What does it mean to be a sociologist? Does it still make sense to “commit a social science”? This essay reflects on the former question and answers the latter affirmatively. It accepts much of Weber’s argument in “Science as a Vocation,” but it goes beyond Weber by suggesting that the practice of sociology is meaningful in ways he did not fully recognize. The point of doing sociology is not only being dedicated to specialized scholarly work or called to illuminate human affairs, but also being oriented to certain virtues and moved by a particular kind of passion.

What does it mean to be a sociologist, to practice sociology? To raise the question is to make a point. After all, sociology has become a profession like any other. Doing sociology means getting paid to do research, to teach, to consult. It has become a job—hardly a dirty one, involving as it does mostly inside work and no heavy lifting—and someone’s got to do it, or so it appears. Asking for the meaning in all this now seems beside the point. But that is my point. Rather than take for granted the tempting but mindless professionalism that threatens to pervade our discipline, rather than give in to the trend that threatens to turn us into “specialists without spirit,” I want to examine whether there is anything like an inner vocation left in the discipline. Or to put it differently, I want to see if it still makes sense to “commit a social science,” in spite of the faint aura of senseless sin implied by Auden’s famous line.

Embarking on this kind of enterprise may seem to violate a fundamental sociological insight. The conventional jargon expresses our condition all too well: We know that in the process of rationalization, institutions may become divorced from their original purposes. In a society where labor is divided, specialists will focus on the tasks at hand—they necessarily “lose spirit.” A firmly institutionalized social practice makes roles routine. The success of institutionalization may be measured precisely by the questions that need not be asked. Why, then, probe for meaning in the face of these “facts”?

A simple answer—too simple, as I will show—is that we should not give

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institutionalization such short shrift, that the very process of routinization has a certain meaning. For one thing, we cannot live by ideas alone. Institutionalization means that the purposes inherent in a practice become viable. Such viability, no great virtue in itself, is obviously a necessary condition for anything else we may want to accomplish that is of intrinsic value. At the very least, getting paid to do a job is not meaningless, as long as the job has something to recommend it. Even considered as merely a job, the practice of sociology has something going for it, since doing the job requires more than a facility at number-crunching and model-munching. Like other sensible practices, it requires a sense of discipline and craftsmanship, and that, too, is not meaningless. Now without a solid material basis it would be pointless to speak of a discipline as a going concern at all, and fortunately sociology is a going concern, at least in the academy. But if we were to think of this material viability as supremely valuable in itself, the security it provides in this uncertain world, we would become, so to speak, intellectual peasants. If we were to think of routine craftsman-like role-playing as sufficiently satisfying in itself, because at least it reduces the complexity of our lives, we would be likely to surrender to the temptation of tenure. Reduced to mere routine, a discipline succumbs to the banality of learning. If, as I will argue, it is part of our essential purpose to contribute to progressive enlightenment and to produce work that is meant to become outdated, then that routine, however rewarding in itself, should leave us restless. Normal science is almost an oxymoron. Unlike capitalists, sociologists by the very nature of their role must help to dig their own graves—intellectually speaking, of course. Such grave-digging is acceptable. Suicide by routine is not. Thus the simple answer about the meaning inherent in institutionalization as such is not enough.

In fact, the sociological perspective itself forces us to go further. If we ask, as is our habit, what gives other people's practices plausibility and their institutions legitimacy, surely we can direct such questions at our own enterprise. As we know, any role, any social performance involves a choice of norms and values; any form of social action may have unintended consequences. Why not determine the values we stand for, and the intentions that define the very practice in which we are engaged? What, in the final analysis, is the point of doing sociology? Beyond the earlier faint praise for routine viability, I suggest that to raise the question is also part of the answer: Being able to ask it, being systematically self-reflexive in this way, as part of the practice of sociology and as a self-critical application of its essential insights, is a humanly meaningful thing. It takes a lot of heart and some guts. Leaving the question unasked is to diminish the discipline and ourselves as well.

In looking for an answer we need not start from scratch. We can climb onto the shoulders of a giant. Max Weber famously expounded on the theme of "Science as a Vocation" in a speech to students at the University of Munich about seventy years ago. What he said has motivated generations of sociology graduate students, though the impact he had on his immediate audience has not been recorded, as far as I know. It is worth noting that before turning to the heart of the matter