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# **Rethinking Right: Moral Epistemology in Management Research**

Journal of Business Ethics, Forthcoming

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## *Abstract:*

Most management researchers pause at the threshold of objective right and wrong. Their hesitation is understandable. Values imply a “subjective,” personal dimension, one that can invite religious and moral interference in research. The dominant epistemological camps of positivism and subjectivism in management stumble over the notion of moral objectivity. Empirical research can study values in human behavior, but hard-headed scientists should not assume that one value can be objectively better than another. In this article we invite management researchers to rethink this presumption. We show how accepting at least a limited form of moral objectivity, namely, an epistemic orientation that seeks objective moral reasons, can benefit management research by 1. guiding research practice; 2. using patterns of moral objectivity as clues for formulating empirical hypotheses for psychological explanations; and 3. adding prescriptive power to empirical theories.

## ***1. Introduction***

Over fifty years ago Herbert Simon (1957) remarked,

“... an administrative science, like any science, is concerned purely with factual statements. There is no place for ethical assertions in the body of a science” (p. 253).

More recently in a 2015 interview with the *Financial Times*, Jeffrey Pfeffer remarked,

“I’m not a moral philosopher, I’m a social scientist . . . So I’m going to teach you the social science, and hopefully somewhere along the line, in religion or [from] your parents or your peers or something you’ve read, you’ve learned how to use the power that you’re going to get for good rather than evil” (Hill 2015).

Most modern management researchers, at least ones who publish primarily in American mainstream management journals, would agree with these statements. The reasons for pausing at the threshold of right and wrong are obvious. Values imply a “subjective” and personal dimension. Empirical research is capable of discovering that people and organizations in fact have certain values, and it can correlate those values with other variables. But, presumably, a scientist should not assume that one value can be objectively better than another, or that any values are objectively “right” or objectively “wrong.” Beware the unsupported premise! Value propositions lie beyond the realm of empirical research and, worse, invite moral and religious interference in empirical work. One must not forget the lessons of the European Renaissance, the trials of moral heretics such as Galileo, and the final intellectual triumph of the scientific method. Science must fight to stay free from moral and religious hegemony.

And yet . . . is there nothing at all “objective” about moral<sup>1</sup> notions? Most of us, whether academics or not, behave in our daily lives as if they possess some form of objectivity. We defend democracy over tyranny, compassion over insensitivity, and the protection of life over

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, we follow standard practice in moral philosophy and use the terms “ethics” and “morality” as synonyms. We acknowledge, however, that Aristotelians sometimes use the two terms often differently, where “ethics” primarily concerns the issue of “What is it for a life to go well?” and “morality,” in contrast, concerns issues such as “What do we owe to each other?”

murder. Most of us believe that even though the terrorists who ruthlessly killed 118 people in the Bataclan concert hall in Paris in November of 2015 may have believed that their massacre was justified, there was objective reason not to commit the act. Social scientists sometimes acknowledge objective moral failure, as for example, when psychologists critiqued—too late—the post-911 psychological research on torture. On August 7, 2015, the American Psychological Association moved belatedly to ban any ties by psychologists to US National Security Interrogations (Risen 2015). If there was nothing objectively wrong or at least objectively problematic about torture, then the Association’s ban seems misguided.

So *are* values objective? Are there sometimes objectively good reasons for moral actions? And if so, what are the implications for research? Perhaps it is time to rethink the widespread hesitation about accepting moral objectivity in management research. This article argues that there are at least three distinct ways in which assuming an epistemic orientation that warrants objective reasons, i.e., moral objectivity, can benefit management research. These are: 1. by guiding the practice of management research; 2. by using patterns of moral objectivity as clues for formulating empirical hypotheses and explanations; and 3. by adding prescriptive power to empirical theories. Our aim in this paper is not to engage professional philosophers but to engage colleagues in management for whom empirical research is the dominant approach. For this reason, we give special emphasis to management examples and management literature.

## ***2. The Values Quandary***

No one can accuse management researchers of fully neglecting values issues. Quite the contrary. Researchers have invoked values frequently in explanations of organizational behavior. In the 1990s and early 2000s many business academics referenced values both when analyzing management behaviors and when critiquing dominant economic models of corporate

governance, e.g., Transaction Cost Economics (TCE) and Agency Theory. They argued that limits exist for the purely “selfish” interpretations of human behavior that economic models assumed. They stopped short, however, of taking a last, bold step—namely, of legitimating objective accounts of “right” and “wrong,” or “good” and “bad.”

In other words, such criticisms targeted prior theories’ positive or empirical failings but not their failure to incorporate objective accounts of intrinsic moral value. For example, it was alleged that TCE discourages alternative social controls in favor of “rational” controls that are “bad for practice” (Ghoshal & Moran 1996, p. 24); that TCE oversimplifies complex phenomena (Perrow 1986, p. 236); that agency theory often fails to predict corporate performance because of its excessive emphasis on self-interested mechanisms of monitoring, independence, and incentives (Dalton et al. 2003; Dalton et al. 1999; Westphal 1999; Zajac & Westphal 1994); that theories of organizational economics neglect historical realities of culture and local morality (Guillen 2001); and that adopting a traditional view of the corporation in which shareholders are the sole residual claimants misses the underlying reality of economic value creation and the distribution of value to stakeholders (Asher et al. 2005; Coff 1999; Zingales 2000).

While such criticisms may expose failings in economic theories of governance, and have implications for the relevance of values in explaining corporate behavior, they accept the theories’ empirical epistemological assumptions. That is to say, they target empirical failings such as factual accuracy, psychological assessment and problems of achieving pre-established objectives, such as curbing opportunism and shirking. They stop short, however, of assigning independent or epistemic<sup>2</sup> “rightness” or “goodness” to the values in question. Thomas Jones’s well-known article, “Instrumental Stakeholder Theory: A Synthesis of Ethics and Economics”

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<sup>2</sup> By “epistemic” we refer to the structure of knowledge or its justification.

(1995) is a case in point. Jones argues that if managers subscribe to a subset of ethical intrinsic values (trust, trustworthiness, and cooperativeness), they may well create competitive advantage for their firms. Here the issue of whether those values are objectively “good” does not arise. At issue, rather, is the empirical correlation between certain kinds of management behavior and a firm’s competitive advantage. At issue, in other words, is whether certain corporate outcomes flow from behaving in certain ways.

One might well ask what an objective “morally normative claim” amounts to, and who, if anyone, endorses such a claim? In this article we use the word “normative” in the strong sense used by most moral philosophers, although we grant that other uses of the term are possible. We use “normative” as a synonym for the expression, “morally normative,” and not in the weaker sense adopted by many social scientists, i.e. meaning merely practical guidance. “Normative” in the strong sense refers to concepts that are prescriptive or action-guiding in a categorical rather than hypothetical way. The proposition, “If you want good barbecue, then eat at Tuco’s,” is action-guiding but only in a hypothetical sense. It is meant in a hypothetical way because its guidance is conditioned by the hypothetical, “If you want good barbecue.” In contrast, most morally normative propositions are categorically action-guiding. The proposition, “You ought to do the right thing” and its twin imperative, “Do the right thing,” are intended as all-things-considered, non-hypothetical guides to action. For this reason, such imperatives qualify as “normative” in the strong sense.

