

VALUES AND PROGRESS IN SOCIAL SCIENCE

Submitted for Consideration for the James Gutmann Prize

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§1. Introduction

Every form of inquiry imposes structure on the world. Physics has its particles, chemistry has its elements, and biology has its species. The social sciences, with their own multifarious kinds, aren't any different. The reason for all this classification is plain. Without categories to organize our experiences, we confront an almost-unintelligible world, one that defies systematic investigation. In order to form reliable generalizations about our world, investigators must group objects and mechanisms into categories on which they can depend. Over time, however, these categories change as inquiry advances. How can we make sense of this change? Can we characterize it as *progressive* at all? If so, under what conditions? In the pages that follow, I take up these questions to examine the possibility of conceptual progress in the social sciences, focusing in particular on the history of poverty measurement.

I begin my discussion, in §2 and §3, by considering a standard view about conceptual progress, often adopted by philosophers who consider the natural sciences. I call this view *realism about conceptual progress*, and I quickly reject it, on the grounds that it fails to account for what is really at stake in social-scientific debates about classification. In §4, after sketching two alternative notions of conceptual progress, which I dub *practical constructivism* and *cognitive constructivism*, I describe various roles that non-cognitive values might play in social-scientific classification. Some of these roles seem legitimate; others do not. At this point, in §5, I introduce the *value-free ideal*—or the view that, in general, non-cognitive values must not be permitted to shape social-scientific categories—and I present three powerful arguments in its favor. In §6, I articulate one problem to which the value-free ideal gives rise: owing to social inquiry's important role in social and political life, social-scientific concepts cannot be rid of their value-ladenness. So, we must figure out how to incorporate values

into social-scientific concepts in a way that shows adequate consideration for the concerns that motivated value-freedom.

One proposal, which I consider in §7, requires investigators to perform classification in ways that conform to value-laden *folk conceptions*. Conceptual progress, on this view, occurs whenever social scientists modify categories so that they more accurately mirror concepts used by the folk. After applying this suggestion to poverty measurement, I argue that it ought to be rejected, since most members of the general public will likely be ignorant of facts that are crucial to successful classification. In §8, I sketch, in very rough terms, a general account of the structure of value judgement, and I apply that account to this discussion. I contend that social inquiry has an obligation to help promote societal ideals that receive democratic endorsement, or what I call *public ideals*. Then, drawing on this point, in §9, I review a more sophisticated version of the view that calls for social-scientific categories to conform to folk conceptions. This position permits investigators to deviate from folk concepts, so long as their deliberations rely on value judgements provided exclusively by the folk. I argue against this approach, too, on the grounds that non-evaluative ignorance is likely to distort the public's capacity to perform value judgements that reflect its own ideals. The value-free ideal isn't tenable, and we need to find another way forward.

In §10, I recount Mollie Orshansky's development of the United States poverty thresholds in the mid-1960s, and I identify some morals we ought to draw from this episode. In particular, I suggest that investigators should rely on their superior epistemic conditions to perform value judgements that reflect public ideals. Equipped with these value judgements, social scientists should then go on to formulate concepts. The remainder of the essay is spent elaborating these claims. In §11 and §12, I reiterate social inquiry's obligations to society at large, and I go on to present my own

account of conceptual progress, which I call *democratic constructivism*. According to this view, conceptual progress occurs whenever investigators modify categories in ways that enable social inquiry to more successfully promote public ideals. Next, in §13, I argue that Orshansky managed to achieve conceptual progress, even though, as I acknowledge in §14, her poverty measures must face up to several problems of their own.

Two main lessons emerge. First, value judgement turns out to play a crucial role in adjudicating Orshansky's successes and failures. Indeed, more generally, I argue that value judgements lie at the heart of progressive classificatory practices. And second, as I conclude in §15, social-scientific categories are perpetual works-in-progress—always capable of improvement, although never achieving perfection.

§2. How Pluto Lost Its Planethood

I'll begin with the natural sciences and with a short version of a familiar story, about how Pluto lost its planethood. In August 2006, the International Astronomical Union (IAU) voted to adopt a definition of *planet* that excluded from its ranks the celestial body that had long been considered the ninth planet from the Sun. While the announcement stunned some members of the public, Pluto's demotion was a long time in the making.¹ Indeed, as early as the 1990s, the legitimacy of Pluto's status as a planet began to erode, as astronomers discovered objects in the Kuiper Belt whose orbital and compositional properties undermined Pluto's reputation.² The discovery of Eris in 2005 finally spurred the IAU to act. After intense deliberations, and several rejected proposals, the

¹ Pluto's planethood is no joke. When, in 2000, the Museum of Natural History opened its Rose Center for Earth and Space, it premiered models of the Solar System that did not treat Pluto as a planet. Museum-goers were outraged, and Neil deGrasse Tyson, who led the design of the exhibitions, received many dozens of angry letters. Seven-year-old Emerson York wrote to him: "Dear Mr. Tyson, I think Pluto is a planet. Why do you think Pluto is no longer a planet? I do not like your anser [sic]!!! Pluto is my faveret [sic] planet!!!" For more on the the scandal, see Neil deGrasse Tyson, *The Pluto Files: The Rise and Fall of America's Favorite Planet* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009).

² For instance, several of these objects are icy and rocky, just like Pluto, and Eris is nearly a third *more* massive.

IAU settled on an account that supplied three conditions:

A planet is a celestial body that (a) is in orbit around the Sun, (b) has sufficient mass for its self-gravity to overcome rigid body forces so that it assumes a hydrostatic equilibrium (nearly round) shape, and (c) has cleared the neighborhood around its orbit.³

Pluto, which has not cleared its neighborhood (i.e., cleared its orbital zone of other gravitationally significant bodies), failed to pass muster and was thus relegated to dwarf-planet status.

We might wonder whether the IAU's redefinition of planethood amounts merely to a change in our habits of speech, or whether it signifies a genuine achievement, some improvement in our understanding of the natural world. Compare, for instance, the IAU's conception with a much earlier one, in vogue from antiquity until Copernicus. Most pre-Copernican astronomers placed great emphasis on their distinction between *fixed stars* (i.e., celestial objects whose positions appeared fixed in the sky) and *wandering stars* (i.e., celestial objects whose positions appeared to shift over time). For these pre-Copernicans, planets were identified with the latter group (and generally included the Moon, Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn); for us, alternatively, planets are identified with objects that satisfy the conditions of the 2006 IAU resolution (and include Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune).⁴ How should we understand the relationship between the first collection of objects and the second?

Here's one proposal. Following Mill's suggestion, that "there are in nature distinctions of Kind," traditionalists who espouse *realism about natural kinds* (RNK) might endorse *realism about conceptual progress* (RCP).⁵ According to RNK, things in the world come partitioned into objective categories—or *natural kinds*, which do not depend on human linguistic conventions, evaluative

³ See International Astronomical Union, "Resolution B5: Definition of a Planet in the Solar System" (2006).

⁴ Nor did pre-Copernicans recognize that other stars could have planets in orbit around them.

⁵ See John Stuart Mill, *A System of Logic* (London: Longman, 1884), book 4, chapter 7.

attitudes, cultural practices, or anything else about us. If mature scientific languages can “carve nature at its joints,” as Plato put it, by specifying the locations of these partitions, then scientific inquiry should always aim to formulate concepts that mirror nature’s own.⁶ Realism about conceptual progress thus emerges naturally, declaring that progress is made whenever (and only whenever) investigators modify their groupings in ways that better correspond with objective taxonomies in nature. In other words, RNK stipulates that there are some correct, and many incorrect, ways of classifying objects and mechanisms; and RCP identifies conceptual progress with the refashioning of our categories (and their extensions) in accordance with truths about the structure of the world.⁷

Return now to the story about Pluto. Suppose we wish to count the transition from wandering stars to planets (in the IAU’s sense of the term) as a genuine case of conceptual progress. If RCP is right, then this transition counts as progressive because the IAU has managed to “carve nature at its joints” more successfully than the pre-Copernicans did.⁸ The history of science is replete with episodes like this one, in which one mode of classification is supplanted by another, allegedly superior, one—and, at least at first glance, RCP seems to provide us with a plausible account of these episodes. The history of social inquiry is no different: social concepts also evolve over time in ways we wish to characterize as progressive. Shifting our attention from natural inquiry

⁶ See Plato, *Phaedrus*, line 265e, in which Socrates describes the principle of “dividing things again by classes, where the natural joints are, and not trying to break any part, after the manner of a bad carver.”

⁷ My brief treatment of realism about conceptual progress ignores accounts of natural kinds that are both realist and radically pluralist, such as John Dupre’s “promiscuous realism.” In short, if some very promiscuous variety of natural-kind realism is true, then realism about conceptual progress will still turn out to be inadequate; for merely being *real* will not count as enough of an accomplishment to be the sole (or even the main) criterion for conceptual progress. See John Dupre, *The Disorder of Things: The Metaphysical Foundations of the Disunity of Science* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993).

⁸ Indeed, the IAU has obviously managed to do much better than most post-Copernicans, too. Admittedly, though, there are good reasons to doubt that even this episode can be understood as a genuine case of realist conceptual progress. This story seems to have more to do with convention-setting than with grasping nature’s joints.

to social inquiry—from kinds like *planets*, *genes*, and *gold* to kinds like *unemployment*, *xenophobia*, and *murder*—we might be similarly tempted to embrace RCP. Our first order of business therefore involves figuring out whether that idea is plausible.

