

Benjamin Gregg

# **THICK MORALITIES,** THIN POLITICS

*Social Integration Across Communities of Belief*

ISBN 978-0-819-56444-0  
\$35.00  
112 pp., 6 1/8" x 9 1/8" x 1/2"  
Paperback  
Published by Rowman & Littlefield  
www.rowmanandlittlefield.com

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Social Integration Across Communities of Belief

Duke University Press   Durham and London   2003

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Printed in the United States of

America on acid-free paper ☉

Designed by C. H. Westmoreland

Typeset in Cycles with Helvetica display

by Tseng Information Systems, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-

in-Publication Data appear on

the last printed page of

this book.

FOR KEQIN



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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful for the thoughtful and sensitive readings, and attendant critical feedback, of David Braybrooke, Joseph Carens, Fred Dallmayr, Dick Howard, J. Donald Moon, and my anonymous reviewers for Duke University Press. I am especially indebted to David Braybrooke, who urged me to consider and then reconsider my arguments in almost all of their parts. My work, whatever its merits, is better for my attempts to respond to all of these critical readings. Expectably, any weaknesses in it go not to the respective accounts of my various interlocutors but solely to mine.

Chapter 5 originally appeared, in a somewhat different version, as “Using Legal Rules in an Indeterminate World: Overcoming the Limitations of Jurisprudence,” in *Political Theory* 27, no. 3, pp. 389–410, copyright © 1999 by Sage Publications. Used with kind permission of Sage Publications.



## INTRODUCTION

*Thick Moralities, Thin Politics* constitutes an extended argument for social and political agreement under conditions that discourage agreement. Among those many conditions I speak directly to moral diversity, a normatively heterogeneous populace, and morally and culturally diverse communities active within modern, cosmopolitan societies. My goal is a conception of legitimate politics, progressive public policy, and responsive law that can hold for all component communities even as they differ from one another. I develop a model of validity for arguments made in the public sphere, of understanding between and among competing worldviews, and of adjudication of disputes generated by normative differences. My approach considers how social integration, broadly conceived, can be configured to this end. Part 1 of this book focuses on a certain kind of politics—what I develop as “normatively thin”—in social integration. Part 2 centers on integration more narrowly, in political judgment or decision or agreement. Together the two parts of the book urge an integration accommodative of difference via “thin norms.” All comprehensive worldviews, from repressive to emancipatory, from benighted to enlightened, are “thick,” in my sense of the term. I argue that a common political regime characterized by normative “thinness” is the best way to allow different and competing “thicknesses” to flourish side by side in mutual tolerance. While the goal of thin politics is successful integration and social cooperation, such politics does not preclude or discourage political contestation about moral principles, long a means of social and political progress. I also develop a notion of “generalized community” that institutionalizes peaceable, rational auspices for carrying out such contestation. Generalized community oversees a society’s various concrete communities in normatively neutral ways, promoting equality among them through a politics of recognition (as legal equals) or through a politics of difference (as carriers of unique identities). Each concrete community, in taking the attitude of generalized community toward itself, commits to respecting the different, even competing orientations of other concrete communities. Each concrete community can expect to be tolerated by the others in return. If the different concrete communities relate to one another in terms of generalized commu-

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nity, their mutual tolerance will allow each to flourish, in part because generalized community's thin normativity needn't "infect" or elide the normatively thick commitments of these concrete communities. Nor does it surrender either the poor or the otherwise marginalized. Not to surrender means not to forsake efforts toward political and social progress, not to forego contestation over moral principles, not to preclude any role for the state in implementing policies toward social justice and equality among citizens.

My theory draws upon particular disciplinary debates but always within the broader focus of my own, autonomous project (which for the most part foregoes *explication de texte*). The philosophical warrant for my position is a notion of pragmatism; mine is a pragmatist model of how competing worldviews might understand one another. One strand of this strain of pragmatism is the claim that all knowledge and judgments are fallible. Another is the claim that the theory, although abstract, is at all points concerned with practical implications: how people in fact cope with normative diversity and how they might cope better. The theory seeks to identify and develop the various elements of a pragmatist approach to social integration under conditions of moral diversity. These are the elements necessary for social integration within cosmopolitan societies, among diverse communities, and in the personality structures of individual citizens. I apply the theory in three salient contexts for political judgment: critique of ideology, decisions about how best to interpret indeterminate legal norms, and genuine understanding between competing systems of cultural values.

