian approaches, ordinary language philosophy has been a dominant influence in anthropological work on 'ordinary ethics'. Advocates of this approach have located the ethical within the realm of 'ordinary' practice and action, 'as specific acts (performance) and ongoing judgment (practice)' (Lambek 2015: 242). In this body of work, ordinary language philosophy – especially Ludwig Wittgenstein, J.L. Austin and Stanley Cavell – has been drawn on in exploring the formation of criteria for ethical judgement and modes of performativity and acknowledgement. Advocates of ordinary ethics have often situated their understanding of ethics in contrast with notions of the

transcendent or the religious (Das 2012; Lambek 2010). This is also the reason why some of its proponents suggested that there is no such thing as the good. Veena Das, for example, claims that ordinary ethics is opposed to any notion of 'the good' that stands 'in alienated majesty separated from all suffering and pain' (in Venkatesan 2015: 438), and she argues that ethical work 'is done not by orienting oneself to transcendental agreed-upon values but rather through the cultivation of sensibilities *within* the everyday' (Das 2012: 149). This understanding of morality is, she argues, premised on 'making dispositions and habits' the 'very substance of a moral way of living' (2015: 65). While religious vocabularies may play a part in this, Das states, drawing on Deleuze's (1998) contrast between the 'morality of living' and 'the European morality of salvation and charity'; that these vocabularies do not 'function as the kind of transcendental super-concepts that Wittgenstein warned against' (Das 2015: 65).

In response, Robbins has argued that rejecting the transcendent or the religious as dimensions of the ethical or the good means excluding aspects of life that for many play an important part in constructing forms of value and moral life, such as consciously articulated moral laws or forms of religious ritual (Robbins 2016, on rules see also Clarke 2015). Stanley Cavell – an influential figure in ordinary ethics approaches – likewise argues that visions of and arguments about the good city – what he calls 'an imagination of justice' – are important in the moral life and that utopian moments and transcendental elements may in the end be 'indispensable in the motivation for a moral existence' (Cavell 2004: 18; see Strhan, this volume). This question of the role of utopian and transcendent elements within the realm of the moral and how these are imagined and constructed across space and time is perhaps, however, ultimately an *empirical* question, as is the location of the good within the everyday and the ways in which forms of the good are related to particular forms of suffering and injustice (see Henig, this volume; Wilkinson, this volume). As Michael Jackson puts it, '[t]hese gestures towards everyday ethics, and the ways questions of what is right and good figure in almost every human interaction, conversation, and rationalization, effectively reinscribe the role of ethnography as a method for exploring a variety of actual social situations' (2013: 11).

A third rich seam of anthropological work on moral experience has drawn on phenomenological philosophy – especially hermeneutic phenomenology – to explore questions of responsivity and intersubjectivity (Mattingly and Throop 2018: 482). This approach focuses on the struggle for a good life, the way things address us, matter to us and make claims on us and 'the way that the world and our response to it are inextricably entangled' (Mattingly 2014: 13). Drawing on a range of philosophers, including Emmanuel Levinas, Martin Heidegger and Paul Ricoeur, this approach to morality emphasizes human fragility, finitude, embodiment, moral emotion and 'the limits of life as lived' (Mattingly and Throop 2018: 483). Mattingly (2014) emphasizes that these phenomenological approaches place the focus on the first-person stance<sup>14</sup> of the experiencing subject (who is always-already at the same time a relational being), on the

condition of being-with or being-for another, and on the spaces between subjects ‘and between those subjects and the world itself’ (Mattingly and Throop 2018: 483; see for example Jackson 2012). Countering the critique that phenomenological approaches assert an individualist, Western-centred philosophical hegemony (e.g. Kapferer and Gold 2018), Mattingly and Throop argue that these approaches ‘shift attention away from readily made boundaries between individual and world, self and other, thought and thing, ego and alter’ and instead invite ‘an interrogation of the fluctuating processes by which and through which such distinctions are intersubjectively and intercorporeally constituted and made meaningful’ (2018: 483). Drawing on Spinoza as well as Levinas, Heidegger and Ricoeur, Jackson argues that ‘ethics concerns the ways species life or individual lives are struggled for and sustained, especially under conditions of insecurity, scarcity, danger, and loss, *as well as* the ways in which life itself flows through all things, connecting all forms of life in a common web’ (2013: 6).