§3. The Inadequacy of Realism

RNK strikes me as a dubious doctrine, especially in the context of social inquiry, where our categories are highly contingent. It is doubtful, for instance, that the Gini coefficient grasps nature's genuine concept of economic inequality in a way that the Hoover index does not.⁹ But I won't try to oppose RNK here. Instead, I will aim to convey its by-and-large irrelevance to questions about conceptual progress. Certain classifications *do* count as better than others—albeit for reasons that transparently have nothing to do with the natural-kind structure of our world. So we ought to reject RCP, even if we cannot decisively rule out RNK.

Social scientists have spilled gallons of ink on disputes about classification. Let's consider one such case. Michele Moody-Adams shows how twentieth-century cultural anthropologists, inquiring into the diversity of human moral practices, often framed their categories and investigations in terms that presupposed certain values.¹⁰ One of her examples focuses on a dispute about how to conceive the moral code of a particular Native American community. R.B. Brandt and John Ladd offer clashing accounts of *Hopi ethics*. Ladd develops an “authoritative version” of Hopi ethics by relying on in-depth interviews with two “Navajo informants,” while Brandt forms generalizations about Hopi ethics on the basis of the moral beliefs of the community's (supposedly)

⁹ The Gini coefficient measures economic inequality by giving a measure of statistical dispersion in a frequency distribution of income or wealth; the Hoover index, alternatively, measures inequality by identifying the portion of the total income (for some population) that would need to be distributed from the richest half of the population to the poorest half in order to achieve complete income uniformity. These measures provide different information, but one isn't *closer to the real kind* than the other.

¹⁰ In this section, I abide by the account of the dispute told by Michele Moody-Adams in *Fieldwork in Familiar Places: Morality, Culture, and Philosophy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997), chapter 1.

“average member.” Which account of Hopi ethics is superior, and—more importantly—on what grounds?¹¹

In assessing the virtues and defects of each anthropologist’s approach, we pay attention to *evaluative considerations* of some sort. Bearing this point in mind, Moody-Adams points out that both approaches have flaws. “Authoritative versions” tend to neglect certain complexities of moral life—things like internal conflict, dissent, and self-scrutiny—that are often of “supreme *moral* importance” to the community in consideration. Brandt does not fare much better, though: it is similarly difficult to see why the beliefs of a community’s “average member” should count as comprehensive.¹² Both authors endorse “evaluatively non-neutral” accounts of Hopi ethics. Thus the dispute turns on practical, ethical, social, and (certain kinds of) cognitive values, rather than on considerations we might expect to coincide with facts about natural kinds.

Indeed, no matter whether Ladd’s or Brandt’s account is superior—or if neither is adequate, and some other conceptualization of Hopi ethics, hitherto unconsidered, ought to be adopted instead—correspondence with natural kinds has nothing to do with the matter. Thus, RCP fails to grasp the full range of ways in which social-scientific concepts can succeed or fail. If we wish to make sense of conceptual progress in social inquiry, we will need to look elsewhere, in search of a position that does away with the extravagant demands of realism but which does not degenerate into a full-blown, free-for-all form of relativism—according to which no one scheme of categories can ever be deemed superior to some other scheme, at least in any genuine sense.

¹¹ I should clarify that “Hopi ethics” just refers to the whole collection of ethical norms that govern Hopi communities.

¹² Moody-Adams (1997) asks: “What would it mean, for example, to try to describe the moral import of homelessness in America by interviewing only the ‘average American,’ who is unlikely to be homeless?” I shall return to questions of this sort later on.

§4. Alternative Values

Philosophers of science traditionally distinguish between *cognitive* and *non-cognitive* values. Cognitive values—like predictive accuracy, explanatory power, and coherence—guide scientific inquiry in ways that strike us as largely unproblematic. Rejecting some theory in virtue of its incoherence isn't pathological; it is mandatory. Preferring classificatory schemes that facilitate predictive success isn't shady; it is perfectly reasonable. We fully expect, even require, these sorts of considerations to lie at the heart of scientific decision-making. Unsurprisingly, then, nobody worries about the pervasiveness of cognitive values in science. Far thornier are questions about the rightful place of *non-cognitive* values. These sorts of considerations—which include moral, prudential, religious, social, and political values—tend to stir up trouble, and, as we shall see, it isn't hard to see why.

To endorse realism about conceptual progress is to endorse a particular view about the aims of scientific classification—about what sorts of *values* classifiers should embrace. Realists believe that social-scientific categories aspire to mirror nature's own divisions; thus realism emphasizes one type of cognitive value above all others: namely, *correspondence with natural kinds*. Alternative accounts of conceptual progress diverge from RCP insofar as they emphasize other sorts of values (cognitive or non-cognitive) instead. So, rather than identify satisfactory categories with ones that conform to the world's natural-kind structure, *constructivists* contend that classifications succeed when we build them in ways that promote our own ambitions. But we have many ambitions—so which ones should our classificatory practices pursue? I'll sketch, in very rough terms, two proposals: *cognitive constructivism* and *practical constructivism*.

Cognitive constructivists maintain that successful classificatory schemes conduce to the overall cognitive aims of social science—things like explanation, understanding, and prediction; so, naturally, the view holds that conceptual progress occurs whenever investigators reshape their categories in ways that better facilitate the achievement of our overall cognitive goals.¹³ Practical constructivism offers a more permissive view, declaring that *practical* aims, which might sometimes include cognitive goals, should constrain researchers' classifications; thus this view associates conceptual progress with transitions that better enable us to achieve our practical objectives, whatever these might be. Cognitive constructivism and practical constructivism conceive the aims of classification—and the sorts of evaluative considerations that investigators are entitled to deploy in the service of those aims—in different ways. Let's return to a more general question, about what sorts of values can legitimately guide scientific inquiry.

§5. Introducing the Value-Free Ideal

Consider seven roles that non-cognitive values could perform in the context of scientific classification:¹⁴

- (1) Non-cognitive values might serve as reasons to engage in classification in the first place.
- (2) Non-cognitive values could fix the agenda of classification.¹⁵
- (3) Non-cognitive values may help adjudicate between rival classificatory schemes, which are equivalent in cognitive virtue.¹⁶

¹³ What I call cognitive constructivism resembles what Laura Franklin-Hall calls “the simple epistemic view.” See her “Natural Kinds as Categorical Bottlenecks” (2009) in *Philosophical Studies* (Vol. 172, No. 4: pp. 925-948).

¹⁴ I draw on Anna Alexandrova's taxonomy of non-cognitive values in science, though I modify it considerably. See her “Can the Science of Well-being Be Objective?” in the *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* (forthcoming).

¹⁵ Why study the epidemiology of HIV rather than the geographical distribution of thumbtacks? Scientists often rely on non-cognitive values to determine what sorts of investigations to undertake, and the questions which they choose to pursue form their *research agendas*. According to (2), then, classification might be performed in the service of investigations that were undertaken for non-cognitive, value-laden reasons. For an analogous point about non-cognitive values in scientific inquiry in general, see Philip Kitcher, *Science, Truth, and Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

¹⁶ Relatedly, see Helen Longino, *Science as Social Knowledge: Values and Objectivity in Scientific Inquiry* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990).

(4) Non-cognitive values might specify evidentiary standards for classification.¹⁷

(5) Non-cognitive values could provide reasons for deciding that certain kinds of properties are relevant (or irrelevant) to a particular classification.

(6) Non-cognitive values may serve as reasons for accepting (or rejecting) some particular system of classification.¹⁸

(7) Non-cognitive values might be a source of bias or malpractice.¹⁹

Some of these roles, like (1) and (2), seem completely legitimate; these cases are often described as extra-scientific. Other roles, like (3) and (4), take place *within* science but aren't obviously objectionable. The real trouble is alleged to come from somewhere else. Call the *value-free ideal* the view that (5), (6), and (7) have no place in healthy scientific inquiry. Let me try to give the value-free ideal its due. Defenders of certain vision of science—which sees scientists as impartial investigators, working to provide humanity with a vast reservoir of objective knowledge—worry about (5), (6), and (7) for very good reasons: the history of science supplies scores of examples of the havoc that this sort of value-ladenness can wreak.

Consider an especially hideous case. Samuel George Morton was a nineteenth century anatomist and physician, who owned what was then reputed to be the world's largest collection of human skulls. Morton took particular interest in the possibility of ranking races by 'cranial capacity'. He was also a rabidly racist man and a proponent of polygenism—which held that the human races were independent species (created separately by God, Morton added). Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, Morton's investigations led him to conclusions that "support[ed], in detail, every Teutonic and

¹⁷ See Heather Douglas, "Inductive Risk and Values in Science" (2000) in *Philosophy of Science* (Vol. 67, No. 4: pp. 559-579). Douglas reopened discussion of a point made by Richard Rudner in his "The Scientist Qua Scientist Makes Value Judgments" (1953) in *Philosophy of Science* (Vol. 20, No. 1, pp. 1-6). As Rudner puts it: "How sure we need to be before we accept a hypothesis will depend on how serious a mistake would be."

¹⁸ See Heather Douglas, *Science, Policy, and the Value-Free Ideal* (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009), especially chapter 5.

¹⁹ See Anna Alexandrova (forthcoming).