In this article we use the word “objective” to characterize a moral claim or reason that is justifiable by moral reasoning rather than by empirical etiology.<sup>3</sup> Forms of moral reasoning vary, and different schools of philosophy endorse different accounts. Consequentialist (e.g., utilitarian)

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<sup>3</sup> The moral reasoning, however, may make reference to empirical or “natural” states of affairs, as with Aristotle (1962).

reasoning differs from non-consequentialist or principled (e.g., Kantian or deontological) moral reasoning, and both from Aristotelian virtue ethics, which identifies concepts of virtue and happiness (Sison 2014). But all forms of moral reasoning share one important feature: Their own objectivity, as well as the objectivity of the moral propositions they aim to justify, is not a function of empirical correlation or causation, nor is such objectivity reducible without remainder to empirical states of affairs. The distinction between reasons and causes, of something being an objective, justifying reason for something in contrast to its being the cause of something, is sharply drawn in moral philosophy. This is despite the fact, as we shall see later, that some philosophers argue that reasons can themselves function as causes.<sup>4</sup> Moral reasoning identifies acts, character, and states of affairs as good or right in themselves, not good or right in virtue of some empirical fact, such as the fact that they happen to be endorsed by Person A.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> According to some theorists, subjective reasons can be “causes” of intentional action (Davidson 1963). For more philosophical discussions about the distinction between objective and subjective reasons, see Harman (2015) and Sepielli (Forthcoming).

<sup>5</sup> In this article, we do not defend a particular view of moral objectivity, an activity already undertaken by several moral philosophers (e.g., Enoch, 2011; Scanlon, 2014; Setiya, 2015; Skorupski, 2010). One widely accepted account of moral objectivity is “reflective equilibrium” (Goodman, 1955; Rawls, 1971). Reflective equilibrium represents an *attempt* to justify moral values by achieving a state of coherence in a dynamic process of reasoning, which involves moving back and forth between, on the one hand, (a) considered moral judgments and (b) relevant background theories (Daniels, 1996; Bambrough, 1979; DePaul, 1993; McMahan, 2004). It works back and forth between (a) and (b), making incremental adjustments to existing beliefs about cases and particular principles in the light of background theories, and then moves to the other side, making incremental adjustments to theories in light of moral intuitions. The culmination of the reasoning process is an equilibrium point where incremental change is no longer necessary. The underlying idea behind reflective equilibrium is that rational and informed people’s substantive convergence can be an important *proxy* for moral objectivity. But as Rawls himself points out, convergence is not itself moral objectivity. Note that divergence of normative views by itself does not refute moral objectivity. First, rational disagreement can exist even when discussing empirical fact (McMahon, 2009). Second, the fact that reflective equilibrium cannot explain how to fundamentally resolve a genuine moral conflict should not be considered a defect. Any adequate theory must reflect rather than dissolve conflicts if intrinsically difficult. Third, the moral skepticism based on divergence itself assumes a certain moral objectivity because the

Although social scientists seldom speak of objective, morally normative reasons, moral philosophers often do. The alternative view, that ethics is *not* objective, is labeled “normative ethical relativism,” and has never fared well among professional philosophers (Brandt 1967; Wellman 1963).<sup>6</sup> Normative ethical relativism holds that “If someone thinks it is right (or wrong) to do A, then it is right (or wrong) for him to do A.” As Richard Brandt (1967) notes, despite its rather wide popular acceptance, moral relativism is thought to be absurd and self-defeating by philosophers because it implies “that there is no point in debating with a person [about] what is right for him to do unless he is in doubt himself” (p. 76).

Notably many empirical researchers flirt with moral objectivity even as they resist outright endorsement. Work by the behavioral economist Dan Ariely (Gino & Ariely 2012; Gino, Ayal, & Ariely 2013) is a case in point. Ariely’s hypotheses are often cast in a manner that suggests moral objectivity. He implies, for example, that a particular kind of action is straightforwardly immoral (such as intentionally miscounting dots in an experiment) insofar as he labels the behavior “cheating” or “unethical.” He then proceeds to identify empirical factors that correlate with such “cheating” behavior. For example, in recent research he and other colleagues show that people “cheat” more when others can benefit from their cheating and when the number of beneficiaries of wrongdoing increases (Gino et al.). Yet at no point does Ariely describe “cheating” as objectively wrong. At no point does he offer moral reasons for specifying

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critic purports the criticism to be objectively true. For more comprehensive discussions about this matter, see McGrath (2010).

<sup>6</sup> Normative ethical relativism is typically distinguished from metaethical relativism. The latter deals primarily with the epistemic basis for moral judgments rather than the objective status of the judgments themselves. Metaethical relativism, in contrast to normative ethical relativism, is frequently defended by moral philosophers.



how miscounting dots in an experiment qualifies as “unethical.”<sup>7</sup> This omission, as we shall see later, can expose an experiment’s operational constructs as well as their prescriptive power, to challenges of accuracy and relevance.

Another study by Edwards and Rothbard (1999) fits the same mold. The target of Edwards and Rothbard’s theoretical construct is “well-being.” The operational measures for “well-being” are ratings about affective responses to work and family (e.g., “In general, I am satisfied with my job”) and ratings of symptom frequency about anxiety, depression, irritation, and somatic symptoms. It is noteworthy that the construct and the measures suggest an implied morally normative claim about “well-being.” The authors do not develop their definition of well-being from a survey of what people think is well-being. Rather, they propose it. Well-being, most of us assume, is objectively good and its absence objectively bad. But the authors are careful to stop short of ascribing moral objectivity to their conclusions, and no moral justification for the “well-being” construct is offered.

Interestingly, Richard Ryan, one of the authors of Self-Determination Theory, along with his colleagues (2015) recently proposed an account of “human wellness” drawing upon the philosopher Martha Nussbaum’s well-known normative account of capabilities. Ryan, thus, seems to recognize the inescapably normative nature of well-being, and also problems of purely subjective accounts of it (Parfit 1984; Sison 2014).

### *2.1 Empirical methodologies stumble over objective values*

Research methodologies differ in their treatment of values, but the dominant views converge in their skepticism of what we have called “objective values.” Central to the debate is the issue of the relative superiority of different research methods, an issue lying at the center of

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<sup>7</sup> Deception is not always unethical. For circumstances under which deception can be unethical, see, for example, Strudler (2005).

what management scholars call the “paradigm wars” (Burrell 1997; Deetz 2009; Fabian 2000; Hassard & Kelemen 2002; Moldoveanu & Baum 2005; Shepherd & Challenger 2013). Which of many competing research methods is the most powerful? Which is the best fit? Management scholars already acknowledge that questions about methods can entail ones about epistemology, i.e., about the nature of knowledge and justified or warranted belief (Alvesson & Willmott 2012; Bechara & Van de Ven 2007; Easterby-Smith et al. 2012; John & Duberley 2000; Westwood & Clegg 2002). This acknowledgement is not surprising, because appropriate methodologies in organizational research must build upon an accurate understanding of the nature of the knowledge sought.