While conversations with philosophy have figured prominently in shaping the terms of anthropological approaches to the moral and ethical, it would be fair to say that they have been less developed thus far in sociology. This is in part because the re-emergence of morality as a core theme has been more recent in sociology than anthropology. It can also be attributed to the fact that social theories – including those of Durkheim – have continued to be a resource in sociological approaches to studying morality and the good, and there has therefore been less sense of a need to look beyond the discipline. The ongoing influence of Weber has meant that there has been attention to the significance of Nietzsche in shaping Weber’s understanding of moral values and purpose (and their fragmentation) under the cultural conditions of modernity (Wilkinson and Kleinman 2016), as well as wider attention to the significance of Nietzsche’s genealogy of morality<sup>15</sup> in developing criteria to map different moralities across space and time (Abend 2014; Bargheer and Wilson 2018).

As in anthropology, virtue ethics is something of a counter-example, as it has figured as one notable philosophical thread in the ‘new’ sociology of morality. Sayer’s analysis of values (2011) critiques notions of detached rationality that have been dominant in Western modernist philosophy and draws on virtue ethics to explore how moral emotions and sentiments, virtues and vices are related to social context. Also drawing virtue theory into conversation with sociology, Owen Abbott likewise notes that much moral philosophy has pursued the formation of moral rules and principles, whereas the ‘sociological view is that action and judgement, moral or otherwise, cannot realistically be unravelled from the relational context in which they are constituted’ (Abbott 2019: 76). As Seyla Benhabib puts it:

Modern moral philosophy, and particularly universalist moralities of justice, have emphasized our dignity and worth as subjects at the cost of forgetting and repressing our vulnerability and dependency as bodily selves. Such networks of dependence

and the web of human affairs in which we are immersed are not simply like clothes which we outgrow or like shoes which we leave behind. They are ties that bind; ties that shape our moral identities, our needs, *and our visions of the good life*. The autonomous subject is not the disembodied self; universalist moral theory must acknowledge the deep experiences in the formation of the human being to which care and justice correspond. (Benhabib 1992: 189, cited in Abbott 2019: 75–76, emphasis added)

The emphasis on forms of care and the relational nature of our moral identities and visions of the good emerging in moral philosophy from the 1980s onwards (e.g. Gilligan 1982) have also been drawn into sociological conversation (Abbott 2019; Hegtvedt and Scheuerman 2010). This focus on care in sociological approaches to morality, arising in conversation with feminist philosophy and approaches to the study of families and personal life, has also indexed the relation between morality and power. As Sayer puts it, relations of care are crucial for ethical formation and are typically asymmetric and strongly gendered; they are always also ‘relations of power, whether benign or malign’ (2011: 178).

Likewise emphasizing the relational constitution of morality and the good, pragmatist philosophy has been another philosophical resource for sociologists. In developing a relational view of moral phenomena as located ‘in the intersubjective flow of life’<sup>16</sup> (Abbott 2019: 181), Abbott draws especially on Mead’s pragmatism. Mead’s understanding of the self as shaped through both socialization and individuation helps to develop a framework for exploring forms of moral subjectivity and reflexive deliberation as always entangled with relations, and how morality involves ‘mundane considerations of how to respond to a situation at hand, and deeper dialogic assessment of our own perspectives that can be in some way efficacious for future action and transformative of our viewpoints’ (Abbott 2019: 183). Stefan Bargheer (2018) draws on Dewey’s pragmatism to develop an approach to morality based on pragmatist theories of valuation. Bargheer argues that forms of moral valuation are embedded in practices and institutions, and he explores how this shaped organized bird conservation in Britain and Germany, as the moral value of birds was shaped through their relational position within particular institutions and practices.