Anglo-Saxon expectation for the ranking of races: whites on top, blacks on the bottom, and Indians in between; among Caucasians, Western Europeans on top, Jews in the middle, and ‘Hindoos’ on the bottom.”²⁰ When Stephen Jay Gould revisited Morton’s data, he identified five varieties of scientific malpractice in Morton’s research, including several instances of data-fudging and mismeasuring. Ultimately, Gould concludes that “[Morton’s] a priori conviction of racial ranking [was] so powerful that it directed his tabulations [of cranial capacity] along pre-established lines.” In blunter terms, Morton’s racism rendered his science a sham. Inquiry, as it turns out, doesn’t mix well with ideology.²¹

The story of Cyril Burt ends in similar disaster.²² Cyril Burt was a twentieth-century English psychologist whose research focused on intelligence, especially on questions about the heritability of IQ. Studying twins who had been separated at birth, Burt argued that intelligence was highly heritable, since even twins reared worlds apart could be expected to share similar levels of cognitive ability. Burt concluded: “Capacity must obviously limit content. It is impossible for a pint jug to hold more than a pint of milk; and it is equally impossible for a child’s educational attainments to rise higher than his educable capacity permits.” Relying on Burt’s research, England implemented an

²⁰ Here I follow Stephen Jay Gould’s version of the story, presented in his “Morton’s Ranking of Races by Cranial Capacity” (1978) in *Science* (Vol. 200, No. 4341: pp. 503-509). Also see Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1981), chapter 2.

²¹ I should note that Gould’s re-interpretation of Morton’s data and his charges of malpractice created a scandal of their own. In 2011, a team of physical anthropologists at the University of Pennsylvania (where Morton’s collection now resides) actually remeasured Morton’s skulls—something Gould had failed to do—and re-examined both Morton’s and Gould’s analyses. In a repudiation of Gould’s allegations, this research team concluded that Morton neither manipulated his samples nor selectively reported his data. For our purposes, however, it doesn’t much matter whether or not Gould’s account is right. The moral of the story stands either way. For if Gould turns out to be the one guilty of malpractice, it will only prove that *his* anti-racist politics clouded his own scientific judgement. See Jason Lewis, David DeGusta, Marc Meyer, Janet Monge, Alan Mann, and Ralph Holloway, “The Mismeasure of Science: Stephen Jay Gould versus Samuel George Morton on Skulls and Bias” (2011) in *PLOS Biology* (Vol. 9, No. 6).

²² Here I rely on three sources: Stephen Jay Gould (1981), chapter 6; Philip Kitcher, *Vaulting Ambition: Sociobiology and the Quest for Human Nature* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1985), introduction; and, especially, Richard Lewontin, Steven Rose, and Leon Kamin, *Not in Our Genes: Biology, Ideology, and Human Nature* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), chapter 5.

educational system that lived up to his vision. Beginning in 1944, many English students (around the age of ten or eleven) took an “eleven-plus” exam that determined their educational and vocational futures. Depending on their performance on these exams, students were sent to grammar schools, secondary modern schools, or technical schools. After all, if Burt was right about the heritability of intelligence, then society could determine a child’s potential at a young age and structure its educational system in a way that saved resources from being squandered on hopeless cases.

Yet Burt’s findings do not stand up to scrutiny; indeed, worse than that, he was almost certainly a fraud. Several decades later, when Leon Kamin returned to Burt's papers to re-analyze his data, Kamin discovered some peculiarities: in 1955, Burt alleged to have experimented on 21 pairs of twins; in 1958, his study claimed to have relied on data from 30 pairs of twins; and in 1966, Burt's study apparently involved 53 pairs of twins. Yet in all of these studies, Burt reported identical correlation coefficients—all the way up to the third decimal places. (For all cases, he claimed that the correlation coefficients for IQ were 0.994 for twins reared together and 0.771 for twins separated at birth.) Kamin pointed out that these numbers represent a near impossibility: Burt must have fabricated his data. But damage had already been done. Many thousands of children had already had their futures fixed by the eleven-plus exam, and that fact couldn’t be changed. While Burt’s findings could be repudiated, and his reputation could be demolished, damage could not be undone. If only Burt had not let his values—in particular, his long-held conviction that the poor were, at birth, usually cognitively inferior to the rich—cloud his scientific judgement, then this disaster could have been averted.

The Morton and Burt affairs impart several lessons. Start with the most conspicuous one. It is easy to see how value-ladenness, in the senses described by (5), (6) and (7), can warp scientific

rationality. Science is supposed to be an objective enterprise, in the sense that investigators cannot allow their own personal biases to predispose them to obtaining certain results. Conclusions in science should not depend on the values of individual scientists; they should depend on *facts* about the world. When Morton allowed his politics to shape his investigations, he rendered himself incapable of objectivity: rampant methodological blunders, all of which happened to favor Morton's prejudged views about race, spoiled his conclusions. Yet, so long as values are allowed to take on roles (5), (6) and (7), these sorts of blunders should be expected. So perhaps we should adopt value-freedom in order to safeguard against malpractice and fraud. Call this the *precautionary argument* for value-freedom.

Granting scientists free license to formulate concepts which presuppose value judgements seems wrong for another reason, too: it is anti-democratic, and it reeks of dogmatism. The role that science plays in guiding public policy, made especially clear in Burt's case, means that scientists have a special kind of political authority which they must take care to avoid abusing. Scientists must recognize boundaries. Even when the values in play aren't nearly as pernicious as the ones that drove Morton and Burt to their conclusions, and even when value-ladenness does not give rise to data-fudging or other overt sorts of malpractice, scientific authority does not extend to ethics. Scientific expertise doesn't guarantee moral expertise. (Just recall Morton and Burt.) Scientists who sneak their own values into concepts in order to push particular political doctrines—even eminently worthy ones—undermine the integrity of the entire enterprise; they even risk turning science into a tool of propaganda and sabotaging democracy. Surely that is something well worth avoiding, especially in light of the political significance of scientific inquiry. Call this the *democratic argument* for value-freedom.

Hilary Putnam blames a final source of hostility to values on the enduring influence of empiricism.²³ If, as Carnap wrote, “all statements belonging to Metaphysics, regulative Ethics, and (metaphysical) Epistemology [...] are in fact unverifiable and, therefore, unscientific,” then we would be right to expunge them from our scientific language.²⁴ Worse still, we might worry that, so long as scientific concepts contain evaluative content, scientific disagreements will remain rationally irresolvable; and if scientific disputes are intractable, then scientific progress is impossible. For pragmatic reasons, we do not want science to inherit any features of ethical discourse. Call this the *empiricist argument* for value-freedom.

§6. Social Inquiry’s Value Problem

On the face of it, the value-free ideal bears bad news for social inquiry: if Real Science mandates value-freedom, then social science just doesn't make the cut. After all, many social-scientific concepts—like *rape*, *freedom*, and *well-being*—seem hopelessly laden with non-cognitive value. Ordinary language, where most social categories originate, is replete with terms that simultaneously perform both description and evaluation (i.e., so-called “thick” concepts), so this fact shouldn’t surprise us. Yet it threatens the prospect of a genuinely scientific form of social inquiry. For even if we could in principle “disentangle” the evaluative content of these terms from their descriptive content, there are good reasons for wanting to keep social-scientific concepts thick.

Recall (2), which claims that non-cognitive values might play a role in setting the agenda of inquiry. This role isn’t merely permissible; it is necessary. The range of possible research agendas which investigators could adopt is so vast that cognitive values alone cannot navigate these decisions. Responsible agenda-setting must bear in mind all sorts of evaluative considerations—for

²³ Hilary Putnam, *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy and Other Essays* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2002), chapters 1 and 2.

²⁴ See Rudolf Carnap, *The Unity of Science* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Company, 1934).

instance, about what sorts of questions are politically or socially significant—and social-scientific concepts cannot succeed unless they reflect these judgements. An account of *unemployment* will remain worthless, unless it manages to take into account the particular sources of the political and social significance of unemployment; investigators cannot adequately conceptualize a phenomenon without grasping its significance.²⁵

Why does the Bureau of Labor Statistics exclude “discouraged workers” from its count of the unemployed? Our current conceptualization of unemployment traces back to research conducted by the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s, when economic wounds inflicted by the Great Depression had reached their peak.²⁶ The United States government wanted to identify, and then offer aid to, certain segments of the out-of-work population, and it figured that providing support to one-time workers who had given up on their search for employment was less of a priority than helping former workers who were still looking for jobs. Investigators developed an account of unemployment that reflected that (value-laden) priority.

Social inquiry cannot avoid incorporating non-cognitive values into its conceptualizations. Our next task is to figure out whether this kind of value-ladenness can be achieved in a way that satisfies proponents of value-freedom. Ernest Nagel offers one suggestion. Nagel distinguishes between “estimation” and “appraisal,” conceding that social scientists may “*estimate* [...] the degree to which some commonly recognized (and more or less clearly defined) type of action, object, or institution is embodied in a given instance,” but insisting that they must not pronounce on whether

²⁵ See John Dupre, “Fact and Value” (2007) in *Value-Free Science? Ideals and Illusions*, edited by Harold Kincaid, John Dupre, and Alison Wylie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), for more on the point that the social sciences should be able to provide us with reasons for action.

²⁶ For a comprehensive history of the development of the unemployment rate, see David Card, “Origins of the Unemployment Rate: The Lasting Legacy of Measurement without Theory” (2011) in the *American Economic Review* (Vol. 101, No. 3, pp. 552-557).

that action, object, or institution is good or bad. So long as investigators limit themselves to estimating, and steer clear of appraising, they can avail themselves of morally-loaded categories without forfeiting value-freedom.²⁷

Reflecting on efforts to conceptualize and measure *poverty*, Amartya Sen elaborates on Nagel's suggestion.²⁸ Sen embraces value-freedom, too, and rejects the notion that poverty measurement involves “unleashing one's personal morals on the statistics of deprivation.” In fact, he rejects an even less sinister view, that ethical judgements—even the most sophisticated, well-founded kinds—deserve to play any active role at all in poverty measurement. Rather, Sen reminds us of the point that “[to] describe a prevailing prescription is an act of description, not prescription,” and argues that economists and sociologists who measure poverty aim, primarily, to formulate an account of prevailing prescriptions of that phenomenon.²⁹ In other words, genuine ethical judgements never enter the picture, since the poverty theorist is merely responsible for recapitulating poverty's public image—or the *folk conception of poverty*, as I will call it.