Management scholars often characterize the two dominant contemporary camps interpreting the epistemology of management research as “positivist” and “subjectivist” (see Baum 2014 for reviews).<sup>8</sup> The positivist camp is also sometimes given the label, “scientific” or “realist,” and the subjectivist sometimes “constructive” or “interpretive.” As we shall see, however, both camps stumble over objective values. The positivist believes that researchers can objectively observe, validate and transfer knowledge (Baillie & Meckler 2012; Hunt 2004; L. Donaldson 1985, 2003, 2005; Simon 1977). The subjectivist believes that researchers cannot objectively codify knowledge using the positivist’s scientific method, because researchers subjectively perceive organizational reality and pluralistically construe it (Astley 1985; Astley & Zammuto 1992; Gioia 2003; Mitroff 1972; Van Maanen 1995a, 1995a; Weick 1979, 1995). Arguments for both positivism and subjectivism have been coherently developed by theorists,

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<sup>8</sup> The positivist and the subjectivist division can be articulated in much greater detail, and the division itself is open to challenge, especially by philosophers of science. For the purposes of this article, however, we accept the simple division. It is one commonly made by management scholars.

and both are able to cite allied arguments in philosophical epistemology (Leplin 1984; Sosa 1991; Steup & Sosa 2005).<sup>9</sup>

Recent alternative approaches, in particular “Practice Theory,” appear more open to integrating objective notions of moral value with research objectives (Feldman & Orlikowski 2011; Bourdieu 1977, 1990; Giddens 1986; Schatzki 2002). Let us briefly analyze the challenges posed by positivism, subjectivism, and practice theory.

### *2.1.1 Positivist management research*

From the standpoint of moral values, taking the “positivism” side is tantamount to banishing value judgments from research except when they are treated as measurable data. All objectivity for the positivist is empirical objectivity. Certain data, however, can reflect moral attributes and can constitute proper objects of knowledge. These are the moral opinions, behaviors, and attitudes that can be studied using empirical methods (Tenbrunsel & Smith-Crown 2008; Treviño et al. 2006; Weaver et al. 2014). A management researcher who identifies herself as a positivist in the paradigm wars can use survey data, for example, to test the hypothesis that “Fewer than fifty percent of young Germans believe that what Hitler did was morally acceptable.” But observation and experiment alone are impotent to confirm the

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<sup>9</sup> At this point, one might note a possible difference between management research and moral reasoning, asking whether or not, in the domain of moral propositions, there exist what David Armstrong calls “truth makers”—“something in the world which makes it the case that serves as an ontological ground, for this truth.” (1997: 155). Social scientists, both positivists and subjectivists, assume that truth makers, such as stock values, currency changes, job stress, or motivation exist, but different camps have different views about what they can know about the facts. A certain version of moral objectivity, especially that of some correspondence theorists (e.g., Boyd, 1988; Shafer-Landau (2003), is committed to the view that there must exist truth-makers for moral propositions, and they attempt to explain the existence of moral facts using metaphysics or evolutionary biology. But, more recently, important moral realists (e.g., Scanlon, 2014); Setiya, 2015) argue that even without truth-makers, moral propositions can be objectively true or false.

objectivity of the moral proposition itself, i.e., “What Hitler did was morally wrong.” Of course, organizational theorists defending positivist management research also could conceivably adopt a “meta-moral” posture that equates moral objectivity with particular empirical relationships—but they almost never do. For example, a positivist management theorist in the epistemic debates could adopt the view that what is morally correct is what a majority of people believe is morally correct, and in this way allow the objectivity of moral propositions to be tested by empirical methodologies that assess the prevalence of moral belief. But, again, management researchers almost never adopt theories of moral/empirical equivalence, and for good reason. Empirical equivalence views are rejected by both common sense and moral philosophy. In the Antebellum South of the United States, where a majority of people accepted slavery, that majoritarian view hardly confirmed the moral proposition “Slavery is morally acceptable.”

Because, then, positivist management research limits itself to a conception of objectivity that relies entirely on empirical description, cause and correlation, positivist management researchers have sometimes marginalized moral values in organizational research, a fact already noted by many observers (Ghoshal 2005; Keeley 1983; Wicks & Freeman 1998; Zald 1991, 1993). The marginalization of values, in part, derives from an “old sociology of morality” (Abend 2010), which assumes that only positive statements are capable of being objectively defended, and which, as Abend notes, does not properly reflect recent metaethical development on moral cognitivism (Dworkin 1996; Enoch 2011; Scanlon 2014; Setiya 2015; Skorupski 2010; Smith 1994).<sup>10</sup> Wicks and Freeman (1998), too, take a strong stand on this issue: “Avoiding

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<sup>10</sup> Most but not all moral philosophers accept moral objectivity. For instance, those who hold expressivism (Blackburn 1984; Gibbard 1990) hold that moral value statements are simply expressions of one’s non-cognitive attitudes, such as personal approval or disapproval. But the expressivist has several difficult problems to solve. One of them is the Geach-Frege problem (Geach 1960; Searle 1962), which has stubbornly resisted solution from anti-objectivist positions

discussion of ethics and trying to remain agnostic on the subject does not allow positivist researchers to make organization studies value-free. Such a strategy entails that they, in effect, do ethics badly” (p. 124).

### *2.1.2 Subjectivist management research*

The “subjectivism” side of the epistemological debate in business school research also has difficulty with moral objectivity. Although subjectivist management researchers have often been more aware of moral values in organizational scholarship than their positivist counterparts, they tend to relegate those values to soft epistemic relevance. Their relevance is “soft” because it stops short of affirming value objectivity. To be sure, ethnographic or narrative-oriented research designs associated with subjectivism can directly reference moral values more easily than can the positivist’s narrower, largely quantitative methods of data analysis. For this reason, they are able to lift values to greater prominence. But by jettisoning true objectivity for soft objectivity, the subjectivist interprets moral values as part of a narrative, while never qualifying them as genuinely “objective.”

Of course, moral values can be personally interpreted, but it does not follow that moral reasons are themselves merely subjective. This becomes more obvious when one thinks about moral issues that hold significant human consequences.<sup>11</sup> Consider examples of morally normative propositions whose epistemic confidence level is high and that play crucial roles in many real world institutions. The status of such propositions is more objective than that of a mere element in a subjective narrative or “story.” Take, for example, the proposition, “The harm

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(Drier 1996; Sinnott-Armstrong 2000). Today, most current anti-objectivists have softened their views (See van Roojen 2009, for reviews). Contemporary anti-objectivists accept, at least, the epistemic features of moral objectivism (Blackburn 1984; Gibbard 1990).

