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DURKHEIM'S PROJECT: A CLAIM

The work of Émile Durkheim and his school represents the most sustained effort in the history of sociology to recast the central problems of the religious and philosophical tradition in sociological form. This involved simultaneously the retention of the basic truth claims of religion and philosophy, yet also the sociological transcendence of these claims. No other social theorist or school of social thought attempted or achieved as much in this area: neither Karl Marx and the Marxists, despite promising leads in their work (Jay 1984); Max Weber; Georg Simmel, despite his deep philosophical interests; Sigmund Freud and his followers; Max Scheler (1992) and Karl Mannheim, despite their pioneering work in the "sociology of knowledge"; nor even George Herbert Mead and the Pragmatists, although these latter thinkers were perhaps, as Durkheim himself sensed, some of his main challengers in this field (Durkheim 1955).

Durkheim offered a sociological theory of religion, its essense as well as its central manifestations in beliefs and rites. He and his school also attempted to provide a sociological account of some of the main problems of philosophy: moral, epistemological, and metaphysical. Durkheim sought to create a sociology of moral life which would resolve the perennial debates over both moral obligation and the nature of the good which had exercised philosophers since Plato. This very incomplete aspect of his work has received increasing attention in recent years, but it will not be my primary focus (see Durkheim 1975, II, 292–331; Wallwork 1972; Hall 1987). Durkheim's epistemological concerns included both a sociology of knowledge and theory of science, both of which have also been discussed extensively (Hirst 1975; Schmaus 1994; Turner 1986; LaCapra 1972; Bloor 1982; Berthelot 1995; S. Collins 1985). While I will say a good deal about his doctrine of categories and his sociology of knowledge, my central concerns are neither with his epis-

temology nor his theory of science, as they have usually been understood. My main interest is in not only the place of his theory of the categories, but also his sociology of knowledge within his larger sociological metaphysic. As I will argue in the following pages, his work does contain the lineaments of a sociological metaphysics, including a "metaphysics of knowledge," whose full range and claims, when adequately understood, are truly astonishing. Instead of rejecting the older philosophical problems and starting from an entirely new set of premises, as some contemporary philosophers and social theorists have done (e.g. Habermas; see Nielsen 1987b; Rorty 1979), Durkheim sought to retain the truths and insights of the traditional "philosophy of consciousness," and traditional metaphysics generally, including its theory of "representation" and image of a "mirror of nature," while at the same time grounding them in a social philosophy with metaphysical intentions. In the process, Durkheim created a unique sociological, religious, and philosophical amalgam.

Durkheim's sociological metaphysic has not been given nearly enough independent attention. This is true despite, perhaps even because of the interest in his so-called social realism. The term "realism," as applied to Durkheim's position, has usually been opposed to the notion of "nominalism." It seems to have gained currency in modern sociology through Gabriel Tarde and others, who labeled Durkheim's work as a form of "realism," perhaps even "scholastic realism" (Tarde 1969, 140: 15–17; Deploige 1938). Variants of this view were soon adopted with little question by commentators and already came to dominate the discussion of this aspect of Durkheim's thought at an early date (Gehlke 1915, 86–88, 94–95; Dennes 1924, 33–53; Simpson 1933; Alpert 1939). It has done considerable mischief in the study of Durkheim's work. It has terminologically misdirected the discussion by confusing Durkheim's tenaciously held claims about the "reality" of society with philosophical debates over the reality of universals, thus putting investigators off a more fruitful trail. Durkheim never doubted that universal concepts were "nominal" (among other things), but he also believed in the "reality" of society; the conflict between these intellectual orientations drove him toward the creation of a social metaphysics which would resolve the conflict.

Durkheim's interest in the "reality" of society cannot be understood solely at the level of epistemological claims. It needs to be seen from the standpoint of the problems of metaphysics. The misunderstandings over Durkheim's so-called social realism have also

led scientifically oriented sociologists to doubt the very possibilty that Durkheim's work could be informed by a metaphysics (a reaction beginning especially with Parsons 1937). Indeed, many commentators continue to deny that he makes any metaphysical claims (Wallwork 1972; Schmaus 1994). The debate over Durkheim's alleged "social realism" obscures the central fact that his "realism" is, more accurately, a reliance on the whole/part metaphor and a focus on the problem of totality, terms invested by him with a certain "metaphysical pathos" (Lovejoy 1936, 12–13). As his work develops, the whole/part rhetoric becomes increasingly linked to his analysis of religion and the problem of totality, including a view of society and nature, in a way which forms the basis of a wider metaphysics. Although it has the minor advantage of gesturing toward metaphysical problems, the term "social realism" is largely unhelpful in understanding Durkheim's work, at any stage in its development. Durkheim never adopts the term as a description of his own position and, in fact, distances himself from this characterization. For example, in his rejection of Deploige's criticism of his work, he refers to the whole/part analysis, which he had adopted from Charles Renouvier, as the true basis of "*what M. Deploige calls* (author's emphasis) our social realism" (Durkheim 1975, I: 405).