The successful recapitulation of folk conceptions is regarded as legitimate, on Sen's view, presumably because *conformity to folk conceptions* is considered a kind of cognitive virtue; genuine knowledge about poverty cannot be had unless the scientific conception of poverty matches the public conception, unless both groups use the same term in roughly the same way. Social scientists can remove ambiguities from these primitive concepts, in order to make them suitable for study.

²⁷ See Ernest Nagel, *The Structure of Science: Problems in the Logic of Scientific Explanation* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1961), chapter 13.

²⁸ See chapter 2 in Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famine: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983). I should stress that Sen's view has changed *considerably* since then. See Hilary Putnam (2002), chapter 4, for a discussion of the evolution of Sen's view on this topic. As Putnam puts the point, Sen's own capability approach is not easy to square with his early view on the role of values in economics.

²⁹ An apparently similar strategy was adopted by sociologists Herbert Blumer and Steven Woolgar in their efforts to conceptualize the *social problem*. See Michael Root, “Social Problems” (2007) in *Value-Free Science? Ideals and Illusions*, edited by Harold Kincaid, John Dupre, and Alison Wylie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

Short of that, however, investigators must fashion terms that conform to folk conceptions. Call this constraint the *principle of conformity to folk conceptions* (CFC). We can easily grasp a straightforward notion of progress that emerges from it: conceptual progress occurs whenever social-scientific categories get modified in ways that more accurately reflect, or mirror, those used by the folk. CFC sidesteps worries about bias, dogmatism, and perpetual disagreement—three compelling considerations in favor of value-freedom—all while permitting that minimal kind of value-ladenness which is necessary for social inquiry.

§7. Why the Folk Can't Measure Poverty (Part I)

Formulating a poverty line involves making two determinations. First, investigators must figure out what level of *economic welfare* (or *standard of living*) counts as minimally acceptable (for some society at some point in time); and second, investigators must specify what level of income (in monetary terms) corresponds with that minimally acceptable level of economic welfare. The figure which emerges represents the poverty line. We should think of the minimally acceptable level of economic welfare as an overtly value-laden notion; this level reflects social, political, and moral judgements about the material goods which members of our society are entitled to have. If all goes well, the poverty line just translates that measure of economic welfare into income terms. In this section, I'll argue that one problem with CFC is that it fails to perform that translation successfully.

The most literal version of CFC turns social-scientific classification into a matter of polling, requiring investigators to set their poverty line at whatever level of income the public identifies as the poverty line. In the United States, economists and sociologists would implement this suggestion by conducting opinion polls which ask each American to set her own poverty line in dollar terms, averaging the responses, and then setting the poverty line at the resultant figure. This strategy has

been tried. In 1989, a healthcare advocacy group commissioned Gallup to perform exactly this activity.³⁰ Gallup posed the following question to its respondents: “People who have income below a certain level can be considered poor. That level is called the ‘poverty line.’ What amount of weekly income would you use as a poverty line for a family of four (husband, wife and two children) in this community?”³¹ William O’Hare then relied on Gallup’s results to formulate what he termed ‘the American Public’s Poverty Line,’ which he set at \$15,017—or roughly \$3,000 (24 percent) *higher* than the United States government’s 1988 poverty line.³²

Gallup’s results provide solid evidence in favor of O’Hare’s “clear conclusion” that “the poverty line set by the federal government needs to be re-examined.”³³ That conclusion is too unambitious to be useful, though. The federal government’s poverty line relied on consumption data from the 1950s, when average standards of living in the United States were substantially lower than they were in the 1980s. (Average annual household expenditures increased well over fourfold in real terms during that period.³⁴) So, if poverty lines should at all reflect contemporary social views about minimally acceptable standards of living—and nearly everyone agrees that, in some sense, they should—then even crude efforts to gauge public opinion would have done a better job than the government’s outdated measurement. As we saw earlier, proponents of CFC want to ensure that the public bears sole responsibility for whatever value judgements get built into social-scientific concepts. The idea is that such a policy will tend to produce concepts that accurately reflect the

³⁰ See Denton R. Vaughan, “Exploring the Use of the Public’s Views To Set Income Poverty Thresholds and Adjust Them Over Time” (1993) in *Social Security Bulletin* (Summer 1993).

³¹ See William O’Hare, Taynia Mann, Kathryn Porter, and Robert Greenstein, *Real Life Poverty in America: Where the American Public Would Set the Poverty Line* (Washington, D.C. : The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities and the Families USA Foundation, 1990).

³² Denton R. Vaughan (1993).

³³ William O’Hare, Taynia Mann, Kathryn Porter, and Robert Greenstein (1990).

³⁴ Elaine Chao and Kathleen Utgoff, *100 Years of U.S. Consumer Spending: Data for the Nation, New York City, and Boston* (Washington, D.C. : U.S. Department of Labor and U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2006).

social, political, and moral values of society at large; indeed, it is in large part this aspiration that motivates CFC in the first place. Yet CFC, literally construed, is unlikely to bring about that outcome. So we will need to look elsewhere.

Let's grant, for a moment, the point that social-scientific concepts should reflect the unmodified values of society at large. Then, in the case of poverty measurement, we should want our poverty line to correspond with whatever level of economic welfare is deemed minimally acceptable by the lights of public judgement. (Recall that this is the aspect of poverty measurement that involves value judgement.) If we rely solely on public opinion polling, in the way that O'Hare does, then we had better hope that the public can reliably (and accurately) identify an income level that matches its own conception of the minimally acceptable level of economic welfare. The problem with CFC is that we should doubt the ability of the public to do anything like that

The reason is simple. In general, we should expect most members of the public to be ignorant of the non-evaluative facts about what sorts of things (and how much of them) are required to achieve some minimally acceptable standard of living. A long list of economic, sociological, and even medical facts—about nutritional requirements for children of different ages, consumption patterns of American families, food costs, housing costs, and much else besides—will turn out to be relevant. Yet most members of the public will be clueless about these details. So even if poverty theorists should embrace the social, political, and moral values of the societies they inhabit, they cannot rely on the public to formulate a poverty line that reflects its own values. In other words, we should not expect O'Hare's poverty line ("The American Public's Poverty Line") to coincide with the American public's own conception of the minimally acceptable level of economic welfare. If CFC intends to provide us with a poverty line that accurately reflects public values, then it fails.

We can try to refine CFC in a way that avoids this result. Here's one suggestion. Poverty theorists should rely on public judgements in determining what level of economic welfare counts as minimally acceptable. Once that question is settled, though, they must take matters into their hands in order to figure out what level of income corresponds with the public's judgement.³⁵ In the next section, I'll turn to this proposal. I'll argue that it faces a similar defect: the public's ignorance of non-evaluative facts about poverty distorts its capacity for making value judgements about economic welfare.

§8. The Structure of Value Judgement

Before we move forward, let's review. In §6, we saw that novel kind terms enter into social-scientific language to help facilitate inquiry. Since non-cognitive values help set the agenda of social inquiry, actual investigations tend to be motivated by social, political, and moral projects; and as a result, I argued, social-scientific categories reflect the various social, political, and moral values of the investigations (and investigators) they serve. In fact, this kind of value-ladenness turns out to be exactly what we find when we trace the histories of terms like unemployment, child abuse, and poverty.³⁶ Yet it isn't mere historical happenstance that this is so. Given the aims of social inquiry, I suggested, value-laden kinds are inevitable—desirable, even. Here we encounter trouble, though, for social-scientific concepts cannot endorse non-cognitive values without defying the value-free ideal. If arguments in favor of value-freedom persuade us, and if I am right about the near-inevitability of value-laden kinds, then social inquiry seems doomed.

³⁵ This suggestion, substantially more plausible than the one we just considered, seems to more closely resemble what Sen (1983) has in mind.

³⁶ For a history of the concept of *child abuse*, see Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999), chapter 5.

But hope is not yet lost. The principle of conformity to folk conceptions (CFC) attempts to offer us a way out of this muddle by allowing (*requiring*, actually) investigators to appropriate the concepts of the folk, which are very often value-laden. The idea is that CFC enables social inquiry to use value-laden kind terms in a way that takes care to avoid the sorts of worries—about bias, dogmatism, and perpetual disagreement—that motivate calls for value-freedom. Our current venture is to see whether CFC succeeds. It was easy enough to see that naive versions of CFC do not. But I haven't yet considered any of the more sophisticated variants of the thesis. That is what I'll do next. First, though, we will need to develop a more careful account of the ways in which non-cognitive values shape scientific inquiry. In what follows, I'll sketch a general picture of how things stand so far; this sketch is very rough and extremely incomplete, but details shouldn't much matter for my purposes. In later sections of the essay, I will refine this picture to develop my own positive account.