My goal is systematic not historicist: to provide a critical account of social structure and human agency with respect to the grounds and formation of legitimate political judgment, in my threefold sense of critique (chapter 5), interpretation (chapter 6), and understanding (chapter 7). Beyond the scope of this theory, at least as developed to this point, is some general procedure for political judgment. Beyond its scope is the design of specific institutions that would accomplish the goals of normatively thin social integration. And beyond its scope is the design of tests that would allow a society to distinguish appropriate from inappropriate norms.

My theory approaches issues of social and political theory as they are shaped by epistemology and sociology, rather than, say, ethics or comparative politics. It is more interested in questions of actual social and political process than in the ultimate requirements for a just

society. Its pragmatist orientation rejects the foundational project of first philosophy and its abstract universality.

The theory draws on intellectual currents quite beyond pragmatism. Thus it analyzes the relationship between thick and thin norms in microsociological ways, through several kinds of interactionist approaches (compatible with yet distinct from philosophical pragmatism). These approaches focus on face-to-face relationships between and among persons, in distinction to the mediation of persons through social institutions. But the theory also applies this approach to communities and groups interacting with one another, not only to interacting individuals. It shows that social interaction and negotiations of meaning across the various communities I discuss (including social critique, judicial interpretation, and the efforts of one value system to understand another, competing one) take place within institutional parameters which themselves are not open to complete negotiation. It looks to various kinds of community to understand shifts in the direction of institutional change in cosmopolitan societies.

A third element of my approach is the influence of critical social theory, of the Frankfurt school, although, save in the case of Jürgen Habermas, this element is less explicit. My theory of normatively thin, general social norms seeks to contribute to integration not only within any given community but also among many different communities. It also seeks to formulate a justifiable and useful notion of critique in heterogeneous societies, as a theory of the unique nature of modernity and the challenges modernity poses to traditional forms of social theory and political philosophy. It argues that modern integration can only occur through a self-reflective and critical understanding of political life. The book's title (*Thick Moralities, Thin Politics*) attempts to make this point: that social integration in complex modern societies depends not on thick moral norms but on the capacity of citizens to configure and be bound by thin norms, examples of which I elsewhere analyze as indeterminate norms.<sup>1</sup> The subtitle (*Social Integration Across Communities of Belief*) asks the reader to reflect on social integration in the contemporary context of normative diversity. And my theory of thick moralities, thin norms shows how dependence on thick norms banks on a nongeneralizable form of critique, a form that reliance on thin norms replaces with a critique more subtle, more flexible, more participatory, and hence better able to contribute to social integration in a diverse society.

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Clearly my theory does not lie in the Anglo-American tradition of analytic philosophy. But it does draw directly on the work of a number of American thinkers, including George Herbert Mead, Talcott Parsons, Erving Goffman, Harold Garfinkel, and a considerable number of American feminists. It also draws on the “classical” Europeans G. W. F. Hegel, Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Georg Simmel, as well as on the contemporary contributions of Niklas Luhmann, Pierre Bourdieu, Anthony Giddens, and Jürgen Habermas.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, my theory’s emphasis on the political advantages of normative thinness is in many ways compatible with liberal thought. At the same time I distinguish my approach precisely from what I call “political liberalism,” a term associated prominently with the work of John Rawls. I offer my theory as an unusual form of political communitarianism, which, while certainly inflected with elements of political liberalism, can be defined in part over against Rawlsian liberalism (even as I am sympathetic to some of its claims, as later chapters show). Above all with respect to “liberal neutrality” (what I shall develop as “normative thinness”), my theory is more radical than Rawls’s. And I arrive at my position not, in Rawlsian fashion, via moral theory but rather through an epistemological approach. Consider four points in particular.