<sup>11</sup> For more philosophical discussion about the objective status of moral knowledge, see Boyd (1988); Brink (1989); Enoch (2011); Hampton (2012); Scanlon (2014); Setiya (2015); Skorupski (2010); Smith (1994); Shafer-Landau (2003).

caused by corporate lawbreaking must be an important factor in determining the level of a sanction applied by a judicial authority.” Courts regularly endorse this fairness-based criterion when sanctioning corporate behavior (Dworkin 1975). Now, should someone challenge this proposition, arguing instead that the harm caused by an offense is unrelated to the determination of a fine or other sanction, then the very act of arguing against it—an act meant to offer a rational justification for a contrary proposition—assumes the possibility of some moral objectivity, just as one assumes the possibility of some empirically objective truth when arguing on behalf of the proposition “the Mississippi River is the second longest river in the United States.” If either the proposition about corporate sanctions or about the Mississippi’s length is disputed, the disputant implies that the proposition is capable of being believed or doubted, i.e., capable of being objectively justified or not. Both propositions, moreover, are typically subject to the norms of logic, and the principle of noncontradiction, “It is not the case that S and not S,” applies to both statements (Hooker, 2010). In short, if there were nothing “objective” about moral values, then efforts to arrive at morally correct answers about courts’ endorsement of such principles would amount to a charade (Dworkin 1977, 1986).<sup>12</sup>

This basic insight about objectivity in moral dialogue, however, is difficult to explain using the existing epistemics of subjectivism. While subjectivist management research elevates the status of values in explanation, it nonetheless stops short of endorsing moral objectivity, as does its rival, positivism. The late New York University Law School professor Ronald Dworkin summarizes his advice to any who would deny moral objectivity, including both the subjectivists and objectivists: “You’d better believe it” (1996).

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<sup>12</sup> More metaphysical discussion about how moral deliberation, acceptance of moral mistake, and correction can philosophically demonstrate objectivity of moral propositions can be found in Brink (1989).

### *2.1.3 Practice theory: a bridge to the subjectivism/positivism dichotomy?*

In management research a recent alternative to the subjectivism/positivism dichotomy is “Practice Theory” (Feldman & Orlikowski 2011; Bourdieu 1977, 1990; Giddens 1986; Schatzki 2002). Practice Theory rejects the simple dichotomy between subjective agency and objective structure, and may hold promise for capturing objective value. “Central to a practice lens,” write Feldman and Orlikowski, “is the notion that social life is an ongoing production and thus emerges through people’s recurrent actions” (p. 1240). Issues of knowledge (epistemology) are treated as offshoots of practice. The practice perspective rejects the dichotomy traditionally set up between knowledge that exists “out there” (encoded in external objects, routines, or systems) and knowledge that exists “in here” (embedded in thoughts, bodies, or communities). Rather, “knowing is an ongoing social accomplishment, constituted and reconstituted in everyday practice” (Feldman & Orlikowski, p. 1243). Actual practice, thus, drives knowledge. The resulting view is an interesting amalgam of a social-construction view of reality and traditional philosophical Pragmatism. “[T]he tangible fact at the root of all our thought-distinctions, however subtle, is that there is no one of them so fine as to consist in anything but a possible difference of practice” (1975: 29), wrote the American Pragmatist, William James. Because practice is the common denominator for all reality, values, and states of affairs in the world alike, practice theory promises pragmatic objectivity for values. Whether it can fulfill this promise remains to be seen.

### *2.2 Tipping the hat to objective value*

Outside the paradigm wars in business school research, some management theorists advance the need for objective moral values in business theory. Some argue, for example, that management activities must be understood as “value creation,” by which they mean not only

financial value, but also intrinsic values for human flourishing (Donaldson & Walsh 2015; Freeman 1984; York et al. 2013; Mahoney & Kor 2015); that management research needs to be re-conceptualized as a humanistic as well as a scientific area of study because many problems in management studies are not value-free issues (Alvesson & Willmott 1992; Ezzamel & Willmott 2014; Melé 2003; Zald 1993); that because business and morality cannot be separated (Freeman 1994, 2000; Robertson, 1993; Sandberg 2008; Wicks 1996; ), epistemology in management research that is not adequately selected for its inherent moral aspect may risk rendering the research morally illegitimate (Donaldson 2012; Wicks & Freeman 1998); and that morally illegitimate ideologies entrenched in management theories result in socially destructive impacts, with the implication that research needs to be more firmly based on an adequate understanding of moral values (Preston 1986; Swanson 1999).

Business ethicists have also debated the fact-value distinction. Thomas Donaldson (1994) supported Hume's thesis that a value proposition cannot be drawn in any simple manner from a set of purely factual propositions, i.e., that an "is" cannot be simply derived from an "ought," even as Pat Werhane (1994) and Linda Trevino and Gary Weaver (1994) claimed that there are no purely factual, i.e., value-free, statements. The positions of the two camps are not necessarily inconsistent. Werhane means that because there are no purely factual statements, most management statements must have some normative justification, a position that acknowledges Hume's "is-ought" gap. At the same time, Donaldson never denies that factual propositions can be entangled with values. His point is rather that a set of purely factual statements cannot by themselves be normative, and for this reason any management statements or concepts that are value-laden need clarification in order to exhibit their normative aspects. Both camps agree that moral values are deeply reflected in management research.



However, such endorsements of ethics in management research say little about how traditional empirical research should understand moral objectivity or use it to its *advantage*. Hence, although we admire the spirit of such attempts, we admit the need to identify and explain the specific roles that moral objectivity should play in empirical research.

### ***3. Three roles for moral objectivity in management research***

Selectively assuming moral objectivity can benefit empirical management research in three ways: 1. guiding the practice of research; 2. providing clues for empirical hypotheses; and 3. adding prescriptive power to empirical theories.

#### *3.1. Guiding the practice of management research*

Objective values can guide the practice of management research by prescribing research standards and anchoring discussions of meaningful research. Intrinsic moral values serve in particular to establish ethical limits on experimentation and data gathering, to provide ethical canons for research quality, and to help identify meaningful research projects.

##### *3.1.1 Establishing ethical limits on experimentation and data gathering*

This particular role for objective values is well-accepted, even if often unacknowledged. Principles and procedures that establish the parameters for ethical research and that invoke values such as dignity, bodily integrity, autonomy, and privacy, themselves reflect professional support for some non-relative, “objective” character to morality. Earlier we referenced the decision by the American Psychological Association to ban any ties by psychologists to US National Security Interrogations (Risen 2015), which was made out of fear of professional psychologists’ involvement in torture. Additionally, business school professors who conduct human experiments are already familiar with the mandated moral guidelines (e.g., informed consent) of the Institutional Review Board, which has served as the academic community’s

response to morally controversial experiments such as the Milgram obedience experiments (Milgram 1963) and the Zimbardo prison experiments at Stanford (Zimbardo 1971). Here, the guidance extends to the identification of organizations that qualify as off-limits for the activities of professional researchers. Notice, too, that the very use of moral values such as autonomy, privacy, and the avoidance of torture, presumes an objective moral status for such values.