Alongside pragmatism, a number of other philosophical voices have also featured in sociological approaches to morality, perhaps most notably Hannah Arendt, Charles Taylor and Jurgen Habermas (see, e.g., Abbott 2019; Calhoun 1991; Sayer 2011; Wilkinson and Kleinman 2016). As *critical* social theorists, these particular voices engage in ‘social criticism guided by an idea of the good society in which the salient obstacles to human flourishing would once and for all have been removed, or who reflect on what it means to engage in such criticism’ (Cooke 2006: 7; see also Cooke, this volume). Those sociologists who have drawn on these perspectives have thus often emphasized the normative

implications of focusing on forms of morality and the good. Iain Wilkinson notes that forms of morality and politics are interwoven within the work of social scientists and that social science research should be directed towards better understanding ‘how “the good” may be known and realised in social life’ (this volume; see also Seidler, this volume).<sup>17</sup> Arguing for a ‘critical social science’, Sayer likewise emphasizes that sociology should be about contributing to human flourishing, and that involves identifying ‘what things “are not right as they are”, and why’ (Sayer 2011: 244). Sayer traces social scientific reluctance to evaluate how particular social practices contribute (or not) to human flourishing to the wider social construction of morality and knowledge in modernist thought:

In pressing the question of why anything is good or bad we enter a territory where the ways of thinking we learn as social scientists seem to fail us. The reasons for [this] ... are not only consequences of worries about essentialism and ethnocentrism but go much deeper to the fact-value, science-ethics, positive-normative dualisms of modernist thought, and the subjectivization of values associated with the rise of a liberal society. Critical social science needs to acknowledge its often hidden or repressed premise – that its evaluation of practices imply a conception of human flourishing. (Sayer 2011: 245)

While this range of philosophical voices has played an important role – especially in anthropology – in stimulating important questions and crystallizing terms of debates in the study of morality and the good, our hope is to return to a focus on questions of the good and morality as central topics in social theory.<sup>18</sup> Despite the ‘astonishing efflorescence’ (Mattingly and Throop 2018: 476) of studies of the moral dimensions of existence within anthropology (and to a lesser extent sociology), it is nevertheless fair to say that questions of the good and morality do not in themselves feature prominently within contemporary social theory, at least as this is currently taught within sociology and anthropology programmes. An influential, recent edited volume on social theory (Benzecry et al. 2017), for example, does not include a chapter on morality or the good,<sup>19</sup> even though these dimensions are inextricably interwoven into what the editors situate as the core concerns of social theory: How is social order possible? What is the role of materiality in the world? What is the role of meaning in the world? And what is the role of practice in the world? (Benzecry et al. 2017: 8–10).

To bring the good (back) into social theory, we also need to bring social theory back more centrally into the study of the good. While sociologists and some anthropologists have engaged with social theories in developing recent approaches to morality and the good (and values, for example),<sup>20</sup> they have been somewhat less prominent in anthropological debates, which have turned instead to philosophy (Mattingly and Throop 2018: 478).<sup>21</sup> Recovering the place of the good within social theory does not mean turning away from philosophy. Indeed, many of the contributions in this volume engage with both

philosophy and social theory. However, we hope that future work in this field might productively draw from the rich and diverse resources offered by social theory. If we rethought forms of the good through Jane Addams' approach, seeing it as a form of care, for example, rather than in terms of obligation, debates about 'freedom' or 'unfreedom' appear largely irrelevant to our understanding of moral life as it is lived. Similarly, turning back to Du Bois's consideration of how conditions of suffering, violence and injustice contribute to forms of moral experience and aspiration helps move us beyond the dichotomy that is sometimes articulated between the study of 'the good' and the study of the 'harsh dimensions of social life (power, domination, inequality, and oppression)' (Ortner 2016: 47). As ethics is intrinsic to social life and matters deeply to people, questions of the good and values, and how these are shaped, maintained and contested in everyday life, should, we argue, be seen (once again) as core topics within social theory. By seeking to understand and represent the diversity that exists in understandings of the good and forms of values around the world, the social sciences might thus play an important role in contributing to wider public debates about how people understand, imagine and realize the best ways to pursue lives worth living.

### **Engagements with the Good**

This volume is the first interdisciplinary engagement with the question of how people realize the good in social life. The contributors – working in the fields of sociology, anthropology, religious studies and social philosophy – were invited to reflect on the following questions: What does it mean to study the good as an aspect of social and cultural life? How does focusing on the good enhance and refocus social theory? How do different disciplinary perspectives on the good challenge and enrich each other? To what extent is the concept of the good analytically and conceptually productive, and how should we situate this in relation to debates surrounding the study of ethics and values? What are the interrelations between power and inequality and a 'politics of hope' (Appadurai 2013), between suffering and moral aspiration, and between the ethical and the political (Zigon 2017)? To sustain such an interdisciplinary conversation that is theoretically as well as ethnographically and historically grounded, the volume is divided into two parts. Each part is followed by commentaries, by Steven Lukes and Maeve Cooke respectively, contextualizing the volume in a wider landscape where philosophy and social theory meet, and opening up this conversation to future directions of study.