My central aim is to unravel the intricate skein of Durkheim's thought and demonstrate that metaphysical commitments and related philosophical assumptions are deeply rooted in his thinking and have large implications for his theories. To achieve this aim, I have had to break free from the usual divisions established in the study of his work. I focus on the points of intersection of his conceptions of religion, the categories, and society, and not on any one of these areas alone. As such, my study moves largely outside of the generally established intellectual division of labor, which tends to separate the sociology of religion, the sociology of knowledge and social epistemology, from general social theory and all of these areas from metaphysics.

It needs to be more clearly recognized that there is a peculiar and specific intellectual strategy in Durkheim. Auguste Comte (1975, 29–30) suggested a theory of three stages of human mental development, so to speak, through which the various spheres of culture passed at varying rates. Durkheim wanted to create a theory which, in effect, retained and unified the truths found in all three of Comte's stages: religion (the theological stage), the philosophical categories (the metaphysical stage), and society (the positive stage at the highest level of development in sociology). He wanted it all

three ways, so to speak, and, therefore, required an approach which vindicated both his continued devotion to traditional religious (and philosophical) ideas, and his allegiance to modern science. It is this combination which makes his thought theoretically daring, yet conceptually ambiguous, with its seemingly odd juxapositions of religion, philosophy, and science as well as its simultaneous use of a variety of rhetorical figures, including those of emotion, morality, energetics, force, concentration, wholism, and so forth.

Durkheim's contemporaries had a keener sense than sociologists today of the wider challenges posed by his work, even if they were not always entirely clear, consistent, or thorough in their estimates of these challenges. The suggestive remarks by Richard, Bergson and even some of Durkheim's own followers (e.g. Mauss, Bouglé, and Davy) have not been taken as seriously as they should be for an understanding of his work. The former are usually viewed as opponents whose intellectual, practical, and perhaps personal motives unfairly colored their views of his work. While there is some truth in this view, it is not a good reason for entirely dismissing their intuitions. Moreover, the centrality of metaphysical elements in Durkheim's thinking was noted at an early date even by foreign (i.e. non-French) writers who could not be suspected of such bias. For example, in a comment made in 1912 and based on Durkheim's early work, John Theodore Merz (1965, IV:561, fn1) noted the "synoptic" quality of Durkheim's sociology, which "starts always from the consideration of a totality, a complex; considering this to be the prius and not a later product of the assemblage of its parts. And this the author lays down as a general principle applicable to the study of the phenomena of society no less than to those of life in general and even of inanimate phenomena." Durkheim's own closest followers often expressed an awareness of these wider issues and connections of his work to the philosophical tradition. At times, they even implied a certain assent to the view that Durkheim was, in some way, concerned with metaphysical problems (Bouglé's preface to Durkheim 1974a, xxxix; Davy's introduction to Durkheim 1957, xxxiv; Davy 1911, 12). This does not mean that we need to accept at face value either the defense of Durkheim by his followers or the many exaggerated claims made about the origins and implications of Durkheim's theory by his more strident critics, especially when they tried trace his thought to German influences (Deploige 1938; also now Meštrović 1988). I think Durkheim puts many of these claims to rest quite effectively himself. But it does require that we expand our intellectual horizons to

include a sense of how his contemporaries perceived his work. The very fact that they found metaphysical implications in his writings at all is itself suggestive.

One of the main leads which needs to be followed in understanding the metaphysical dimensions of Durkheim's work concerns the themes of philosophical monism and religious pantheism. Gaston Richard, an early member of the Durkheim group, who later broke with them, remarked that Durkheim's theory of religion rested on both these foundations (Richard's essay in Durkheim 1994a, 230–31). While Richard hardly makes a strong case in his analysis of Durkheim's writings for his sweeping assertions, his insight is suggestive. Henri Bergson was less specific, but also thought that Durkheim's system represented a fundamental philosophy, as much as a new sociological theory (his remarks in Besnard 1983, 133; Vialatoux 1939). The sense that there was more than sociology at stake in Durkheim's work is captured in Jules Romains' provocative image of Durkheim as "the Descartes of unanimism" (cited in Bouglé 1935, 17).