First, Rawls (1993:147) posits for liberal democratic societies a specifically moral form of justice: political virtue is moral virtue where justice derives from principles “embodied in human character and expressed in public life.” On this account (to employ a topical example), an evangelical Christian opponent of legalized abortion and a secular supporter of abortion rights would have to seek justice in putative principles embodied in their characters as human beings, hence in principles universally shared, hence universally valid in the eyes of those who recognize them. (On this account, everyone holds such principles, but not everyone may realize that he or she holds them, in which case such persons hold false beliefs about themselves. This move only compounds the explanatory problems of Rawls’s approach.) The approach presupposes fundamental agreement among persons on both sides of the issue; it assumes that all persons share the same thick morality, as the content of those principles. But were this the case, how would one account for the fact that there continue to be two robust sides to this issue, each intractably opposed to the other? On Rawls’s account, one would have to conclude that some people simply do not realize what their own, true fundamental beliefs are. This conclusion is un-

sustainable because it presupposes what cannot be shown (or at least I know of no plausible account): that these principles actually exist at some universal, perhaps ultimately anthropological level. By contrast, my approach presupposes no empirically unverifiable “fundamentally shared principles” held by all human beings. In fact, my approach does not even work toward normative consensus but rather toward the less ambitious, more realistic goal of “accommodation.” It is not deep or broad agreement but is political cooperation all the same.

My proposal of normatively thin politics of mutual accommodation has to do with contending political, or cultural, or social groups recognizing one another as having the status as every other group. To that extent my proposal constrains all groups to respect one another as an aspect of their right to advocate their position peacefully and within the bounds of law. No one of these groups has the right to impose its position on another, unless those positions “win” in terms of legislation or judicial interpretation. “Losing” groups retain the right to maintain their contrarian viewpoints and to continue to advocate them. These groups, which may be normatively thick, are related to one another in the various normatively thin ways I develop in the course of the book. Justice in normatively thin terms is not moral (normatively thick) but political (which I develop as normatively thin). Justice occurs in the normatively thin relations among groups within a constitutional order that applies to all normatively thick groups equally. To be sure, the losing side of the abortion debate will experience moral anguish at its defeat, but it need not be politically violated: anguished as Christians but not as citizens (or, if the secularists lose, anguished as secular humanists but, again, not as citizens).

Individuation under terms of normatively thin politics refers to the creation of individuals as bearers of rights, as legal persons: a status that can be generalized to all citizens. Political socialization into a constitutional order is distinct from individuation in normatively thick groups, which refers to the creation of individuals as bearers of identities, as members of distinct ways of life that—in the face of rival groups and competing thick normativities—cannot be generalized politically and legally to all members of society. Rights provided by normatively thin politics pertain to all individuals in all normatively thick groups, and cannot be trumped by rights internal to these groups.

Of course, the politics of thin norms must expect constant disagreement at the moral level, but it seeks political cooperation in the face of



enduring disagreement. After all, it does not elide differences among normatively thick groups or standpoints as a condition of recognizing them in its normatively thin way. Nor need it abandon the individualistic formulation of the rights of the citizen. On the other hand, normatively thin politics “protects” normatively thick groups by recognizing their members within the normatively thin political order but not by guaranteeing the survival of any particular thick normativity (where a guarantee would amount to privileging that normativity over others).

The two sides to the abortion debate will not agree at the end of the normatively thin day, but they can cooperate as citizens with each other if they are constrained to make their pitches for their respective views in thin terms—terms therefore potentially acceptable to the opposing side—rather than in thick ones, which will always shipwreck on the rocks of the opposing thick view. What are those thin terms? Prominent in the mix is legalism: the notion that the abortion issue be regulated by a set of rules that apply equally to all citizens. For example, if the Supreme Court defines the unborn fetus as a “person” in the sense of the Fourteenth Amendment,<sup>3</sup> then abortion is unconstitutional and the secular pro-choicers must accept that only a constitutional amendment, or a later ruling by the Supreme Court overturning the earlier ruling, can be a politically acceptable means to establishing their view as the legally binding one. If the Court does not so define the unborn fetus, then the pro-lifers stand before the same desideratum: change the rules (amend the Constitution) or change the legally controlling interpretation of the rules (by appropriately influencing the selection of future authoritative interpreters).