### *3.1.2 Providing ethical canons for research quality*

Some objective values are crucial for establishing research quality. The virtues of integrity, independence, and honesty—including the proper acknowledgement of sources and the allocation of research credit—are widely recognized (National Academy of Sciences 2009). Spurious data, biased measurement, and conflicts of interest can wreck scientific discovery. Plagiarized research should not qualify as good research, a point few researchers would deny.

Both philosophers of social science (Cartwright & Hardie 2012; Root 1999; Rosenberg 2012) and management researchers (Mantere & Ketokivi 2013; Nystrom & Starbuck 1977) agree that epistemic values such as validity, accuracy, rigor, objectivity, or robustness are crucial to the formation of knowledge. Of course, there is room for constructive debates about exactly what those values mean in the context of management research, but there exists significant convergence (e.g., standard validity test in psychological experiments). Epistemic values are akin to other values in the sense that they prescribe standards whose objectivity is not subject to empirical verification. In fact, the renowned psychometrician Samuel Messick (1980, 1989, 1995) admits that validity in psychometrics is fundamentally a normative concept. No imaginable experiment could disprove the value of “accuracy” or “honesty” in measurement and hypothesis testing. Indeed, any experiment attempting to disprove such a value would need to assume such values *a priori* as essential in its own experimental process. Notably, such values

are maintained even by the most extreme empiricist philosophers of science, i.e., those labeled “logical positivists” (Putnam, 2002). “Bad” research is, by definition, research that flouts precepts such as accuracy, robustness, and validity. In this sense, “scientifically valid, value-free research” is an oxymoron (Putnam).<sup>13</sup>

We recall Jeffrey Pfeffer’s insistence that he is a social scientist and not a moral philosopher. Yet even Pfeffer emphasizes evidence-based research in ways that reflect values such as integrity and honesty. The very title of Pfeffer’s (2015) book, *Leadership BS: Fixing Workplaces and Careers One Truth at a Time*, reflects his concern for speaking “truth” to business managers, in contrast to half-truths that managers may sometimes prefer to hear.

### 3.1.3. *Helping to identify meaningful research projects*

Researchers often select topics with moral significance, such as gender discrimination in the workplace, or perceptions about workplace injustice, because of those topics’ moral relevance. Researchers sometimes choose a topic because they believe that discoveries about their topic could both add to factual knowledge and make the world *better*. In doing so, they implicitly appeal to an objective conception of “better.”

Some topics have greater moral significance than others, and the investigation of some topics carries moral risks. In 2013, Ann Tsui (2013) called on the community of management researchers to create socially responsible scholarship. Hollensbe et al. (2014) offer a passionate call for a renewed focus on corporate purpose. They encourage researchers to find “how

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<sup>13</sup> One can argue that values about how research ought to be done can be reduced to usefulness. First, usefulness is itself a value, rather than an empirical fact, since what is useful is based on a more fundamental value like well-being. Second, what is true is not always equivalent to what is useful. In some contexts a scientifically untrue theory or story may be more pragmatically useful than a true theory. Indeed, Alvin Plantinga (1993) argues that epistemic values cannot be well explained by evolutionary biology or survival alone, in part because untrue stories can sometimes benefit our survival better than true stories.

corporate purpose and the values that drive it might best be brought together in the service of society” (p. 1228).

Professional researchers often encourage one another to explore topics with moral significance. The themes chosen for the annual Academy of Management Meetings often carry clear value import. The theme for the 2016 Meeting was “Making Organizations Meaningful.” Earlier themes included “Doing well by Doing Good” (2007); “Dare to Care” (2010); and “Green Management Matters” (2009).

Clear cases of evil are reminders that full impartiality may be impossible. The well-known sociologist, Zygmunt Bauman (2008), insightfully claims that insofar as we should not forget the Holocaust, any intellectual approach holding that no moral propositions can be objectively graded must be rejected. Bauman writes, “Were the distinction between right and wrong or good and evil fully and solely at the disposal of the social grouping able to ‘principally co-ordinate’ the social space under its supervision (as the dominant sociological theory avers), there would be no legitimate ground for proffering a charge of immorality against such individuals as did not breach the rules enforced by that grouping” (2008:176). And as Abend (2010) explains, if a sociologist writes a book about the Holocaust assuming that the moral accusations against Hitler simply amount to a culturally determined view, something about that assumption is deeply wrong. One might reasonably respond that “it’s impossible to *really* understand the Nazi worldview, ideology, or belief system—its rise, success, causes, consequences, etc.—if one doesn’t understand that it was a wicked one, perhaps the most wicked that has ever existed” (p. 574; italics added). Indeed, an attempt to describe the Nazi worldview while being indifferent to its moral vice might be construed as another value-laden view, albeit dressed in camouflage.

### *3.2 Using patterns of moral objectivity as clues for formulating empirical hypotheses*

Good explanations of moral/immoral behavior and of how people are affected by moral principles are ones that sometimes make use of the objective structure of moral reasoning. This is not to confuse moral structures with empirical relations or to equate what “ought” to be with what “is.” Normative morality is not a positivistic domain. But it is to say that because people think in patterned ways about ethics, those patterns may be revealed in their actual behavior. Take a simple example related to the value of fairness. Countless experiments have shown that people respond to issues of “fairness” in patterned ways that reflect underlying “deontic” structures, i.e., structures whose logic is deontic and that deal with obligation and permissibility rather than more familiar “instrumental structures,” i.e., ones involving means and ends. One of the most famous is the “Ultimatum Game,” in which player pairs respond in predictable ways when asked to divide a sum of money. One player announces the exact structure of the division, and the other player either accepts or rejects the division. In the event of rejection, neither receives any money. The patterns of play in the game often reflect deontological, principle-based reasoning, not instrumental reasoning. Players frequently reject offers in which they receive less than 50%, despite the fact that doing so means that they are foregoing money, and the dominant explanation is that the counterparty behaved “unfairly.” The Ultimatum Game evokes reference to an assumed norm of “fairness,”— namely, to treat everyone more or less equally—, something reflected in the fact that the most common division in the game is 50-50%. Most players believe that it is impermissible (unfair) to move too far from this mark, although what they think constitutes “too far” varies (Cameron 1999; Kahneman et al. 1986).

An additional deontic concept is also in evidence in the game: that of the permissibility or obligation to punish unfair behavior. This is seen when players explain their rejection of an

“unfair” offer as itself an act of punishment in response to an unfair act by the counterparty. The same principle of the permissibility (sometimes even obligation) to punish unjust behavior has been illustrated in many other game-theoretic experiments that involve more than two players, especially the so-called “trust game.” One of the first such experiments to do so (Kahneman et al 1986) showed that game participants would pay money in order to punish an unfair allocator and to reward a fair one.