Durkheim's theories are widely assumed to be highly "dualistic," nor would I dispute the strong element of truth contained in this description. A variety of dualities do permeate his work, for example, the individual and society, two types of social solidarity, four types of suicide set out as pairs of polar opposites, the sacred and the profane, and the dualism of human nature itself. On the other hand, his early attacks on those forms of metaphysical dualism, which located humankind as a privileged case outside of and above nature, already raise questions about the place of dualisms in his thinking. A close study of his work provides other reasons for thinking that Durkheim was not entirely, or even primarily, a dualist. I will argue that Durkheim's rejection of metaphysical dualism led him to develop a standpoint best characterized as a type of "sociological monism," perhaps even one with elements of a "sociological pantheism." The crucial fact at the outset was his abiding interest in the nature of the whole (and the whole/part relationship) and, as time passed, in the problem of totality. When these central interests are integrated with his persistent "sociologism" and his increasing focus on religion and the categories, they combine to provide the basic elements of a monistic theory which regularly transcends and encompasses the other dualistic tendencies in his thought.

Along with the whole and part problem, and the notion of totality, we will need to look at his changing usage of such ideas and images as social density, concentration, association, and force and

how they are related to his view of society as, in some sense, a "social substance." Indeed, despite the almost unanimous rejection of the idea that Durkheim was a "substantialist," I think there are strong indications of just such a view in his writings. His central ideas circle around a philosophical core which, despite its many ambiguities, points toward a sociological metaphysics rooted in a variant of philosophical monism.

This is what I want to demonstrate in the following pages. I do so through a chronological analysis of his writings. I will focus especially on his major published works, but I also want to examine many, if not absolutely all, of his less prominent publications, including essays and lectures series. From the very earliest date, we find Durkheim keenly interested in the nature of the whole and in the whole/part relationship. Indeed, it becomes a central rhetorical figure thoughout his writings. He relies on it at crucial points in his arguments and, as often as not, he advances it as an ultimate rationale in proof of his main theses. As we examine his work, we discover a shift in emphasis and see him become increasingly interested in this problem from the standpoint of the category of totality, and from the perspective of the sociology of religion and the categories generally. Throughout his work is found the sociologistic strand of thinking, woven as a complex skein into his treatment of all these issues. My chronological treatment of his work is meant primarily to examine the varied ways and settings in which he develops the problems of the whole, whole/part, totality, the categories, and their relationships to his analysis of religion and society. Only through such a chronological commentary can we capture the various nuances in Durkheim's shifting use of these ideas and images.

Readers should be forewarned about the limits of the present study. There are some things it does not accomplish. The following analysis is more focused than many treatments of Durkheim's work, which attempt a global assessment of his theory, including its political implications and its relevance to contemporary debates in sociology today. This study cuts into the corpus of Durkheim's work at what I consider to be a vital point, one which reveals a great deal about the rest of his thought. I would immediately add that I do not therefore think that my analysis of Durkheim is entirely irrelevant to the dilemmas of the modern world (unless, of course, one is prepared to discount the importance of metaphysics and the related philosophical tradition). However, Durkheim's relevance appears at a different level from that claimed by treatments of him which aim

more explicitly at the political, ideological, social, and purely contemporaneous aspects of his work. As a result, little or no attention will be given to the many issues which currently exercise Durkheim's commentators, for example, the possible relationship of his work to capitalism, socialism, liberalism, communtarianism, structuralism, deconstructionism, modernism or postmodernism, feminism, and a variety of others (e.g. Giddens 1971; Filloux 1977; LaCroix 1981; Challenger 1994; Cladis 1992; Lehman 1993, 1994; Meštrović 1991). Moreover, even the seemingly relevant notions of rationalism, empiricism, nominalism, realism, and other terms are largely circumvented as central reference points of the arguement. While I also gesture at times (as infrequently as possible) toward such omnibus terms (e.g. monism), I do so only to summarize my detailed discussions of Durkheim's ideas. The more global characterizations serve only as punctuation marks, so to speak, in the analysis. Indeed, one of my primary hopes is to avoid featuring such "isms" in the treatment of Durkheim's work. These abstractions too readily take on a life of their own in intellectual history and, as tools of analysis, yield a pitifully small harvest for our labors. While they have some value as intellectual shorthand, and as summary characterizations of an author's position, they are too often used as sorting devices to quickly locate Durkheim's arguments in relationship to other allegedly established standpoints. They short circuit the detailed analysis of particular problems and usually lock us into a set of intellectual party positions which are entirely destructive of thought. More importantly, they hardly do justice to any important and complex thinker's ideas. In some recent treatments of Durkheim, they have been orchestrated into a whirl of unilluminating abstractions (e.g. Lehman 1993; Meštrović 1991; also Nielsen 1996d). It is difficult to avoid them entirely, since they form the staple of much of Durkheimian exegesis, and are sometimes employed by Durkheim himself. However, I do intend to avoid them as much as possible.