Second, I break radically with Rawls not just in rejecting thick morality as a point of departure, but in rejecting his notion that humans as such possess a fundamentally moral personality, certain “powers of moral personality” that generate a “sense of right and justice” as well as a “capacity for a conception of the good” (1993:302). The problem with this view is that it is politically meaningful—in the sense of adjudicating divisive issues of public policy—*only* if we assume what we cannot assume: that every relevant person possesses more or less the same moral personality. The evangelical pro-lifer may well doubt that the secular pro-choicer has a moral personality, and perhaps vice versa. We get ourselves into these sorts of problems with normatively thick assumptions such as that of a “moral personality.” The normatively thin alternative is *not* to set the issue up as one between *my* moral per-

sonality against *your* immoral one (which is how the two sides might view each other on Rawls's scheme). The alternative is to set the issue up as one having nothing to do with the personality of the individual but only with his or her public persona, as a citizen bound by rules that strive to neither favor nor disfavor any particular morality, but to be neutral toward all moralities. This is the approach of positive law, and in democratic contexts the opponents of any particular law seek new legislation, rather than spiritual condemnation or spiritual conversion of the opposing side.

Note that the individual's membership in the normatively thin constitutional order need not threaten his or her simultaneous membership in a normatively thick group if it does not threaten that group's thick normativity. Membership in such groups needn't threaten membership in the normatively thin constitutional order as long as normatively thick groups abide by the constitutional order's thin normativity. In this way the constitutional order uncouples thin and thick levels of social integration—or thin normativity from thick, or generalizable ways of life from nongeneralizable ones. It allows normatively thick groups to interrelate on the basis of thin normativity, without having to forsake the thick normativity constitutive of their respective identities.

Third, I reject the notion of an altruistic rationality or the idea that rationality is somehow inherently altruistic. While Rawls (1993:51) does not entertain such a notion,<sup>4</sup> he does imply that normal human agents are not solely preoccupied with benefits to themselves. Normatively thick is the assumption that “rational agents approach being psychopathic when their interests are solely in benefits to themselves.” A self-regarding or even selfish logic is no more or less “rational” than an other-regarding or even altruistic logic. The normatively thin alternative is *not* to invest rationality with this or that normative valence. And it rejects Rawls's normatively loaded concept of “public reason,” a concept normatively loaded because it seems to presuppose its own correctness in matters of justice, as in the unsustainable assumption that public reason and the Supreme Court “more or less overlap” (Rawls 1993:231) as they do the work of justice. The evangelical pro-lifer likely will reject any “public reason” that claims both to be normative and to have found for the pro-choice side. Correspondingly, the secular pro-choicer will reject any “public reason” that claims both to be normative and to have found for the pro-life side. This impasse fol-

flows from a normatively thick conception of reason. By contrast, a normatively thin conception allows that reason, including public reason, may well lead to conclusions that one rejects from one's moral standpoint. Hence the grounds for accepting unwanted outcomes of rational deliberation or rational processes has to be a willingness to accept (as an obligation of citizenship, that is, of membership in the legal community) the possibility that rational deliberation in the public sphere will not confirm, but sometimes may well disconfirm, one's moral commitments. And one must be prepared to place (in the public sphere, on matters of public policy) one's faith in rational deliberation above one's own moral commitments, when those commitments are not sustained by rational deliberation or rational process in the public sphere. If one finds oneself on the "losing" side in such a process, one seeks to "win" the next round of deliberation, or to prevail in other rational—but not moral—terms. Here one persuades fellow citizens of the merits of one's arguments not by converting them to one's own thick worldview, but by providing reasons that are both persuasive on rational grounds and at least not violative of the addressee's thick worldview. After all, an evangelical Christian is not *as such* pro-life, any more than a secularist is *necessarily* pro-choice. The Christian might affirm his or her faith with the following argument: even where abortion is an inexpensive and safe option, a woman's community that took responsibility for the physical and emotional welfare of mothers and their children (by making adequate medical care unproblematically available, for example, and by not discriminating culturally or otherwise against single mothers) would provide that woman a powerful alternative to abortion.<sup>5</sup> So phrased, the Christian's argument, if persuasive at all, is equally persuasive to Christian and non-Christian alike. By the same token, the argument that abortion is murder can be made from a secularist viewpoint, for example in the claim that the unborn fetus is a legal person and as such enjoys equal protection of the laws. If addressed to persons of religious faith, the secular argument so phrased would not require the addressees to abandon or otherwise compromise their religious beliefs.