Bringing anthropology, sociology, social theory and philosophy together, Part I offers a range of perspectives on the good in the emerging social theoretical field of morality and ethics. The volume starts with Joel Robbins' essay, which directly addresses the volume's question: 'Where is the good in the world?' In his answer, Robbins suggests that we should define the good as the study of cultural

values. The focus on values offers a productive perspective as the study of values is one of the areas in which philosophy and social theory have converged over a long time. By making this case, Robbins focuses particularly on the work of the classics of social theory, Max Weber and Émile Durkheim, and offers an account of how we can construe values as being sufficiently real in the world to be worthy of study. In response to Robbins' argument, Michael Lambek offers in his chapter a counter-perspective, suggesting that the good is located 'nowhere and everywhere'. Drawing on a range of philosophical inspirations, Lambek suggests that we ought to resist collapsing the ethical and the good. As he argues, 'the good' is first and foremost a criterion of judgment immanent to our human condition. Thus, questions about the good and suffering, as well as about ethics and morality, are inseparable from each other, and, as Lambek suggests, we should simply begin with 'the ordinary' and be satisfied with what we can understand of the complexity and simplicity of life as it is lived.

Owen Abbott's contribution echoes some of the productive tensions emerging from Robbins' and Lambek's conversation. His chapter outlines how in the light of renewed interest in sociology of morality, the notions of the good and morality are an integral facet of all social interactions and therefore need to be attended to in terms of everyday social practice. Abbott's chapter thus provides a dynamic theoretical framework for understanding the good and morality more broadly in the flow of social life that bridges the long-lasting tension in social theory between holistic and individualistic positions. Drawing on the tradition of reflexive sociology (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) and the study of social suffering, Iain Wilkinson interrogates the very practice of social science and its motivations (or lack thereof) towards studying how the good may be known and realized in social life. Wilkinson's chapter asks whether the social sciences' practitioners are prepared to endure the antinomies of their practice and hold the moral courage to pursue the good in thought and action whilst facing up to the fact that, more often than not, whatever can be done in our 'dark era' is set to remain woefully inadequate. Yet this does not mean that we ought to give up. In arguing so, Wilkinson makes a powerful case for a humanitarian social science with a focus on human values at its core. Part I concludes with Victor Jeleniewski Seidler's auto-ethnographic essay, which interweaves philosophy and social theory, the personal and the theoretical as mutually constitutive, echoing Wilkinson's call for a reflexive and morally courageous stance from social sciences' practitioners. Reflecting on major shifts in social theory over the last half a century, Seidler traces how the good and ethics have been located and explored across generations within and across social theory, sociology, anthropology, feminism and philosophy, and he shows what it means to think across generations in approaching morality, ethics and the good. Seidler's chapter argues for the importance of approaches that allow for the dignity and integrity of difference.

While the chapters in Part I theorize the concept of the good in relation to debates surrounding the study of ethics, values and morality, Part II brings

together six case studies that engage with the question of how people realize the good in social life *empirically*. By examining how people articulate, imagine, construct and contest different forms of the good in different situations and contexts, past and present, the chapters in Part II pluralize, historicize and politicize as much as theorize the questions raised in Part I. In so doing, the case studies directly address Bruce Knauff's observation that there have been only limited attempts to ethnographically elucidate the conceptual and theoretical debates about the good (2019: 11). Yet, as Gordon Lynch demonstrates in his chapter, the interplay between the conceptual debates and empirical material engaging people's notions of the good is as relevant for an ethnographic inquiry as it is for historical research. Lynch's chapter deals with the limits of morality, addressing historical cases of child sexual abuse within Christian churches. Lynch's chapter seeks to bridge the gap between 'dark anthropology' and the anthropology of morality by encouraging discussion of the ways in which the pursuit of the 'good' in social life does not simply encourage a constructive sense of purpose or place but can also be bound up with causing, or failing to attend to, harm. Similarly, Kimberly Chong's chapter shows the importance of thinking through both the anthropology of the good and the 'darker themes' of power, politics and inequality *together*. Situated inside the China arm of a global management consultancy, Chong explores how global corporations seek to socialize their employees into a particular vision of the good through their corporate social responsibility initiatives. Her chapter persuasively shows how studying the projects of corporate citizenship through which employees are encouraged to embody a moral ethos through the notions of the good can help us understand how power is produced, co-opted and retained within global capitalism.