Let's start at the broadest level. Societies hold themselves to norms that govern how community members should aspire to treat one another. I'll call these *ideals*. Ideals are slowly evolving, often highly ambiguous, complexes of social, political, and moral values, which reflect some of the most fundamental normative commitments of the communities that espouse them.³⁷ When ideals receive democratic endorsement, when they manage to represent commitments that are widely and freely held by members of a society, I'll call them *public ideals*. Ideals tend to be abstract and generic: think of that popular American ideal of *upwards social mobility*, which promises “[a] better and richer and fuller [life] for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement.”³⁸ Or think of Rawls' *difference principle*, which permits social and economic inequalities in a society, so long as these inequalities satisfy two conditions: “first, they must be attached to

³⁷ There is nothing intrinsically parochial about this account; the relevant community could, in principle, contain all of humanity. I just want to allow for the possibility of pluralism.

³⁸ See James Truslow Adams, *The Epic of America* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1932).

offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity; and second, they must be to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged members of society.”³⁹ Far too hazy to provide guidance on their own, ideals must be *interpreted* to be implemented in the world.⁴⁰ Ordinary moral and political life is thus dominated by something else: particular value judgements, performed by particular agents, about particular cases. I’ll call these *token value judgements*.

While token value judgements should reflect ideals, an instance of the former never follows from an instance of the latter. (If this could happen, then the entire class of token value judgements would be redundant.) Moreover, token value judgements do not follow from ideals *in conjunction with* all of the non-evaluative facts that might be relevant to a particular judgment. For example, the token value judgement that *present-day America falls short of Rawls’ difference principle* does not follow from the difference principle in conjunction with all of the relevant non-evaluative facts about contemporary American society; this judgement requires some additional evaluation. The point is that token value judgements are genuinely evaluative in their own right, requiring the agent who performs them to contribute some sort of novel valuation of her own. Borrowing Peirce’s terms, we could think of token value judgements as resting on “ampliative” inferences: something new is added whenever one is performed.⁴¹ Finally, I’ll call judgements that merely involve an inference from token value judgements and relevant non-evaluative facts *applied value judgements*. Well-formed token value judgements uphold societal ideals in ways that reflect all of the relevant non-evaluative facts; well-formed applied value judgements actually follow from well-formed token value

³⁹ John Rawls, “Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical” (1985) in *Philosophy and Public Affairs* (Vol. 14, No. 1, pp. 223-251).

⁴⁰ In this sense, ideals could be analogized with national constitutions.

⁴¹ Charles Sanders Peirce, *The Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, edited by Justus Buchler (New York: Dover Publications, 1955).

judgements and all of the relevant non-evaluative facts. Let me now try to put these distinctions to work.

Recall the democratic argument for value-freedom, which maintained that certain forms of scientific value-ladenness subvert democratic society by encouraging dogmatism and propaganda. If science has no obligation to society at large, then why fret about subverting democracy?⁴² The value-free ideal, as it turns out, takes values far more seriously than its name lets on. Indeed, the whole position presupposes that social inquiry owes *something* (besides knowledge) to society. So, to recast this point in terms I presented above, let us say that proponents of value-freedom recognize that *social inquiry has an obligation to uphold the ideals of the societies it serves.*⁴³ This is exactly right. Scientists should see their own projects (of which classification is a crucial part) as embedded in broader social, political, and moral life. And all sorts of social, political, and moral obligations fall out of that vision.

In particular, classification must not be conducted in ways that undermine social inquiry's commitment to upholding the ideals of the societies it serves. Sen and Nagel feared that value-laden categories failed this test. In §7, I insisted that one construal of their positive view (i.e., naive versions of CFC) does no better, since we cannot expect applied value judgements, made by an ignorant public, to reflect ideals endorsed by that same public. Now we must confront a final, and more plausible, interpretation of their view. I'll call it the *refined version* of CFC. The refined version of CFC embraces its predecessor's core commitment, agreeing that social kinds should reflect actual public values, but it modifies the division of labor so that investigators can perform their own

⁴² It is worth emphasizing that here I obviously mean *non-cognitive* obligation.

⁴³ Perhaps the democratic argument for value-freedom should be understood as making a negative point, about what social inquiry *cannot* do, rather than a point about what inquiry owes society. But I take it that these are just two sides of the same coin.

applied value judgements, so long as their deliberations rely solely on the token value judgements of the public. Defenders of the refined version of CFC believe that this strategy stands the best chance of obtaining kind terms that promote the ideals of society. An example will make matters clearer.

§9. Why the Folk Can't Measure Poverty (Part II)

Let's return to poverty lines. Poverty lines play a crucial role in guiding government policy; their main function is to specify an "adequate minimum amount of well-being," guaranteed to each member of society.⁴⁴ In more direct terms, poverty lines should be capable of facilitating political interventions—like various sorts of welfare subsidies—which promote societal ideals. Given this functional role of poverty lines, then, what it means for some "amount of well-being" to be "adequate" (or, in the language I used in §7, for some level of economic welfare to count as "minimally acceptable") is that such an amount does not fall below what people are owed. So, in large part, setting the poverty line is a matter of determining the conditions under which society is obligated to intervene to alleviate material deprivation afflicting its members; thus, at its heart, it is an activity that requires performing token value judgements about what sorts of things people are owed in life.⁴⁵

The refined version of CFC insists on keeping these efforts purely in the hands of the public. Yet it leaves a small role for poverty experts: social scientists should conjoin these token value judgements with all of the relevant non-evaluative information they can find (about what sorts of things, and how much of them, are required to achieve a life that meets those standards set by the public), and then see what follows. The result is an applied value judgement that constitutes the

⁴⁴ Jonathan Haughton and Shahidur R. Khandker, *Handbook on Poverty and Inequality* (Washington, D.C. : The World Bank, 2009), chapter 3.

⁴⁵ This counts as a token value judgement because, crucially, it is context-specific: "people" refers to people *in a particular place and at a particular time*.

poverty line. This strategy surely represents an improvement on naive versions of CFC. But I'll suggest that it is seriously defective nonetheless. For certain forms of non-evaluative ignorance sabotage an agent's capacity to make well-formed token value judgements. This fact—which I take to be a narrow point about the psychology of token value judgements, rather than a claim about the nature of moral judgement in general—bodes poorly for CFC.⁴⁶ In §7, we saw that ignorance damages the public's ability to make well-formed applied value judgements; in this section, I extend that argument by showing how ignorance distorts the public's ability to perform token value judgements that reflect its own ideals (i.e., well-formed token value judgements).

In his instructively titled essay, “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings,” William James recounts a story about an expedition he once made to North Carolina.⁴⁷ As he trekked through the mountains of that state, James noticed that nearly every valley had been cleared of its native trees. Instead of dense forest, which he had expected (and hoped) to find, James saw pigsties, log cabins, and rows of flint corn. Mortified by all of this environmental destruction, James couldn't help but wonder aloud to his North Carolinian guide, “What sort of people are they who have to make these new clearings?” To which the guide replied, “All of us. Why, we ain't happy here, unless we are getting one of these coves under cultivation.” James tells us that this exchange immediately brought him to the realization that he “had been losing the whole inward significance of the situation.” When James saw mere “denudation” in these clearings, his North Carolinian compatriots saw “duty, struggle, and success.” So, James concludes, “neither the whole of the truth nor the whole of the

⁴⁶ I develop these points in the style of armchair moral psychology, and I think that is adequate for my purposes. But these claims also enjoy plenty of real empirical support. For a survey of the relevant psychological literature on the role emotion in moral judgement, see Jesse Prinz, “The Emotional Basis of Moral Judgements” (2006) in *Philosophical Explorations* (Vol. 9, No. 1: pp. 29-43).

⁴⁷ This story comes from William James, “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings” in *Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1899).

good is revealed to any single observer, although each observer gains a partial superiority of insight from the peculiar position in which he stands.”

Let me try to develop James’ point in some more depth. What exactly went wrong in his earliest token value judgement in this story (i.e., when he sees all of the deforestation as an utter shame)? The answer seems straightforward enough: James made this judgement without having a decent grasp of the lives of the people who were most affected by the deforestation. In other words, he relied on his own shallow understanding of the details of the case when he formed his judgement. Our experiences shape our token value judgements by refining our capacity to sympathize with others. Owing to his complete unfamiliarity with life in rural North Carolina, James just couldn’t *imagine* that some people might find more value in pigsties and log cabins than in unspoiled woodland. So, what began as a failure in James’ understanding of the lives of others gave rise to a failure in his ability to sympathize with people whom he would normally would.

When we lack this kind of understanding, we stumble through our ethical deliberations, unable to recognize when another person or group has a claim that our own ideals would recognize as legitimate, if only these ideals were interpreted properly. In the case of poverty measurement, distortions provoked by ignorance are likely to be severe. The public—most of whose members know hardly anything about the lives of the poor—will likely fail to recognize the full extent of the suffering inflicted by poverty. We should expect this sympathy deficit to result in token value judgements, about minimally acceptable levels of economic welfare, that fail to reflect the public’s own ideals. Even the refined version of CFC doesn’t give us what it promises.

§10. Molly Orshansky and the Development of the U.S. Poverty Thresholds

In the mid-1960s, Mollie Orshansky pioneered an approach to poverty measurement that

avoided (at least in spirit) most of the problems I presented earlier. Orshansky's poverty thresholds continue to serve as the United States government's official poverty line, tasked with determining eligibility for most federal social safety programs.⁴⁸ In this section and the next, I'll examine her strategy in some depth to see what general lessons we can glean from it. First, though, it will be useful to provide some biographical information and historical context. So let's begin there.