Groups that refuse these means of contestation are, by my lights, "dogmatic." Dogmatic is a normative thickness closed to all normative thinness. Without self-contradiction or violation of its own principles, the normatively thin constitutional order must be intolerant of intolerant, normatively thick groups. Dogmatism's normative exclusiveness

is its accommodation only for converts, or its coercion of others to assimilate to its normative thickness. Against such thickness I would note that individual rights flowing from membership in the normatively thin constitutional order allow the individual a right of exit from any normatively thick group, including dogmatic ones.

Fourth, I reject Rawls's (1993:71) notion of the fundamentally moral identity of citizens. He regards public norms as "inhibiting self- or group-centered tendencies," that educate citizens to the "ideal of citizenship" and elicit in them "an effective desire to be that kind of person." Normatively thick are these sorts of efforts to change or form the individual's normative self-understanding. Certain self- or group-centered tendencies need to be inhibited in democratic societies, but this can be done in normatively thin ways, in ways that do not seek to change the citizen's normative self-understanding or his or her moral self-regard. Evangelical pro-lifers and secular pro-choicers alike can regard basic political rules (for example: popular majority rule, or the authoritative interpretations of controlling documents) as legitimate despite their personal moral disdain for some of their outcomes. Here there is no talk of transforming people's hearts and minds; the thick normative alternative to Rawls's theory allows evangelicals to be evangelicals and secularists to be secularists. For both, adjudicating rules needs to be politically legitimate, not necessarily morally acceptable. Politics in a normatively thin mode does not do away with moral disagreement; it brackets it (in the public sphere) and works around it as much as possible. At the same time, because diversity can be consistent with a normatively thin constitutional order, normatively thick groups can thrive within the thin constitutional order, because the rights of thick groups derive from that order and from nowhere else.

Part 1 of this book consists of four chapters, in the course of which I develop my basic theory of normatively thin ways of coping with normative diversity in complex modern societies.

Chapter 1 argues that normative thinness best allows different and competing thicknesses to flourish side by side: (1) Thin norms tolerate difference: agreement on points of public policy despite differences in the participants' specific ways of life, or particular religious faiths, ethnic identities, or socioeconomic statuses. They are neutral toward most of the competing worldviews and ways of life in liberal democratic polities, although not toward positions intolerant of liberalism's tolerance. (2) Despite their heterogeneity, modern societies

display common cultural practices, on which either a thick or a thin normativity might draw. Among the characteristics of a thin core, several are at odds with thick normativity: a thin core is not consensual; it emphasizes individual rights; it embraces diversity; it is relatively “neutral” in a political sense; and it is tolerant of social differences. (3) Sociality through thinner forms of normativity does not conflict with the need for rules to regulate society but with the notion that such rules need be moral in kind. Social and political understanding, even agreement, can be normatively thin in various ways: groups and individuals can be integrated socially in part through a variety of nonmoral media of exchange, and in part through language where description can be morally neutral or normatively uncommitted; and some legal structures can motivate without appealing to morality. (4) One could know if this or that thick norm were needed in a given context and could not be replaced by a thin norm, only with reference to the logic of the institution, legal order, or public policy in question. One could then identify abiding social needs for thicker levels of morality without invoking some a priori standard.

Chapter 2 claims that recognition and tolerance of difference within a community, or among communities, poses problems for overarching normative agreement. Toward securing greater popular agreement on critical communal issues, it proposes social integration through “normative thinness.” (1) I show that normativity has gradually withdrawn from many areas of social life, leaving a normativity both “thin” and “local.” (2) I argue that normative thinness is possible both where the kind of contexts needed to adjudicate disputes need not be particularly moral, and where successful social integration need not be based on solidarity or sincerity or overarching values. (3) I identify several features of thinly normative integration: validity that is local and context-dependent; merit-based norms rather than convention; and community in terms of strangers whose otherness is not absorbed by the relationship. And (4) I draw on Erving Goffman’s work to argue for social integration as “agonistic pluralism,” a kind of interactional *modus vivendi*, which, while not unproblematic, offers welcome possibilities for social integration in heterogeneous societies. It can lead beyond social coordination to social cooperation because it does not preclude a social order stabilized through a widely shared notion of justice.

