

# Durkheim and Society as a Moral Entity: A Brief Synopsis and Critique

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## I. Introduction

Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) lived and died during turbulent times not only for his native France but also for all of Europe. During his youth France suffered a crushing defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871, with it the passing of the Second Empire, the birth of the Third Republic, and the short-lived and much discussed Paris Commune, while at the time of his death Europe was embroiled in the first World War with Russia having passed through two distinct revolutions in a single year. It is not surprising then, as one of the founding fathers of the discipline of sociology, that Durkheim was greatly concerned with the questions of social structure and morality. His views on the societal origin of morality, however, have been as controversial as they have been influential, and thus the present paper will seek to elucidate those views through an examination of modern academic research done on both Durkheim's earlier works and his latter. The structure of Durkheim's society as a moral entity will be discussed, followed by a look at the place Durkheim gave the individual in society, and finally some criticisms of Durkheim's views will be offered. Writing nearly a century before the present though he did, there is perhaps something of Durkheim that we can apply to our own times of questioning amidst rapid change.

## II. Society as a moral entity

One of the most striking features of Durkheim's conception of society is the collective effervescence that forms its group mind. He attributed to society a will of its own, an ability to think, feel, wish, and act in its own right.<sup>1</sup> Society is thus self-aware, and endowed with a higher consciousness than individuals as it is composed of the

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<sup>1</sup> Whitney Pope, 'Durkheim as a Functionalist', *The Sociological Quarterly*, 16:3 (1975), 361-379.

collective consciousnesses of all individuals within it,<sup>2</sup> arising out of those members' collective effervescence. This idea is closely linked to Durkheim's notion of *homo duplex*, that all of us are internally divided between egoistic impulses and our ability to go beyond ourselves into a realm of 'conceptual thought and moral activity held in common by a society'.<sup>3</sup> This collective mind then functions by protecting individuals, when interacting with one another, from the disturbance of their sensory perceptions, allowing them to substitute the world around them for a more moral one, a medium that also acts as the basis for the social structuring of emotions.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the moral force that society exerts does in fact come from the separately existing entity 'society' itself, but that entity can be understood as being generated by its members. In this way, Durkheim's view of society as a moral power can be understood to mean morality developing as a social phenomenon rather than society developing as a moral one.<sup>5</sup> This entity of society, once created, could however also cease to be should the idea of society disappear from its members' minds, being rooted in their collective effervescence as it is.<sup>6</sup> Durkheim saw the increasing division of labor as one such potential weakening agent of collective sentiments, the substitute social cohesive he suggested will be discussed below. This may all strike the reader as being quite strange and esoteric, and so a helpful analogy may perhaps be taken here from Hindu theology. Vedantic philosophy, rooted in the *Upanishads*, and especially that of the Advaitan school, teaches that the ultimate reality of the entire universe is one supreme consciousness, that all is connected into this one reality, that it supports all, flows through all, and yet is beyond all.<sup>7</sup> Taking this concept and localizing it, as well as allowing it to be self-generated rather than pre-existent, we have an idea of how Durkheim saw society as something other than its members and yet created by its members: something very much along the lines of 'the whole is

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<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Chris Shilling and Philip A. Mellor, 'Durkheim, Morality and Modernity: Collective Effervescence, Homo Duplex and the Sources of Moral Action', *The British Journal of Sociology*, 49:2 (1998), 193-209 (p. 196).

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> T. M. S. Evens, 'Two Concepts of "Society as a Moral System": Evans-Pritchard's Heterodoxy', *Man*, 17:2 (1982), 205-218.

<sup>6</sup> Shilling and Mellor, *op. cit.*

<sup>7</sup> *Upanishads*, trans. by F Max-Müller, rev. and intro. by Suren Navlakha (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 2000).

greater than the sum of its parts’.

This entity of society (or, perhaps more fitting to the view heretofore discussed, Society) exerts a tremendous moral force over its members and to a large, even total, degree dictates their behavior. When born, each person faces the society where they live as an objective reality with a moral quality that is beyond any one individual’s control.<sup>8</sup> A person does not choose to believe in certain things or act in certain ways; he or she learns them through the process of socialization.<sup>9</sup> The objective nature of Durkheim’s society is quite important in that it not only dictates norms (or ‘social facts’, that is, collectively held standards of behavior,<sup>10</sup> also seen as endowed with a coercive power over individuals<sup>11</sup>) but obliges each person to experience reality in certain ways and not in others, it causes each separate individual to view him or herself as a cultural object,<sup>12</sup> and therefore composes both one’s view of the outside world and one’s sense of identity and place in that world. Society has both a physical and moral force that it uses to control its members, making them feel, think, and act, as society, in its higher wisdom, deems necessary to achieve the equilibrium that is its goal.<sup>13</sup> Society can thus regenerate itself throughout the gradual process of inevitable change that occurs within all human groupings, whether coming from advances in technology or adjustments to a changing environment, by continually exerting moral force and behavioral control over each of the members composing that society. In summation, according to Durkheim, society is a separate entity created by its members, an entity that is both above and beyond them and entirely moral; the moral force it exerts, moreover ‘controls and assimilates to individual consciousness to such an extent that flouting it is for the most part unthinkable, and its status as moral constraint may even go unnoticed’.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Richard A. Hilbert, ‘Anomie and the Moral Regulation of Reality: The Durkheimian Tradition in Modern Relief’, *Sociological Theory*, 4:1 (1986), 1-19.