Similar remarks might be made about the short term, practical dimensions of his thought. They are of little concern to me. Durkheim's view of modern industrial society, his political orientation (and that of his school), his interest in professional groupings or educational reform, his relationship to current events like the Dreyfus affair, and a large number of other questions are all important and interesting (e.g. Clark 1973; Pearce 1989; Cladis 1992; Besnard 1983; Pickering and Martins 1994). I will argue that they are much less relevant to the understanding of his main philosoph-

ical rationales than other "influences" operating across longer historical, civilizational spans. Indeed, one of my primary methodological tools in this work is a civilizational perspective, a view from the *longue durée*. It is adapted ultimately from Durkheim and Mauss's own thinking on this subject (Durkheim and Mauss 1971; also Braudel 1980, 25–52; Nelson 1981, 83–84).

My approach is generally that of an "internalist," but of the long view, interested in the fundamental philosophical rationales and rhetorical tropes which go into the making of Durkheim's major texts. I want to trace Durkheim's use of key foundational rationales in his argument, ones which turn out to have a long philosophical lineage. Insofar as I do address the practical implications of his work, I am interested less in the short-term ones than in the long-term vision of the possible future implied in his theories, in, so to speak, Durkheim's "utopian" strand.

While this work covers a good deal of the ground around Durkheim, it does not pretend to offer a general survey of his work or an overview of his life (Lukes 1973; Jones 1986). It is a specialized treatise on a particular dimension—albeit, a central one—in his writings. I want to examine the texts themselves and the way in which Durkheim treats the problems of the whole and others of concern to me. Any progress in the understanding of Durkheim (or the ultimate advance of sociological theory, for that matter) is only possible on the basis of such focused analyses of particular problems. These questions need not and should not be trivial ones; I do not think the ones treated in this work are trivial. But they must be specialized investigations, carried through as exhaustively as possible, even at the risk of a certain repetition in the chronological analysis. Only if we stick closely to our theme, and trace its development throughout his writings, can we hope to fully understand its role in his thought or offer a convincing proof, rather than a mere assertion, of our interpretation.

My treatment is argued at the level of Durkheim's deepest philosophical assumptions about reality. Indeed, I will treat Durkheim primarily as a philosopher, albeit a sociologically oriented one. He confronted the full range of inherited philosophical questions. However, he is especially a religious and social philosopher. It is the religious element which increasingly predominates and provides the basis for resolving the other philosophical and metaphysical dilemmas in his work. Of course, behind religion lies society. There is certainly nothing unusual about such a treatment of Durkheim. His philosophical training and interests are well

known. There are already several works devoted to him as philosopher, in general, or to various particular aspects of his philosophy (LaCapra 1972; Schmaus 1994). Most of the literature on him necessarily says something about these philosophical themes. However, in keeping with my emphasis on the longer historical duration, I will be focusing on Durkheim's relationship to several thinkers who have not been examined very closely in conjunction with his work, in particular, Aristotle, Bacon, Spinoza, Kant, and the neo-Kantian Renouvier. In the conclusion to this work, as well as at several points along the way, I will suggest that Durkheim's philosophy bares a striking resemblance to Spinoza's system and, indeed, that the two thinkers emerge from similar historical conjunctures.

The empirical and theoretical validity of his sociology will also need to be put aside in these pages. This is not because I am uninterested in his research sociology and particular theories or that I think him a bad sociologist. On the contrary, I think there is much of value in his substantive empirical and theoretical work and, indeed, feel drawn to aspects of his sociological style of explanation (especially his sociology of religion and knowledge). However, these are not my main concerns. Any discussion of his ideas at the level of substantive theory must be left for another occasion. In any case, there is no lack of good, strictly sociological and anthropological, commentary on his major works (Douglas 1967; Pope 1976; Lester 1994; Pickering 1984; Needham's introduction to Durkheim and Mauss 1963; Stanner's essay in Durkheim 1994a, chap. 16). Durkheim may be judged empirically mistaken (as he undoubtedly often is) and his theories poorly conceived (which they sometimes are), but none of this in any way effects my analysis of his philosophical system.

I will have much more to say about the coherence of his formulations and his mode of argument. While there are several persistent themes in his work, his style of thought remains very complex. His developing theory is much more ambiguous than is usually realized and manifests a variety of theoretical and rhetorical tensions. These ambiguities probably emerge from several sources. I will emphasize those emerging from the tensions between the dualistic and monistic elements in his thinking. This book attempts to reassess these neglected monistic elements, bring to light these ambiguities, and offer a version of Durkheim which points toward a resolution of these dilemmas.