Mollie Orshansky was born in the South Bronx in 1915 to Jewish-Ukrainian immigrants who could hardly speak English. The Orshansky household struggled to make ends meet: Orshansky's father, who worked wherever he could as an ironworker, plumber, tinsmith, and repairman, was frequently unemployed; and Orshansky and her five sisters often had to share a bed, "forgo one small purchase in order to have the money for something else," and wait, alongside their mother, in public relief lines to receive surplus food.⁴⁹ Fittingly, perhaps, upon her graduation from Hunter College in 1935, Orshansky began a career in public service, first as a statistical clerk in the New York Department of Health's Bureau of Nursing and then as a researcher at the Children's Bureau, which had been the main federal agency tasked with investigating and alleviating childhood poverty. Orshansky's research during this early part of her career focused on infant mortality, childhood nutrition, and pneumonia prevention—some preliminary evidence in favor of James' point, that one's experiences shape one's views about what sorts of things are worth having and what sorts of projects are worth pursuing.

In 1945, Orshansky moved to Washington to take up a post in the Bureau of Human Nutrition and Home Economics at the Department of Agriculture, where she spent thirteen years,

⁴⁸ Gordon M. Fisher, "From Hunter to Orshansky: An Overview of (Unofficial) Poverty Lines in the United States from 1904 to 1965" (Washington, D.C. : U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1993).

⁴⁹ See Gordon M. Fisher, "Some Stories About Mollie Orshansky" (2007) (delivered on November 7, 2007, at a reception in honor of Mollie Orshansky at the Twenty-Ninth Annual Fall Research Conference of the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management in Washington, D.C.).

working alongside economists, statisticians, and nutritionists to develop “diets designed to provide poor American families with adequate nutrition at minimal cost.”⁵⁰ These investigations relied on an enormous amount of sophisticated, cross-disciplinary knowledge—about food costs, income distributions, childhood development, nutritional requirements, and more.⁵¹ The “food plans” which emerged from these studies would turn out to play a crucial role in Orshansky’s approach to poverty measurement, which she finally took up in 1958, when she moved to the Office of Family Assistance at the Social Security Administration. If Orshansky’s childhood provided her with one important kind of knowledge about poverty, an unusually intimate kind, her time at the Department of Agriculture provided her with another, more academic kind.

Orshansky’s investigations at the Social Security Administration focused on many of the same themes that had dominated her work in previous years: childhood development, home economics, and women’s welfare.⁵² Knowledge about nutrition, accumulated during her tenure at the Department of Agriculture, continued to inform most aspects of her research, which began to grow more explicitly concerned with poverty measurement. In the early 1960s, she decided to fashion a procedure for comprehensively measuring poverty in the United States. This project formed part of a broader initiative within the Social Security Administration to study “poverty as it affects children,” and so, in particular, Orshansky aimed to measure poverty in a way that paid adequate attention to two groups that had been neglected by earlier measures: families with single mothers and families with more than two children.⁵³ Orshansky regarded this oversight as a serious moral failure, and she later said that she had hoped to “prove [...] that if you had a lot of kids, [then]

⁵⁰ See John Cassidy’s profile of Orshansky, “Relatively Deprived,” published in *The New Yorker* (April 3, 2006).

⁵¹ See Gordon M. Fisher, “The Development of the Orshansky Poverty Thresholds and Their Subsequent History as the Official U.S. Poverty Measure” (Washington, D.C. : U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1992).

⁵² See John Cassidy, “Relatively Deprived” (2006).

⁵³ See Gordon M. Fisher (1993).

you were poorer than if you had few kids, and [that] a woman without a man around was poorer with her kids than a man.”⁵⁴ Orshansky worried that certain types of families (i.e., “marginal” or “non-average” ones) were being systematically underrepresented in extant poverty measures; her efforts tried to remedy that shortcoming.

Orshansky published some initial results in a 1963 article, entitled “Children of the Poor.” The article begins with a long justification of its own purpose, describing in detail “an uncomfortable realization that an expanding economy has not brought gains to all in equal measure.”⁵⁵ Orshansky then presents her empirical findings, specifying median income levels for families of different sizes, different structures, and—particularly progressively for her time—even different races. Just as she promised, she also set dozens of poverty lines that varied on the basis of family size and structure. Drawing on her earlier work on food plans, Orshansky developed poverty lines that were sensitive to the fact that different groups of people required different sorts of material goods to lead good-enough lives.⁵⁶ Indeed, Orshansky’s sensitivity to these details represent an important sense in which even these provisional poverty lines were an improvement on their predecessors.

She offered some more general, policy-minded conclusions in the article, too. While the “low income of the aged are receiving much attention in existing and proposed programs,” she observed, poor families with more than two children (or without fathers) are left to fend for themselves, since “children are not subject to help from existing programs to combat poverty.”⁵⁷

⁵⁴ See Robert Hershey Jr., “Washington Talk: Interview with Mollie Orshansky: The Hand That Shaped America's Poverty Line As the Realistic Index” in the *New York Times* (August 3, 1989).

⁵⁵ Mollie Orshansky, “Children of the Poor” (1963) in *Social Security Bulletin* (Vol. 26, No. 7: pp. 3-13).

⁵⁶ Orshansky did not specify particular goods, since she relied on the *budgets* that followed from the Department of Agriculture’s food plans; but she recognized that large families with children required different things (and, hence, had different budgetary requirements) than elderly couples, and she adjusted her calculations accordingly.

⁵⁷ See Mollie Orshansky (1963).

Orshansky explained that these realities should trouble us because “[by] almost any standard of adequacy the number of children underprivileged by too low income is as large as or larger than the total aged population.” When poverty measures fail to recognize that different groups of people require different sorts of things, it mismeasures the poor and gives rise to disastrous political interventions.

Fortunately, Orshansky’s article was well-timed. Six months after its publication, in January 1964, Lyndon Johnson addressed Congress to announce the start of his ‘War on Poverty’—an initiative designed, in his words, “not only to relieve the symptom of poverty, but to cure it and, above all, to prevent it.”⁵⁸ The War on Poverty marked the first serious attempt by the federal government to tackle poverty since Roosevelt’s New Deal, and it required an immense amount of planning. The Council of Economic Advisors (CEA) was put in charge. In 1964, the CEA released its annual report, including a chapter on “The Problem of Poverty in America,” which relied on a poverty line that did exactly what Orshansky took pains to avoid; as she later explained, it “led to the odd result that an elderly couple with \$2,900 income [...] would be considered poor, but a family with a husband, wife, and four little children with \$3,100 income would not be.” When the CEA realized that the Social Security Administration employed an expert on poverty measurement, it hired Orshansky to expand on her initial efforts, presented in the 1963 paper, and develop something that could be used to coordinate the War on Poverty.⁵⁹ So, how did Orshansky proceed?

Orshansky was a committed democrat, who took care to ensure that the normative commitments built into her poverty thresholds were not mere reflections of her own peculiar moral feelings but were, rather, well-founded convictions, generally embraced by most Americans. In other

⁵⁸ Lyndon B. Johnson, “91: Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union” (delivered on January 8, 1964).

⁵⁹ See Gordon M. Fisher (1992).

words, unlike Sen, she did not deny that her poverty thresholds were laden with social, political, and moral values. But she justified her value judgements by pointing out that they reflected an ideal which most Americans embraced: namely, “a conviction that everyone has the right to share in the good things in life.”⁶⁰ So, while her starting point was a fundamentally democratic one, Orshansky took on the task of figuring out what exactly that ideal meant. In yet other words, Orshansky adopted public ideals but performed her own token value judgements.

In order to set the poverty line, Orshansky relied on information to which most members of the general public would have been oblivious, under normal circumstances. This information included ordinary facts about nutrition, food prices, and costs of living—the sort of knowledge she obtained during her career in public service. But it also included, in a subtler sense, an understanding of poverty that she developed in her childhood. She once remarked, decades later, that “[if] I write about the poor, I don’t need a good imagination—I have a good memory.”⁶¹ Thus, Orshansky utilized all of the knowledge at her disposal to develop a procedure that, she believed, would result in a poverty line that reflected public ideals. For each family size, she multiplied the cost of the relevant ‘Economy Food Plan’ (which was formulated by the experts at the Department of Agriculture) by a multiplier of 3, which gauged how much American families (depending on their size) spent on food, as a proportion of their total income. Thus, Orshansky’s approach to poverty measurement should be understood as an effort to determine where Americans in the 1960s would have set the poverty line, *had they had access to ideal epistemic conditions*. Epistemic conditions are ideal when they permit decision-makers to recognize what exactly it takes to realize a public ideal.

⁶⁰ Mollie Orshansky, “Counting the Poor: Another Look at the Poverty Profile” (1965) in *Social Security Bulletin* (Vol. 28, No. 1: pp. 3-29).

⁶¹ Gordon M. Fisher, “Remarks on Mollie Orshansky’s Life, Career, and Achievements” (delivered on August 5, 2008, at a memorial panel in honor of Mollie Orshansky at the 2008 Joint Statistical Meetings in Denver, Colorado).

§11. What Is Social Inquiry Good For?

Social-scientific languages are instruments for advancing social-scientific investigations; freed from the task of uncovering objective divisions in nature, investigators should simply adopt whatever categories do best at facilitating successful inquiry. This instrumentalist conception of social kinds suggests that conceptual progress must depend on some broader notion of scientific progress. Successful classification emerges from successful inquiry. Yet what exactly does *successful social inquiry* entail? In short: very many different things. So I shall focus on just one.