Perhaps management researchers’ hesitation to refer to moral principles when explaining behavior stems from the assumption that moral reasons or principles can never serve as causal explanations of behavior. In this vein, Donald Davidson’s (1963) famous defense of reasons as a form of causal explanation is relevant. As mentioned earlier, the idea of reasons serving as explanations is widely accepted in philosophy of action. But Davidson goes further; he argues that reasons can serve as “causes.” Of course, not all actions should be interpreted as caused by reasons. But when someone believes, for example, that she has a reason to treat the other in a fair manner and she acts on that reason, it can be correct for Davidson to say that the moral reason “caused” her to perform the action. Davidson’s complex arguments on behalf of reasons as causes lie beyond the reach of the present analysis. But they open the door to considering good reasons in general, and morally good reasons in particular, as powerful explanations—and perhaps even causes—for human behavior.

Davidson himself hints at how good reasons have a privileged place in behavioral explanation through his introduction of the principle of “rational accommodation” (sometimes also called the principle of “charity”). This principle of rational accommodation, similar to one articulated earlier by Quine, is a normative and epistemic injunction about explaining human behavior, asserting that when one is assessing the causes of a given behavior, one should

presume, just as the actor herself no doubt does, that true beliefs lie behind bringing the action about, and not false ones (Davidson 1973; 1991).

Among other things, this principle of rational accommodation affirms the special status of good reasons when interpreting human behavior. It is a short step from there to affirming the special status of good *moral* reasons. Gary Weaver in a panel discussion at the Society for Business Ethics' Annual Meeting in 2014 aptly makes this point:

“... scholars need to recognize that part of the reason or explanation as to why an actor acts ethically is that the actor in some way grasps the ethical quality of the action. That even a perfect correlation between, say, shoe size and ethical behavior explains nothing about the behavior *as ethical* is, I suspect, uncontroversial. But my question is whether a behavioral explanation of ethical behavior (distinct from unethical behavior) that is adequate from the standpoint of “pure” explanatory social science (i.e., no normative theory or assumption is invoked) fails in some way if the ethical propriety of the act is not in some sense part of its explanation. And if such propriety is explanatorily implicated, then scholars cannot claim to be able to ignore normative business ethics even when teaching or studying behavioral business ethics.”<sup>14</sup>

Weaver's remarks seem persuasive. Some instances of management research already recognize the explanatory power of moral reasons, for example, the “deontic justice” perspective advanced by organizational justice scholars Cropanzano, Goldman, and Folger (2003). “Deontic,” again, is a philosophical term used to refer to categories of permission and obligation in ethics, and of

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<sup>14</sup> This quote is from an unpublished manuscript (De los Reyes, Kim & Weaver).

necessity and possibility in logic. The older, more traditional explanatory framework for organizational justice research holds that just or unjust (fair/unfair) behaviors are caused by economic self-interest—the same explanation that many economists think is an inductively established law of human behavior. Hence, the prior organizational justice research literature has mostly explored relationships between fair or unfair behaviors on the one hand, and self-seeking motives on the other. These studies do not extend, morally speaking, beyond the identification and analysis of behavioral and psychological states in relation to self-interest, albeit to “self-interest” in an expanded sense related to group-based identity.

However, as Folger and Salvador (2008) argue, exclusively relying on the construct of self-interest may be a misleading and incomplete behavioral account that can place “theoretical blinders on us” (p. 1148). Indeed, Cropanzano et al. offer striking instances of justice behaviors that cannot be explained by self-interest. They propose instead that justice behaviors are often better explained by particular good reasons, “good” because they are presumed to be morally just, that people use when they behave. In this way, Cropanzano et al. also affirm the importance of moving beyond traditional self-seeking motives when explaining the phenomenon of organizational justice. A person’s fair or just behavior or negative response to unfair or unjust behavior can be caused by “principled moral obligations” (Cropanzano et al. p. 1019), distinct from egocentric personal desires.<sup>15</sup> The authors appeal for more theoretical and empirical investigation of “the role of morality” (Cropanzano et al. p. 1022) in the ethical decision-making process.

Making reference to the objectivity and underlying logic of moral reasoning can be especially helpful when constructing empirical hypotheses. Without much fanfare, this approach

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<sup>15</sup> This view, interestingly enough, is similar to the one defended by the so-called school of moral realism in moral philosophy (e.g., Scanlon 2014; Setiya 2015).



has been often used in the construction of theories and hypotheses about topics such as “moral development” (Kohlberg 1981), “firm responsibility” (Quinn & Jones 1995), and “corporate moral maturity” (Andreas 2004). Kohlberg’s well-known structure of moral development is a striking example of using objective moral notions to frame hypotheses and, in Kohlberg’s instance, to justify theory. He hypothesizes, and then uses empirical evidence to confirm, the existence of progressive “stages” of moral development, beginning with “conventional” levels and moving finally to “post-conventional” levels (most people never reach the highest levels). It is not accidental that the highest, post-conventional levels—specifically, “social contract orientation” and “universal ethical principles”—match precisely well-recognized interpretations of moral reasoning that appear in many moral theory textbooks. The interpreted deontic structures discussed by philosophers play an important role in the construction of the empirical hypotheses utilized by Kohlberg, and Kohlberg himself often discusses the connections. He writes, for example, that notions of morality such as social contract are natural structures that emerge in ordinary people’s thinking as they “reflect upon customary morality in varied cultural settings” (Kohlberg 1973, p. 634). Elsewhere, he is even more specific: “Our psychological theory as to why individuals move from one stage to the next is grounded on a moral-philosophical theory which specifies that the later stage is morally better or more adequate than the earlier stage” (p. 633). For Kohlberg, there is an “isomorphic” relation between what empirical evidence shows and what moral reasoning demonstrates.

Kohlberg’s theory has been criticized for neglecting other moral approaches, including virtue ethics and Confucian ethics. Our aim in this article is not to defend Kohlberg’s theory’s selection of one version of moral objectivity over another, but simply to note that its potential contribution to the psychological interpretation of moral behavior relies upon its underlying

assumption of moral objectivity. Indeed, the criticism that his theory would have been better were it not for its deontological moral bias implies that better normative thinking would improve the construction of his empirical hypothesis. The moral controversy surrounding Kohlberg's moral development theory, thus, is clear evidence of how moral objectivity can play an important role in empirical research. Were Kohlberg's theory merely empirical, only empirical criticisms would be relevant.

Thomas Jones (1991) offers yet another instance of drawing inspiration from moral reasoning. He hypothesizes in his well-cited "Ethical Decision Making by Individuals in Organizations," that "moral intensity" influences every component of moral decision making and behavior, and he defines "moral intensity" in terms of a well-known concept from consequentialist moral theory: "magnitude of the consequences." Here, too, the normative quality of the "magnitude of consequences" concept becomes a plus (or minus) for evaluating his empirical theory.