Chapter 3 analyzes, in modern liberal societies, two kinds of com-

munity: the ideal of the “generalized community” of the constitutional state, and various “concrete communities,” each committed to a particular way of life or worldview. The notion of generalized community is one of normative neutrality. Where most political theories treat neutrality individualistically, I transpose the problem to a higher level: to the relation of a general community to its component subcommunities. In this way I develop a notion of communitarianism among communities, in distinction to a notion of simply *the* communitarian community.

Here the issue of normative neutrality returns with some force. Building on similarities between George Herbert Mead’s analysis of the individual’s socialization into the group and the relationship among communities in a democratic constitutional order, I explore a politically communitarian relationship among various concrete communities in modern liberal states. This theory of the similarities between mental structure in individuals and social structure in communities proceeds in four steps: (1) *a basic model of social integration in heterogeneous societies*: in dealing with each other, concrete communities assume the attitude of generalized community’s normatively thin social framework, on which most normatively thick communities can agree; (2) *the major prerequisite for integration*: separating thick from thin normativity, which allows concrete communities to interrelate on the basis of thin normativity, without having to forsake the thick normativity constitutive of their respective identities; (3) *integration through the thin normativity of legal rights*, where generalized community establishes equality among concrete communities in one of two ways: through the “politics of recognition” (formal equality) or the “politics of difference” (recognizing the unique identity of the concrete community, its distinctness from all other concrete communities); and (4) *the limits of integration*: dogmatic communities that practice exclusiveness to the point of an intolerance incompatible with generalized community.

Chapter 4 develops, more fully than the preceding chapters, a theory of the person as entailed by my overall theory of thick and thin normativity. It approaches the individual as a political agent in terms of three mutually constitutive dimensions, as three interlocking “systems”: the social system, the personality system of the individual, and the cultural system instantiated in the individual’s behavior. These systems correspond, respectively, to *society*, which integrates the individual into the

patterns of its institutions, including the legal, administrative, and economic spheres; to *culture*, which integrates the individual into the cognitive patterns of the various groups to which he or she belongs; and to *personality*, which integrates the individual as an individual, as a unit in itself. Culture, society, and personality are held together through their carriers' normative behavior. They are constitutive of that behavior. Normative action is one kind of purposive activity, whose purposes are regulated by values. It can be normatively thick, but it can also be thin. I argue that in a normatively heterogeneous populace, normatively thin forms of culture, society, and personality better serve social integration than do thick forms. This claim resonates with the notion that social integration in modern, heterogeneous societies has a certain "negative" character. Incisive analysts (including Ferdinand Tönnies, Emile Durkheim, and Georg Simmel) concerned with the historical transition to modernity in the West examine modern societies as moral orders from which moral consensus is absent—and in this sense, as "negative" orders. What such authors diagnose as "negativity" in social integration in modern societies I develop as thin normativity, specifically as thin forms of social solidarity, at the level of society; thin forms of shared cultural understandings, at the level of culture; and thin forms of individual identity, at the level of personality.

Part 2 comprises three chapters, each of which applies the theory developed in part 1 to specific areas of contemporary social life.