Earlier, I argued that social inquiry should undertake investigations aimed at promoting ideals that have been democratically endorsed by the societies that it inhabits (i.e., public ideals). It is time to be more precise. As usual, let's consider the study of poverty. For various value-laden reasons—mostly having to do with judgements about the social, moral, and political *badness* of material deprivation—social scientists study poverty because they believe that knowledge about poverty is worth having. Yet, if this is right, if primarily non-cognitive considerations motivate research, then knowledge about poverty only matters to the extent that it teaches us practical lessons. This line of reasoning isn't complicated: if poverty is bad, then we should want to *do* something about it. In order to mitigate poverty, though, we must know something about it; so, we ought to study poverty. Particular social-scientific investigations owe their significance (at least in part) to the various interventions that these investigations empower us to perform.

If we set out to study poverty because we wish to reduce poverty—as Orshansky intended and as, it is reasonable to think, most contemporary poverty researchers intend—then our investigation cannot count as successful unless it yields knowledge that actually enables us to achieve

that goal.⁶² Social inquiry should be judged, at least partly, on its capacity to facilitate interventions that reflect our values. This intrusion of non-cognitive values is highly desirable—a point that even the staunchest champions of value-freedom will no doubt concede. (For how could anybody *not* want social inquiry to be socially relevant? What else could social inquiry be good for?) Indeed, as we saw earlier, non-cognitive values should be central to the task of setting research agendas. But, in light of social inquiry's role in guiding public policy, these values must take care to avoid reflecting the arbitrary moral sentiments of individual social scientists—or else science will begin to reek of authoritarianism, as defenders of value-freedom worried. Social inquiry should instead work to advance ideals that belong to society as a whole; in other words, inquiry should promote ideals that are democratically endorsed, or what I called public ideals.⁶³

§12. Sketching Progress

Classification is performed for the sake of advancing inquiry; and inquiry, in turn, should be conducted to promote public ideals. Think of social kinds as cogs in the machine of social inquiry, which is itself an instrument for realizing public ideals. The purpose of classification is to contribute to the smooth-running of the whole machine. That is the picture I've tried to develop in this essay, and a notion of conceptual progress follows from it. I'll call this view *democratic constructivism*. According to democratic constructivism, conceptual progress occurs whenever investigators modify categories in ways that enable social inquiry to more successfully promote public ideals. Much more must be said.

⁶² This isn't completely fair. Obviously, most of the time, individual investigations do not *directly* bring about improvements in human lives, and I am not suggesting that they must in order to count as successful. My point is that successful social-scientific investigations should *contribute* something to that broader project of promoting public ideals.

⁶³ This goal need not be social inquiry's lone goal; I have argued that it is *one* goal of social inquiry, and it is the one on which I shall focus, but it might coexist alongside others. We might value purely cognitive goals, for example. And, as I'll suggest later, we might even want social inquiry to help us revise our own ideals.

Categories are modified when extensions of existing ones change, when new ones are created, or when old ones fall into disuse. Sometimes it is easy to see how modifying our categories can bring about improvements in human lives. In some episodes of conceptual progress, newly-created categories advance public ideals by filling in gaps in social-scientific language; recall how the concept of unemployment emerged in the twentieth century in response to a severe social problem that had hitherto gone unnamed. Once the right terms had been introduced, various forms of intervention, aimed at responding to these problems, were made possible. Similarly, sometimes it is clear that conceptual progress requires certain categories to be completely retired; some eliminativists about human racial categories argue that *race* is one such concept.⁶⁴ Sometimes, then, there is a transparent path that traces social progress all the way back to changes in our social categories. Radical adjustments in social-scientific language can directly facilitate improvements in human lives—but stories like this are unusual. Progress is often tougher to spot.

Most episodes of conceptual change tend to involve something more mundane: slight adjustments in categories that seem to be getting at the same point. While it makes little sense to wonder whether our present-day concept of *mammal* is progressive with respect to the nineteenth-century concept of *hysteria*, it makes perfect sense to consider whether Orshansky's poverty thresholds were progressive with respect to the Council of Economic Advisors' (pre-Orshansky) poverty lines. We typically want to know whether some concept is progressive with respect to some other *relevantly similar* concept. Most instances of conceptual change involve continuities that tie old concepts to newer ones, and these continuities matter because of their

⁶⁴ Of course, many people who hold that racial categories should *ultimately* be retired (or at least seriously de-emphasized) also believe that this move cannot be made until racism and all its vicious legacies have been defeated. See, for example, Kwame Anthony Appiah and Amy Gutmann, *Color Conscious: The Political Morality of Race* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996).

historical ubiquity. But the notion of ‘relevant similarity’ turns out to be tough to define. An obvious conception of it—according to which relevantly similar concepts latch onto one underlying natural kind, albeit to greater or lesser degrees of success—won’t work for us, since we rejected realism about conceptual progress early on. We should instead consider particular *roles* that various *families of concepts* serve within the larger machine of inquiry. These roles often get preserved when individual concepts change, even when these changes make it impossible to match each pre-transition concept to some post-transition counterpart. Thus conceptual progress can also occur, in a humbler sense, whenever a family of categories is modified in ways that enable it to better perform its functional role.

§13. Progress in Poverty Measurement

It is time to return to our story about Mollie Orshansky and her poverty thresholds. Recall that, with the launch of Johnson’s War on Poverty, it became clear to Orshansky that Americans had finally settled on a “conviction that everyone [had] the right to share in the good things in life.”⁶⁵ Collectively, by way of a roughly democratic process, Americans had come to recognize that their fellow citizens were entitled to some minimum standard of economic well-being. So, in terms I’ve used in this essay, Orshansky identified a public ideal, one that had been democratically endorsed by Americans. Call this ideal the *welfare promise*. The welfare promise had considerable political implications: it was accompanied by an assurance, provided by the federal government, that nobody would be deprived of this (as-yet unspecified) minimally acceptable level of economic welfare. Indeed, the War on Poverty represented an attempt to fulfil this promise by introducing dozens of anti-poverty initiatives, including the Food Stamp Act of 1964 and the Social Security Act of 1965

⁶⁵ Mollie Orshansky (1965).

(which created Medicare and Medicaid). But public policy is rarely so simple an affair, and plenty of questions remained unanswered. What *exactly* did the welfare promise guarantee to Americans? Who should count as poor?

Orshansky embarked on her project upon realizing that extant answers to these questions—in particular, answers that the Council of Economic Advisors planned on using—were woefully inadequate. So long as the CEA relied on its own crude conception of poverty, government interventions to alleviate poverty (which were to be orchestrated by the CEA) were doomed to fail. That is to say, these interventions would fail to achieve the sorts of outcomes that Americans envisaged, outcomes that adequately reflected the welfare promise. Orshansky traced these anticipated failures to several different sources.

First of all, the CEA relied on just *two* poverty lines: one (for individual persons who lived alone) set at \$1,500 and one (for families of *any* size) set at \$3,000. Her earlier investigations of childhood poverty had made her sensitive to the distinctive economic challenges that larger-than-average families faced, and Orshansky foresaw that the CEA's coarse-grained poverty lines would have devastating consequences on those least capable of managing them. That was, of course, at odds with the welfare promise. Worse still, the CEA set its poverty lines by approximating the yearly income of a full-time worker who earns minimum wages. But that figure has little to do with providing for a quality of life that meets the requirements of the welfare promise. The CEA's poverty lines could not achieve what they should have been designed to do; if Johnson's anti-poverty interventions relied on these measures, then his War on Poverty would surely fail. Orshansky recognized these shortcomings and determined to formulate her own poverty lines in a way that overcame them.

In large part, Orshansky succeeded; let's examine why. For one, she recognized that poverty lines had to be grounded in value judgements that bear on well-being. The CEA's poverty lines provided nothing but a regurgitation of some facts about what low-income Americans managed to earn each year. That won't work. If we understand poverty lines as instruments for achieving the welfare promise, as I have suggested, then poverty lines must reflect judgements about what Americans *ought* to earn. Poverty lines should distinguish acceptable levels of economic welfare from unacceptable ones; and performing that task requires explicit value judgement. Orshansky confronted this problem head-on. To begin, she grasped the obvious point, apparently overlooked by the CEA, that leading a good-enough life involves achieving a certain level of physical health by avoiding malnourishment.⁶⁶ Since conceptions of *health* vary considerably across space and time, Orshansky had to choose one that reflected the welfare promise. So, relying on the Department of Agriculture's food plans, she outsourced these judgements to nutrition experts.

Second, Orshansky tried to ensure that her poverty measures paid adequate attention to people whom earlier measures neglected; one of her project's main achievements was its recognition of forms of suffering that had hitherto gone ignored (at least by poverty measures). The scope of public morality in the United States was widened, thanks to Orshansky. Rather than partition all American families into just two kinds (i.e., those consisting of just one person and those consisting of greater than one person), she constructed 116 family categories (58 "farm" categories and 58 "nonfarm" categories), and matched each category to its own corresponding poverty threshold, which depended on particular facts about the family kind it served. The result was that the "hidden poor," as she called them, could finally be identified. Orshansky recognized that different groups of

⁶⁶ This point wasn't a novel one; it had been recognized before by some earlier poverty theorists. Yet it had been ignored by the CEA, perhaps because of the thorny and value-laden questions to which it gives rise.

people require—and thus deserve—different sorts of things to lead lives that qualify as acceptable, and she expanded the family of poverty-line concepts to accommodate that judgement.⁶⁷

In the context of Orshansky's investigations, poverty-line concepts served as instruments for determining which members of American society ought to be helped by Johnson's anti-poverty programs. Though she embraced a public ideal (i.e., the welfare promise), Orshansky took matters into her own hands, performing value judgements that relied on an enormous repository of knowledge. Her efforts managed to solve (at least partially) two problems that earlier poverty measurement techniques had created. In so doing, she modified poverty-line categories in ways that enabled social inquiry to more successfully promote the welfare promise. But progress does not entail perfection. Orshansky's poverty thresholds suffer from their own shortcomings, which historical experience and further inquiry have since revealed. Briefly, I'll articulate three of these problems.