To put the idea of hypothesis construction in perspective, consider a partial analogy to mathematical behavior. Mathematical truth is often assumed to be the canon of "objectivity." Without attempting to equate moral objectivity with mathematical objectivity, it is noteworthy that both morality and mathematics cannot be empirically or etiologically grounded (Enoch 2011; Hampton 2012; Putnam 2002; Scanlon 2014; Setiya 2015; Shafer-Landau 2003). Neither morals nor mathematics are subject to hypothetical falsification by observation or experiment. No matter how many times our eyes witnessed two objects and two objects adding up to five objects, it would not overturn the truth that " $2 + 2 = 4$ ." We simply would not believe our eyes. Morality is similar in defying hypothetical falsification by observation or experiment. Ask

yourself: What empirical experiment could possibly dissuade people of the view that torturing infants for fun is wrong, or that humans deserve to be treated with dignity?

Notice, too, that patterns of mathematical reasoning, just as patterns of moral reasoning, can serve as clues to the formulation of empirical hypotheses. Again, we are not conflating morals with math, but only drawing on a particular relevant similarity. Suppose a grade school student writes the number “4” on the whiteboard alongside the written expression, “ $2 + 2 =$ .” A good explanation of her behavior may involve reference to the structure of mathematical validity. Suppose the answer “4” had been whispered to the student by a classmate while walking up to the whiteboard. This explanation for writing the number “4” would be different from an explanation that referred to the epistemic validity of the concept of mathematics. Suppose that the student is asked later to write the answer to “ $6 + 6 =$ .” What prediction might a good psychologist make about the student’s ensuing behavior? If the cause of the earlier writing of “4” was not a whisper, but an understanding of simple integer calculation in mathematics, then we can predict that the student will write the answer “12” (We might find evidence for this hypothesis by looking at previous answers the student has given to questions about other problems of simple addition). As obvious as it may seem, our behavioral explanation/prediction must refer implicitly to the objectively rational structure of mathematical calculation. That is, in order to predict that the student will write the number “12,” the researcher must calculate (in addition to the student calculating) the answer to the question “ $6 + 6 =$ .”

Moral insights often arrange themselves in rational patterns that can serve as hypotheses for explaining behavior in ways that moral falsity does not. Again the partial analogy with mathematics is instructive. If someone understands mathematics, we can make predictions about their answers even to novel problems. Mathematics is rationally defensible and “objective,”

despite the fact that its truths are established through rational reflection and not empirical methods (Putnam 2002). But to the extent someone fails to understand mathematics and behaves irrationally, making predictions about their answers becomes more difficult. Indeed, explanations of mathematical failures, in contrast to successes, must derive from data outside the concepts of mathematics, and can be found in an almost infinite set of possible causal explanations: for example, neural failure, anxiety, strategic deception, bad teaching, etc. Hence, just as the internal objectivity of mathematics can serve as a tactic for explaining behavior, so too the structure of morality can serve as a tactic for explaining organizational and individual ethical behavior.

Explaining moral irrationality is often as important as explaining moral rationality. The need to explain irrational or failed moral behavior has launched a new, promising sub-field of business ethics, whose prominent contributors include Daniel Ariely (2008), David Messick (1999), Max Bazerman (2004), and Ann Tenbrunsel (2011). These writers examine “blind spots” and “predictable surprises” in moral behavior, using the tools of psychology, organizational psychology, and sociology to expose and explain failures in ethical decision making. With impetus from the pioneering work of decision theorists such as Daniel Kahneman, this academic subfield has affinities with the area of behavioral economics. It successfully illuminates many of the dark spaces lurking behind more “rational” or “theoretical” approaches to ethics, with obvious significance for practitioners. Just as behavioral economics seeks to explain the failures of “rational” economic presumptions, so too does behavioral morality seek to explain the failures of ethical motivation. Hence, ironically, this new sub-field also serves to underscore the primary power of rational or “good” moral reasoning, the very reasoning that serves, using Davidson’s expression, as the default “rational accommodation.” This coin has two sides.

### *3.3 Adding prescriptive power to empirical theories*

Economic theories are often used as if their embedded moral notions entailed moral objectivity, despite their authors stressing the moral neutrality of their underpinnings. Minus a concept of the right to property, economic theory is sterile except as a mode of description and prediction (Donaldson & Preston 1995). That is to say, economic theory requires some conception of “mine” vs. “yours” that extends beyond a regime of communal, mutually shared ownership, and beyond (what amounts to nearly the same thing) a regime of no ownership at all. And while it is technically possible to interpret economic theory so as not to imply that respecting another’s property is a good thing to do, most economists act and talk as if they believe that improving efficiency while not violating ownership rights is a good thing. Moreover, were the moral objectivity of property rights not assumed, it would follow that any normative (in the hard sense) guidance from economic theory, such as “behave efficiently” or “optimize” would carry no authority. Such words would amount to a fully contingent, hypothetical suggestion: something like, “If you happen to want efficiency defined in a particular way and happen to accept a regime that recognizes personal property rights, then you should optimize according to the following formula.”

Consider “rights,” a classic moral concept. Neo-classical economic theory implies that a moral right to property exists and possesses objective relevance. Notably, the moral right remains even when the legal right is missing. States such as the former Soviet Union failed to create and enforce a legal right to property, but in doing so they opened themselves to criticism for having failed to protect the more basic moral right to property. A moral right to property exists regardless of whether or not it is recognized by a given government (Dworkin 1984; Feinberg 1992; Thomson 1990; Waldron 1984; Wenar 2005, 2008).

Defenders of empirical theories of the firm often seek prescriptive relevance for their theories, which is understandable. Yet, when giving advice about the “right thing to do,” underlying moral commitments should be acknowledged. If the advice is to remove conflicts of interest in governance systems and thereby better serve the legitimate property rights of owners, then the underlying commitment to the moral rights to property (and also the moral duties of agents to principals) should be acknowledged. But they are barely acknowledged, at least in mainstream economics and much organizational theory. Agency theorists and other defenders of particular conceptions of the firm frequently move beyond claims that their conceptions are accurate descriptions of how firms do behave, to advocate governance reforms such as enhancing the power of shareholders. And they often do so with political zeal. There’s nothing wrong with advocacy, at least so long as the claim about what is objectively the “right thing to do” is acknowledged to rest upon certain objective—and often well-accepted—moral values.

Some concepts combine descriptive relevance with moral objectivity. Aristotle (1962) lays out the conditions for “arête,” virtue/excellence, using words with hybrid meaning, such as “phronesis,” or practical wisdom. Contemporary philosophers Hilary Putnam (2002) and Bernard Williams (1985) follow Aristotle’s lead and refer to “thick ethical concepts,” ones that cannot be fully understood unless interpreted in both descriptive and normative ways. Consider Putnam’s example, “cruelty.” To call a person cruel is both to describe his moral character and to evaluate him normatively. Thick ethical concepts are pervasive in management research. Take, for example, Oliver Williamson’s (2005) use of the term “workable” in Transaction Cost Economics. Williamson’s use of the term can be assigned two meanings. The first sense of “workable” evokes the ordinary meaning of the term, which is clearly normative. This sense implies that a given act or policy is “workable” in that it can achieve desirable or desired goals

and is not in conflict with other firmly held objectives and values. The second sense is a descriptive and technical sense, meaning a transaction cost-economizing result that can be predicted from the interplay of market forces and market actors.