<sup>9</sup> Pip Jones, Liz Bradbury, and Shaun Le Boutillier, *Introducing Social Theory*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, see also Shilling and Mellor, *op. cit.*

<sup>11</sup> Murray Knuttila, *Introducing Sociology: A Critical Approach*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>12</sup> Hilbert, *op. cit.*

<sup>13</sup> Pope, *op. cit.*

<sup>14</sup> Emile Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method* (New York: The Free Press, 1938) p. 55,

### III. The individual in society

As controlling and pervasive as Durkheim's concept of society is, there is still a place for the individual within it. In fact, Durkheim saw the individual becoming more and more central as society developed within modern cultures from an increasing division of labor. While social cohesiveness was achieved in pre-modern societies due to 'mechanical solidarity', the solidarity that comes about more or less automatically from the similarity of people's lives and limited number of available roles, modern societies are held together by 'organic solidarity', that which comes from the interdependence resulting from each person having a very specialized and limited role within society.<sup>15</sup> To Durkheim, in addition to bringing about organic solidarity, such specific roles also play a large part in giving meaning and purpose to life, arguing that 'our work makes sense only because it serves something other than ourselves. The individual is not an end sufficient unto himself.'<sup>16</sup> One's occupational function was so important to Durkheim that he suggested occupational groups could succeed the family in its economic and moral functions, giving a sense of security, place, and belonging to each individual.<sup>17</sup> Through the organic solidarity that is built in such a way, and reflecting its developing pluralistic nature, society becomes bound together increasingly by the beliefs and values that its members share rather than a set of common behavioral patterns, and in modernity the core of those beliefs and values is individualism. To modern people, the individual is sacred and 'individualism is our public religion'.<sup>18</sup> That individualism should take on such importance to each of us is explained by Durkheim in that since there are fewer common ideas and fewer common perspectives in modern societies, the authority of such institutions as the state or religious orders weakens, forcing society to rely more on its individual members.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, although this is not explicitly stated, as the entity of society directly influences how its members think in

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in Hilbert, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

<sup>15</sup> Jones et al., *op. cit.*

<sup>16</sup> Emile Durkheim, 'The Conjugal Family', in *On Institutional Analysis*, trans., ed., and intro. by Mark Traugott (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1978 [1892]), pp. 229-239 (p. 236).

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.* The same point is repeated in Shilling and Mellor, *op. cit.*

<sup>18</sup> Steven Seidman, *Contested Knowledge*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, Ltd., 1998), p. 61.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*

Durkheim's system, it could very well cause each member to consider individualism as an important value to hold. Thus, organic solidarity is created through general norms and values stemming from individualism, such as 'justice' and 'equality', and not through society dictating specific behaviors outright.<sup>20</sup> In fact, the rights and dignity that society accords the individual comes to be, in Durkheim's thought, the most significant value consensus in advanced societies.<sup>21</sup> In his later writings, this point came to be the knot holding together public morality in the entity that is society, its moral foundation being one of interdependence and acceptance of individual differences.<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, it must be remembered that in Durkheim's view of society each individual contributes to generating the higher and all-encompassing entity of society itself, making each member a necessary part of the whole. Through his notion of *homo duplex* Durkheim proposed the method by which such a transcendent being could come into existence, via the collective consciousness generated by individuals interacting within groups. Considered from a long-term perspective, and Durkheim did take such an evolutionary approach to social questions,<sup>23</sup> how such interactions could contribute over time to the birth of a society is rather plain to see. Additionally, morality for Durkheim had a strong social character, so that an action is considered moral if and only if it is directed towards an impersonal or social end; morality begins and ends with life in the group.<sup>24</sup> This view also helps explain the terrible weight Durkheim's concept of *anomie* would place on an individual, as the disconnect an *anomically* afflicted person felt from the society all around them would be alienating and emotionally exhausting. Hilbert makes the comparison here between a person alone in a foreign country experiencing *anomie* from his or her culture shock, from not being able to relate in any way to their external reality, as opposed to the experience of that same reality that the natives of the country have,