Since Adam Smith, and via Max Weber, the theme of capitalism and ethics has a well-established genealogy in social theory. In her chapter, Anna Strhan explores evangelical Christians' engagement with money in a large conservative evangelical church in London. This might not be an obvious location for the good. Yet as Strhan shows, following different moral threads interwoven in the thoughts and actions of the conservative evangelicals in relation to the place of money in their lives, the good is imagined not only in relation to the value of a capitalist calculative ethic but also to a transcendent grace that exceeds capitalist regimes. Focusing on the good ethnographically allows Strhan to tease out the contradictions and eruptions that evade the logic of capital even amongst those who appear well rewarded by the current economic order. Taking collective worship in English primary schools as her focus of analysis, Rachael Shillitoe's chapter explores how schools perform, mediate and teach different ideas of the good. It documents how schools attempt to cultivate children's ethical subjectivities in both religious and nonreligious frameworks and subsequently how children respond to such strategies. Through her finely-grained ethnography, Shillitoe shows how focusing on the question of 'the good' in relation to childhood contributes to our understanding of the good by



exploring how parents, teachers, children and policymakers construct and enact particular moral ideas and values in everyday life.

The question of how to locate and study the ethical and moral as an empirical object of research is discussed by Ruth Sheldon. She takes the debates between scholars of ‘the good’ and proponents of ‘ordinary ethics’ as a case in point. Drawing on long-term ethnographic research into Jewish life in Hackney, London, Sheldon considers the tensions and consequences of her naming ‘the good’ and ‘ethics’ as research objects and asks how these terms resonate within orthodox Jewish contexts that are also gendered in distinctive ways. Sheldon’s chapter shows how Jewish ethnography as one under-acknowledged ‘other’ within the social sciences can speak back to some implicitly Christian, colonial and masculine grammars structuring this field. And, finally, David Henig’s chapter takes a similar critical route to show how inadequate the now rather incommensurable theoretical positions focusing either on the good or on the dark conditions that produce inequalities, suffering and despair in the contemporary world have become. Situated in postwar Bosnia and Herzegovina, where people’s lives have been drastically constrained by debt and foreshortened aspirational horizons, Henig explores how developing and cultivating practices of hope can become generative for our understanding of how people imagine a good and act on it in situations of suffering and dramatic ruptures. His ethnography shows how individual as well as collective striving for the good, and for a life worth living, is a fragile endeavour, always entangled in suffering, despair and doubt, and in which the outcomes of one’s striving are uncertain.

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## Notes

1. In what follows, we use the terms ‘morality’ and ‘ethics’ largely interchangeably. We note, however, that the use of the terms is contested, and some anthropologists have emphasized a distinction in the use of these terms (most influentially, perhaps, Zigon 2007, and more recently, and following Bernard Williams (1986), Keane 2016; see also discussions in Laidlaw 2014; Mattingly and Throop 2018).