Obviously, “virtue” is another thick ethical concept. Thus, it is futile to examine virtue through a purely descriptive lens. Many management scholars who study virtue or moral character acknowledge that the object of their study is, at least in part, a normative concept. Taya Cohen, for instance, (Cohen et al. 2014), investigates what it means to have moral character and how levels of moral character are related to unethical and ethical behaviors. In doing so, her work stands in stark relief to so-called philosophical “situationism,” i.e., the view that humans are blocked from displaying moral character by situational forces (e.g., Doris 2002; Harman 2003).

If virtue is a thick ethical concept, then any adequate understanding of virtue must consist of both descriptive and normative studies. Social psychologists who study virtue might enrich their research by paying attention to moral philosophers’ normative analysis of virtue. Recently, Miguel Alzola (2015) contrasted what social psychologists mean by virtue with what moral philosophers mean. Alzola points out that social psychologists’ current understanding of virtue is in need of greater philosophical sophistication, and that many even recognize this fact. Social psychologists today often interact with moral philosophers in workshops and seminars, and often co-edit books on the topic of virtue. It is no surprise that the recent John Templeton Foundation’s grant for moral character went to a team consisting of a philosopher and a psychologist (Nancy Snow and Darcia Narvaez). Because social psychologists use other thick concepts such as guilt, shame, blame, etc., they can similarly strengthen the normative aspect of their research by paying attention to virtue ethicists’ normative analysis of specific thick concepts.

Also consider the widely used concept of “legitimacy,” interpreted as “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (Suchman 1995, p. 574). The term “legitimacy” can describe a society’s shared opinions that certain organizational actions are desirable or appropriate, and, as Suchman explains, these sorts of shared perceptions or opinions are constructed through public discussions. At the same time, however, “legitimacy” can be interpreted as what is objectively legitimate rather than what people merely happen to believe is legitimate. Here, notice the implicit moral premise that public deliberation seeks to warrant the creation of value perceptions that are objectively correct (Scherer & Palazzo 2007).

Earlier we explained how some researchers flirt with moral objectivity, and may even cross the line into objectivity, without acknowledging that they have crossed it. The notion of a “thick ethical concept” just described can be used to rescue such attempts. Consider again the work of behavioral economist Dan Ariely (Gino & Ariely, 2012; Gino et al. 2013). Ariely’s use of the term “cheating” or “unethical” reveals “thick” ethicality. It is at once meant as having a measurable empirical component and also as possessing objective moral content. By using such “hybrid” or “thick” concepts, researchers can acquire enhanced normative relevance. Their conclusions can carry normative authority about what, under certain circumstances, will help people to do the objectively “right thing.” Thick ethical concepts, with their component of objective moral meaning, can thus enhance the reach and relevance of empirical research.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Another example is Gino and Pierce’s (2009) study about “unethical” behavior. In one experiment, when piles of cash (about \$7000 in real \$1 bills) were present on a table before participants, the participants were more likely to behave unethically—to cheat—on the task than when less money (only the cash necessary to pay participants) was visually available. Note that what the authors want to explain is the nature of a certain “unethical” behavior—not merely behavior that the subjects perceive as unethical. This follows from the fact that their hypothesis is that “the presence of abundant wealth increases the likelihood of individuals to behave



One more example is Edwards and Rothbard's (1999) study discussed earlier. Again, the key construct for their study is "well-being," and in the study, ratings about affective responses to work and family serve as operational measures for well-being. Here again, by using "well-being" in a hybrid manner that includes moral objectivity, it is possible to extend the relevance of the results into the moral realm. Used in this way, the authors' findings would have relevance to attaining "well-being"—the very moral question that moral philosophers such as Aristotle, Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, and Amartya Sen have struggled to answer. Many of Edwards and Rothbard's characteristics, interestingly enough, are key concepts in the tradition of normative utilitarian moral theory (e.g., Parfit 1984).

In a similar vein, Alejo J. Sison's book, *Happiness and virtue ethics: the ultimate value proposition* (2014) covers issues closely tied to that of "well-being." "Happiness" in Sison's sense and "well-being" are almost synonyms. Sison surveys economic and neuro-scientific approaches to happiness, identifying strengths and weaknesses. A problem of such studies, he notes, is that they frequently ignore objective morality in favor of emphasizing merely what people subjectively perceive as happiness. Drawing on Aristotelian virtue ethics, Sison stresses the importance of genuine or what we have called "objective" happiness in contrast to the mere utilitarian satisfaction of preferences. If management scholars who study well-being or happiness would address this normative issue, their studies might well be enriched.

#### ***4. Conclusion***

The fundamental claim in this article is that confused ethics, spurred by confused epistemology in management research, begets academic naiveté. Moral objectivity is denied

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unethically for personal gain" (p. 143). Therefore, the experiment suggests that cheating in the experiment is an "objectively unethical" behavior. Again, by treating the concept of cheating as a "thick" or hybrid concept, the experiment can be interpreted as relevant to the general question of how people ought, objectively, to behave.

sometimes to the detriment of research quality. True, the lessons of the European Renaissance must not be forgotten, and moral concepts must know their place in science. Yet, as we have argued, objective moral concepts can find *some* place in empirical research. Both the dominant epistemological camps of positivism and subjectivism stumble over the notion of moral objectivity, often to their detriment. Accepting at least limited moral objectivity through an objectivity-seeking research orientation, as we have shown, can benefit management research by guiding its practice by using patterns of moral objectivity as clues for formulating empirical hypotheses, and by adding prescriptive power to empirical theories.

Clearly then, Herbert Simon's (1967) famous remark that "[t]here is no place for ethical assertions in the body of a science" shortchanges both ethics and science. However, a final irony arises for this remark. A close look at Simon's broader writings reveals surprising sympathy for at least one form of objective values. Khurana and Spender (2012) show that Simon wanted business schools to serve as the "intellectual context" in which "both methodological openness and a diversity of normative, ethical and intellectual commitments to socially meaningful and useful theory" are maintained (p. 18). We are reminded that by "theory," in fact, Simon does not mean purely scientific explanation. Instead, he means both empirical explanation and design, where the former involves pure positive explanation and the latter involves normative prescription and, hence, intrinsic moral values.<sup>17</sup> In this way, the "real" Simon, and not the Simon of the single quote, urges management scholars to incorporate moral values into the objective activity of management research.

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<sup>17</sup> In fact, the GSIA (Graduate School of Industrial Administration) of Carnegie Institute of Technology—the former name of the Tepper School of Business, Carnegie Mellon University, was one of the earliest business schools that incorporated ethics into a curriculum (Modzelewski 2001). Ethics has been taught at the GSIA and the Tepper School since 1966—one year before the publication of Simon's article (1967).

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