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<sup>20</sup> Charles E. Marske, 'Durkheim's "Cult of the Individual" and the Moral Reconstitution of Society', *Sociological Theory*, 5:1 (1987), 1-14.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Seidman, *op. cit.*

<sup>24</sup> Evens, *op. cit.*

which of course would not be *anomic* in the least.<sup>25</sup> It should be noted, however, that Hilbert was writing in general terms here, as Durkheim's *anomie* could afflict a person in their own birth society; occurrences of such were considered by Durkheim to be a potential cause of suicide and he further saw *anomie* increasing with the advancing of the division of labor, a cause of some concern in his analysis of modern societies.<sup>26</sup>

#### IV. Problems with Durkheim's views

To my mind, there are a number of serious problems with Durkheim's views on society as a moral entity, and with how society comes to be structured. First and foremost, despite the goal Durkheim had of approaching the study of societies from a scientific methodology built upon a firm empirical basis,<sup>27</sup> he does not seem to have based much of his theoretical analysis on case studies of any specific and naturally occurring societies.<sup>28</sup> His analysis rather remains almost always in the abstract, and he was never able to show empirically how such institutions that he deemed necessary came into existence (other than to state that necessity explains existence, creating a classificatory scheme he could not convincingly validate).<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, although his view of society existing as a separate entity created and nourished by the contributions of each member in a collective effervescence was based on observations of collective behavior, it is difficult to see such evidence as having enough strength to warrant the conclusion drawn. Durkheim's view of society may not necessarily be *a priori* in that he does allow for it to gradually form via group interactions building up over long periods of time (think here of small bands of hunter-gatherers gradually joining (whether forced together through conquest or by consensus) to become a tribe, and then tribes of similar customs and languages gradually joining to become a nation, creating their society bit by bit as they go along), but it is still metaphysical in nature and seems to me a long way from being scientifically sound. Additionally, such an entity is given the somewhat disturbing

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<sup>25</sup> Hilbert, *op. cit.*

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Jones et al., *op. cit.*

<sup>28</sup> Marske, *op. cit.*

<sup>29</sup> Pope, *op. cit.*

power of total moral control over the individuals whose consciousnesses mystically combine to form it. That society influences the way we behave is unquestionable, but to state that ‘flouting [society’s control] is for the most part unthinkable’<sup>30</sup> is granting a far stronger capacity than I, at least, am comfortable in assigning to it.

Finally, and perhaps most crucially, Durkheim’s work almost entirely avoids discussing the conflicts that occur between groups within societies. The axis of opposition that Durkheim uses is one of social-individual, with deviations being termed ‘nonsocial’ and ‘pathological’.<sup>31</sup> Social location, differing interests, and that some members of a society may use their positions of institutional advantage to help themselves and their friends at the expense of other members of society, all get short shrift from Durkheim.<sup>32</sup> This despite increasing foci on social justice and the need to equalize the conditions of competition within society that are marks of his later works.<sup>33</sup> Durkheim may have been merely trying not to be Marx by donning such rosy-colored glasses, but the end result is that he comes across as very strongly justifying the status quo, to the point that in his view whatever social structure, arrangements, and institutions any given society has are the natural outcomes of the necessary functions they serve.<sup>34</sup> Such a stance can logically only lead to a docile acceptance of whatever one may feel to be wrong with one’s society. I cannot help but think that that would stand in strong contrast to the republican ideals Durkheim hoped to uphold,<sup>35</sup> yet that nevertheless seems to be the position he took.

## V. Conclusion

Emile Durkheim was one of the most important social thinkers of his time, and his legacy within the field of sociology is not in question. His work helped to secure that discipline as an independent area of scientific study and paved the way for generations of sociologists to come. His concerns with morality, social cohesion, and

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<sup>30</sup> Durkheim, in Hilbert, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

<sup>31</sup> Pope, *op. cit.*

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Marske, *op. cit.*

<sup>34</sup> Jones et al., *op. cit.*

<sup>35</sup> Seidman, *op. cit.*

smoothly functioning social institutions were valid and important not only for his own time and place. However, in an examination of his views on society as a moral entity, the place of individuals within society, and some of the problems associated with those views, significant flaws have been revealed in his overall theoretical system. While his analysis of the outcomes that an increasing division of labor (with the resultant shifting of societal mores towards a strongly favorable view of individualism and individual rights and dignity) has brought to modern societies may be sound, as well as his ideas of society forming out of group interactions and carrying with it a moral influence that is exerted on the members of that society, his notion of a self-existent and morally controlling entity that exists as society appears to be very much in error. Moreover, Durkheim's failure to address the very real and significant social and economic distress that certain groups within society face at the hands of other groups in society must be seen as a grave omission. The world may have much to thank Durkheim for, particularly his emphases on social morality and group cohesion, but on the whole his work did not point the way forwards for the people of his own time, and nor does it do so for ours.

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