2. It is worth noting that the study of morality, values and the good is, in different ways, also a theme across the wider social sciences – with longstanding debates in psychology (which, as discussed below, are drawn on within new sociological approaches to morality), as well as political science, social policy, economics, media studies, law and international relations, and work on morality is a growing area within cultural geography. While it is beyond the scope of the present volume to speak to each of these disciplines, we hope and expect the positions that we advance here to be refined and challenged through further interdisciplinary conversation over the coming years.
3. On the importance of Durkheim for the debates on the good, see Lukes – this volume.
4. David Graeber objected to such a division between *values* and *value* in his attempt to develop a more unified approach (2013: 236–37; 2001). Although we pivot towards a more unified approach later in our argument, we still find this distinction analytically productive for understanding the debates of the past three decades (see also Gregory 2014).
5. This is of course only a fragmented account of Dumont’s history of value theory, and of its history more broadly understood (see Robbins 2013a).
6. It is important to mention that two seminal anthropological books on value theory were published in the 1980s (Appadurai 1986; Munn 1986). While Munn’s book presents rather a culmination and synthesis of her thinking and writing on values, Appadurai’s edited volume marks a shift away from the social theory of values towards the study of value (see also Graeber 2001: 30–33). As Chris Gregory pointed out, Appadurai’s volume and subsequent work marks a shift towards a radically new theory of value that is ‘deliberately and provocatively “posthumanist” in that it allows for the agency of things alongside the agency of people’ (2014: 46). And further, Gregory adds, ‘Appadurai develops his new theory of value by deliberately and consciously turning Marx upside down. He converts Marx’s famous theory of the fetishism of commodities into a methodological principle and argues that it is not labor that gives value to things but things that give value to people’ (2014: 48).
7. These trends were anticipated by Webb Keane (2003) already a decade earlier, when he pointed out how the loss of focus on ‘cultural relativism’ and difference is a loss of a productive tension that has driven the production of ethnographic knowledge since the times of the discipline’s founders, namely the tension between ‘epistemologies of estrangement and of intimacy’. And as Webb Keane observed, ‘the latter has increasingly claimed the epistemological and moral high ground in much cultural anthropology’ (2003: 223; see also Robbins n.d.).
8. Happiness was not discussed by Robbins in the original text, though he did take it up later (2015).
9. Knauff continues with his thinking about the good also on his blog: <https://scholarblogs.emory.edu/bknauff/good-anthropology-in-dark-times/> [last accessed 29 March 2021].
10. See Kimberly Chong’s chapter in this volume.
11. Abend (2010) also notes a fourth area of concern – the ‘moral brain’ (and engagement with neuroscience and cognitive approaches to morality) – as a distinctive feature of the ‘new’ sociology of morality.
12. It is important to note that Sherry Ortner grounds her ‘dark’ diagnosis of the oppressive structures of domination and exploitation, and the way out from these structures, in Foucault’s work as well, along with Marx. Yet, as James Laidlaw pointed out in his response to Ortner’s argument, Foucault explicitly claimed ‘that it was simply a misreading to attribute to him the idea of “a system of domination that controls everything and leaves no room for freedom” (1997: 293)’ (Laidlaw 2016: 21; see also Mattingly 2014).
13. A number of anthropologists have questioned this emphasis on ‘freedom’ in ethical life because of its Western associations (e.g. Das et al. 2014; Keane 2016).

14. See also Sayer's critique (2011) of the third-person perspective in sociological accounts of morality.
15. Nietzsche has also been a significant influence within the anthropology of ethics (e.g. Laidlaw 2002, 2014).
16. Zygmunt Bauman (1993) also draws attention to the relational dimensions of ethics, drawing on Emmanuel Levinas's conception of ethics. However, as Abbott discusses (2019, this volume), Bauman's presentation of morality as pre-social draws us away from exploring ethics and morality within everyday life and practice. Strhan (2019) draws on Levinas in a somewhat different vein in developing a sociological approach to ethics, drawing together Levinas and Arendt to trace differing moral impulses within contemporary British society and exploring how these are located within evangelical Christianity.
17. This also resonates with the recent emphasis on social justice approaches within sociology, as powerfully articulated by Mary Romero in her American Sociological Association Presidential Address (Romero 2020).
18. We use the term 'social theory' rather than 'sociological theory' or 'anthropological theory' out of the desire to reestablish 'an intellectual trading zone' in these debates (Galison 1997). The demarcation of social theory into 'sociological' and 'anthropological' theory emerges out of the strong professionalization of these disciplines, especially in the United States. Benzecry et al. (2017), for example, note that the term 'sociological theory' is 'primarily drawn, and used, by sociologists ... who want to separate what is relevant to their research concerns from other scholarly work that they should not feel obliged to read' (ibid.: 6).
19. The volume does, however, include a chapter on norms (Gross and Hyde 2017) but does not explore these in relation to morality.
20. Fassin (2008, 2012) and Robbins (2007, 2012) have continued to draw on Durkheim (and also Weber in Robbins' case), for example.
21. Since we relate the good to the debates on values/value, let us return once more to David Graeber. In his reflections on writing *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value*, Graeber echoed this sentiment when he wrote, 'the book seems to have appeared at precisely the moment when the discipline was collectively dismissing all such great debates as somehow passé, in fact, anthropological theory itself (that is, theory that emerged from within anthropology as opposed to theory borrowed from Continental philosophers)' (2013: 221).

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