§14. Problems in Poverty Measurement

First, Orshansky's measures aren't as wide-reaching, in the scope of their moral sensitivity, as they ought to be. Centuries of misogyny and gender discrimination gave rise to enduring disparities between the economic opportunities available to women in the United States and those available to men; Orshansky adjusted her poverty lines for families with single mothers to account for that fact. Analogously, this country's long-lasting legacy of racism subjects black Americans to distinctive kinds of economic disadvantage. Poverty theorists should pay attention.

Consider one example. Incarceration bears high economic costs on those who get imprisoned.⁶⁸ Besides its obvious (and substantial) opportunity costs, imprisonment imposes other

⁶⁷ See Mollie Orshansky (1965).

⁶⁸ Of course, the families—and especially children—of those who get imprisoned bear enormous costs, too. I have simplified matters to make my point clear.

sorts of expenses, too. In Massachusetts, for instance, court fees and probation expenses (to pay for court-mandated supervision) leave the average ex-prisoner owing over \$1,000 to the state by the time he completes his term of probation.⁶⁹ The pervasiveness of racial prejudice in our criminal justice system means that black Americans disproportionately bear this particular economic burden; all things being equal, then, merely being black increases one's cost of living.⁷⁰ Orshansky's refrain, that different groups of people require different sorts of things to lead lives that qualify as acceptable, shouldn't be forgotten now; salient facts about racial inequity have got to be incorporated into poverty measurement, or else the hidden poor will remain hidden, and our welfare promise will be left unrealized.

There is another worry—which Angus Deaton calls “The Micawber Problem,” after an oft-repeated line by Mr. Micawber in Charles Dickens’ *David Copperfield*—that casts doubt on the whole family of poverty-line concepts.⁷¹ This complaint is very straightforward: “Why do we say that someone who is just below the poverty line is poor, and thus a candidate for transfers and the special attention of the World Bank, while someone who is just above it, whether by sixpence or by six annas, needs no help and can be safely left to their own devices?” It is a good question. After all, deprivation comes in degrees: human lives do not go either well or not-well-enough; there are many possibilities in between those two poles, and our poverty measures should reflect them. Perhaps poverty *slopes* or *gradients* (rather than *lines*) would be capable of facilitating superior anti-poverty interventions, ones that bring us closer to achieving the welfare promise.

⁶⁹ See Tina Rosenberg, “Paying for Their Crimes, Again” in the *New York Times* (June 6, 2011).

⁷⁰ Obviously all things *aren't* equal, and it is tough to say whether it is true *in general* that black Americans face higher costs of living than white Americans. Empirical research isn't clear on the issue.

⁷¹ See Angus Deaton, “Measuring Poverty” in *Understanding Poverty*, edited by Abhijit Vinayak Banerjee, Roland Benabou, and Dilip Mookherjee (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

A final line of criticism, originally developed by Amartya Sen, maintains that one's income often has little to do with how well one's life goes—and how well one's life goes, understood in terms of one's *capabilities*, is what really matters.⁷² Sen argues that poverty should be understood in terms of “deprivations that are intrinsically important.” Health care, adequate nourishment, access to education, democratic governance, and self-respect all count as intrinsically important goods on Sen's view. Yet access to these goods doesn't always correlate with income. Indeed, Sen compares life expectancies and income levels of male inhabitants of Kerala with those of their black counterparts in the United States, and finds that, although black men in the United States earn far higher incomes than do Keralan men, black men live much shorter lives.⁷³

The moral is that money only tells one part of the story: certain forms of suffering get ignored by approaches to poverty measurement that focus solely on income and wealth. Worse still, as a result of that focus on wealth, we are led to underrate the importance of public goods, which are largely unaccounted for by income-based measures of welfare but which—as Sen has pointed out—matter immensely. So, since there are “influences on capability deprivation—and thus on real poverty—other than lowness of income,” and since the “instrumental relationship between low income and low capability is variable between different communities,” we should cut to the chase and conceptualize poverty directly in terms of capability deprivation. Poverty theorists should not forget that the welfare promise is, after all, about *welfare*, and Sen's capability approach to poverty measurement takes that point seriously.

⁷² Sen's capability approach to welfare economics, originally put forward in the 1980s, is presented in his many articles and books written since then. Here I rely on Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999), especially chapters 1 and 4.

⁷³ Sen explains this discrepancy by pointing to differences in “social arrangements and community relations such as medical coverage, public health care, school education, law and order, prevalence of violence, and so on.” See Amartya Sen (1999), chapter 1.

Does Deaton's objection imply that we must completely abandon the entire family of poverty-line concepts? Does Sen's point suggest that "lowness of income" has no role whatsoever in poverty measurement? Not all all. Neither of these conclusions follows because progress is pluralistic. Our categories should be constantly tinkered with, refined versions tried out. As Deaton and Sen realized, it is clear that Orshansky's measures fail to grasp certain crucial features of poverty. But there might nonetheless be good reasons for retaining some aspects of her approach.

First, while some anti-poverty interventions, like transfer payments, can be performed in degrees, other sorts of interventions (like the direct provision of housing) must be wholesale affairs. In order to implement social programs like these, we require a measure of poverty that definitively rules some people in and others out—hence the value of poverty *lines*. And second, while Sen's capability approach accounts for a fuller range of ways in which human lives can flourish or flounder, it is also—for that very reason—considerably more difficult to use. Under certain conditions, then, the handiness of Orshansky's income-based measure could compensate for its crudeness. The point is that these debates aren't easily resolved. Investigators must decide what conceptualization of poverty will, all things considered, most successfully promote the welfare promise. And, needless to say, that is a tough value judgement to make.

§15. Drawing Conclusions

In §3, I sketched two alternatives to realism about conceptual progress. I termed them practical constructivism and cognitive constructivism, in honor of the particular kind of values that each view emphasizes. The position I advanced in §12, democratic constructivism, draws on insights provided by both views—but it also adds something new: democratic constructivism makes room for social, political, and moral values. When performed properly, for the sake of promoting public

ideals, these sorts of value judgements pose no threat to the integrity of the scientific enterprise. Bias, elitism, and obstructive disagreement can be avoided, so long as investigators' token value judgements reflect public ideals. Democratic constructivism thereby dodges three main worries cited by proponents of value-freedom (which I presented in §5). If conceptual progress occurs whenever investigators modify categories in ways that improve our capacity to foster public ideals, as democratic constructivism holds, then social, political, and moral values must lie at the very heart of progressive classificatory practices. That, at any rate, is the point I have tried to make in the preceding pages.

As Orshansky's story illustrates, conceptual progress often happens when investigators recognize subtle ways in which extant modes of classification obstruct social, moral, and political progress, and then go on to rectify these shortcomings. Our categories must be capable of facilitating interventions that advance public ideals. When our categories fall short of that goal, they require revision. As we have seen, figuring out whether to revise—and, if adjustment turns out to be in order, *how* to revise—is a task that involves value judgement. Orshansky had to perform value judgements in order to determine that prevailing conceptualizations of poverty would result in government policies that failed to achieve the welfare promise. Commentaries on contemporary poverty-line categories, like the criticisms made by Deaton and Sen, advance similarly value-laden points.

Yet even if we managed to achieve a polity that perfectly embodied public ideals—an optimistic scenario, to say the very least—social inquiry, and its conceptual tinkering, would not come to a halt. For this achievement would be temporary. As we experiment with various ways of living together, we adjust our own collective aspirations. Sometimes, in response to insights gleaned

by social inquiry (or other domains), we come to recognize ways in which our own ideals fail. When that happens, our ideals themselves must change. James' observation, that "there is nothing final in any actually given equilibrium of human ideals," is exactly right.⁷⁴

In the final chapter of *The Structure of Scientific of Scientific Revolutions*, Thomas Kuhn wondered: "Does it really help to imagine that there is some one full, objective, true account of nature and that the proper measure of scientific achievement is the extent to which it brings us closer to that ultimate goal?"⁷⁵ No, he answered. Kuhn urged us to "substitute evolution-from-what-we-do-know for evolution-toward-what-we-wish-to-know." That is, rather than conceive scientific progress as movement towards some ultimate end, he suggested that we understand scientific progress in terms of obstacles overcome.⁷⁶ Conceptual progress in social inquiry exhibits a similar structure. Social scientists achieve conceptual progress when they solve particular problems created (or left unresolved) by earlier classification schemes. Their work is never finished, though. Revised categories bring novel problems, and these problems require resolution. Nobody, then, shall ever have the last word on classification. For progress is possible, but perfection is not.

⁷⁴ William James, "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" in the *International Journal of Ethics* (Vol. 1, No. 3: pp. 330-354).

⁷⁵ See Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1962), chapter 13.

⁷⁶ Philip Kitcher, in some recent essays, develops a similar point, extending it well beyond the domain of science. Kitcher distinguishes a "teleological" conception of progress—which "assesses the relation between states by considering their distance from some goal state"—from a "pragmatic" conception of progress—which, instead, involves solving problems. In terms of this distinction, I am arguing for a thoroughly pragmatic notion of conceptual progress in social inquiry. See Philip Kitcher, "On Progress" (2015) in *Performance and Progress: Essays on Capitalism, Business, and Society*, edited by Subramanian Rangan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). For another broadly pragmatic approach to scientific progress, see Larry Laudan, *Progress and Its Problems: Towards a Theory of Scientific Growth* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1977).

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