Chapter 5 argues that, to apply a norm whose meaning and application are indeterminate, one must draw on knowledge or competence or interpretations not contained in the norm itself. Norm-guided behavior generates aspects of social order, but in the case of indeterminate norms we cannot explain the generation of order in normatively thick terms but only in thin ones. Taking my cue from the way (according to Harold Garfinkel's ethnomethodology) humans work with indeterminate rules in everyday situations, I argue that such norms, in the form of laws, can be made determinate in normatively thin ways (1) where we can focus on the "competent" use of laws rather than on their "correct" or "incorrect" application (to distinguish between "correct" and "incorrect" is to presuppose a standard that holds across cases of correct rule-application, but where application is ad hoc because indeterminate, each case of application must have its own, unique standard of correctness); (2) where the relevant question is not whether the action in question is legal or illegal, but whether the problem and solution are

known or unknown (after all, when problem and solution are indeterminate, rule-application itself can be a means to define both); (3) where we can employ rule-autonomous procedures rather than rule-needy procedures (where “correct” procedure does not require clarification by rules); (4) where we can exercise creative noncompliance rather than narrow compliance (where not to invoke the law is a more useful way to approach a particular legal issue); (5) where our concern must be with practical methods because abstract principles provide no guidance (where we are guided by the methods or ways in which indeterminate rules are actually applied or have been applied in the past); and (6) where we can apply situations to rules, rather than rules to situations (where laws are themselves resources to determine how a context should be approached). In short, where rule users do not passively follow rules and roles but actively manipulate them, even instrumentalize them, toward achieving their goals, they can draw on thinly normative ways to render those rules and roles meaningful and applicable. A normatively thin approach offers more scope, because more flexibility, than normative thickness for constructing agreement in the face of contested interpretations of the meaning and proper application of otherwise indeterminate laws.

Each system of cultural values displays a peculiar set of thick norms defining its identity and guiding the individual’s behavior in ways appropriate to that system. Chapter 6 studies the efforts of one system—the “scientific” study of religion—to understand another—religious faith—in the work of Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Talcott Parsons, generating proposals for a nonreductive relationship between competing value systems. The relationship can avoid reductionism (1) by allowing for more than one “world” or sphere of valid values (thus sociological claims and counterclaims about religion can be evaluated only if the sociologist assumes the reality of religion beyond all discourse about religion, as the external or independent referent of discourse); (2) by allowing an abiding autonomy to some spheres or forms of nonrationality; (3) by not collapsing evaluative questions into factual ones, that is, by allowing at least some socially legitimate values to be autonomous of truth. And (4) a thin relationship is possible where one value system shares both distance and proximity with another value system, a kind of solidarity beyond cultural differences. These four proposals attempt to confront the epistemological difficulties of understanding another person as he or she understands himself



or herself, by seeking a thin understanding between competing value systems, where understanding is not corrigible to the observer. Moreover, (5) any given system should evaluate the validity of the claims of any other system in nonimmanent (or external or detached) terms, rendering the observed system corrigible by the lights of the observer. Thick cultural values would seek justification in ways thin not thick, but only in those thin ways that did not thereby misconstrue those thick cultural values.

Chapter 7 works out a notion of normatively thin ideology critique, as the critique of claims asserting universal validity for the interests and experiences of only one social sector or group: Thin critique can avoid being itself a form of ideology by avoiding a “hegemonic” approach. A hegemonic approach absolutizes the particular social situation of some persons or some groups and thereby denies or ignores differently situated persons in that group or in other groups. Here I explore a range of examples concerning women in contemporary American society. Thin critique engages ideology at the macro level of structure (where it identifies ideology-spawning social structure in social expectations internalized by the individual in the course of socialization, as well as in the patriarchal family), and at the more micro level of agency, as deep repression, internalized by individuals and rendering them agents of their own domination, yet who are unable to grasp their dominated status and their roles in perpetuating it. In this context thin critique has two socially generalizable goals: equality, both as “women equal to men” and as “equal freedom of individual choice”; and autonomy, both as the private autonomy of individuals who, as the addressees of the relevant social arrangements, receive equal treatment, and as the public autonomy of citizens who, as the makers of these arrangements, must themselves decide how best to structure them toward the goal of individual autonomy. When treating equals equally in all relevant respects, only the participants themselves can determine which respects are relevant.

Finally, in a brief coda, I argue that the normative diversity and fragmentation this book responds to is not a phenomenon of moral decline but of an increasingly porous social structure. And I argue that my theory of thin normativity, as a response to normative diversity and fragmentation, furthers normative engagement on the part of citizens in the public sphere, not moral abstinence or disengagement, let alone decline.

# PART I

Thick

Moralities,

Thin Politics

in Social

Integration