

Durkheim, Emile. 1982[1909]. "The Contribution of Sociology to Psychology and Philosophy." Pp. 236-240 in *The Rule of Sociological Method and Selected Texts on Sociology and its Method*, edited by S. Lukes. New York: The Free Press.

1.1

This is the excerpt from Durkheim's article "Religious Sociology and the Theory of Knowledge" which was taken out when Durkheim adapted that article to serve as the introductory chapter to *The Elementary Forms*. In this section, Durkheim deals with what he deems to be various misunderstandings—some of which survive to this day—between his sociological naturalism and the disciplines of psychology and philosophy. He hopes that the explanations that he gives "will perhaps assist in dispelling some of these misapprehensions" (p. 236). He attempts to establish four main points:

1.1.1

First, he argues that his sociological naturalism does not imply that the analyst solely focus with "the external history of institutions" while ignoring the study of man's inner experience. Durkheim responds by noting that it is precisely the primary purpose of most of his empirical studies to gain a better understanding of "the innermost depths of individuals" in order to relate descriptions of the sociological institutions to the individual psychological conditions. He notes however, that a key methodological precept that separates sociological naturalism from various other types of "psychological" analysis is its reticence to begin with any type of predetermined or *a priori* conception of human nature. Instead, "man is less for us the point of departure than the point of arrival" (p. 236). It is thus inappropriate to "deduce" a sociological system from a preconceived idea as to what is considered "fundamental" in human nature. He adds in this respect that psychological theory cannot provide the building blocks for a proper psychological explanation because "the general traits of our mentality, in the ways that they are studied by the psychologist, are by hypothesis common to men of every age and land" and are thus "too abstract and indeterminate to be capable of explaining any particular social form" (p. 237). Because it is society that provides individuals with their *particular, historical*, nature, then sociology cannot use pure psychological explanations, as variation cannot be explaining by resorting to constants. In this manner "sociology...being a stranger to psychology...arrives itself at a psychology, but one far more *concrete* and *complex* than that of the pure psychologists" (p. 237, italics added).

1.1.2

Second, Durkheim attempts to answer the charge that his sociological naturalist approach is inherently hostile towards philosophical speculation in general. Durkheim notes that the separation of sociology from philosophy has been largely motivated by *methodological* reasons, which are necessary in order to transform sociology into an empirical science and thus emancipate it "from the tutelage of philosophy." Durkheim, in contrast to the precepts of logical positivism, notes that instead of being hostile to philosophy, sociological naturalism allows for metaphysical problems "even the boldest ones which have wracked philosophy" to remain in the forefront of investigation, thus preventing them from "falling into oblivion" (p. 237). Durkheim goes on to suggest that the crisis of philosophy in the wake of the rise of the natural sciences, in which philosophy is dismissed as "a form of literature," can be addressed by the philosopher becoming more acquainted with the science of sociology. The reason for this

is that sociology, being the general science of representation is also in this sense the most general of all sciences. Since modern philosophy is no longer considered a legitimate pursuit when it is undertaken in isolation from natural scientific inquiry, and since no philosopher can be expected to be familiar with the entire corpus of natural science, sociology thus provides a “shortcut” for the philosopher, since by becoming familiar with sociological inquiry, the philosopher can still “hope to perceive the unity of things,” especially if this is done by adopting a sociological naturalist standpoint.

1.1.3

Third, Durkheim notes that sociology has an even more central role to play in the future development of philosophy than has heretofore been realized. The reason for this being—following the argument to be laid out in *The Elementary Forms*—that a sociological naturalism becomes relevant in addressing what is for Durkheim *the key* philosophical problematic: the origins of the Kantian categories of the understanding. As Durkheim notes, in agreement with the classic precepts of German idealism, “...for us the world exists only in so far as it is represented to us” therefore “...the study of the subject includes as well the study of the object” (p. 238). However, with all representations are of equal stature and importance. Instead, “...among our representations there are some which play a preponderant role: these are categories. They dominate thought because they sum it up; the whole of civilization is condensed in them. If the human mind is a synthetic expression of the world, the system of categories is a synthetic expression of the human mind.” It is for this reason that “there is no object more appropriate” than the categories of the understanding for “philosophical thinking.” This is the reason why they have played such a central role in the modern philosophical tradition, beginning with Kant and continuing with the then burgeoning neo-Kantian movement. However, Durkheim notes that until then, philosophers had abrogated for themselves that task of reflecting on the “...constitution of the system of categories can the discovery of the law which makes of them a unity” (p. 239).

1.1.4

Fourth, if the origins of the categories are to be found instead in the concrete enactment of social practices in ritual occasions—the central epistemological argument of *The Elementary Forms* (Rawls 2004)—then they can no longer be treated “...according to the exclusively dialectical and ideological method” preferred by philosophers. Instead, *before* being subjected to philosophical treatment, and in order for philosophical speculation regarding the categories to not degenerate into a pure “folk belief” disconnected from its grounds in practice, “we must first know [what the categories] are, of what they are constituted, what elements enter into their make-up, what has determined the fusion of these elements into complex representations, and what has been the role of these representations in the history of our mental constitution” (p. 239). That is, a sociological naturalist understanding of the origins and functions of the categories must *precede* purely philosophical considerations as to their underlying essence. It is in this way that following the precept laid out in *The Rules* (Durkheim 1982: 35-36), the categories themselves must be treated as *things*, with the word “thing” being understood as the quality of an object such that finding out its true nature cannot be done purely by *thinking* about the object, but must instead be found by engaging in empirical analysis of the object.¹

¹ As Durkheim (1982: 36) notes “A thing is an object of knowledge which is not naturally penetrable by the understanding. It is all that which we cannot conceptualize adequately as an idea by the simple process of intellectual analysis. It is all that which the mind cannot understand by going outside itself, proceeding

Durkheim suggests that philosophers have indeed *not treated the categories as things* (except perhaps as pure “things of thought” in the Kantian sense [*gedankending*]), instead seeing them as potentially being capable of yielding the secret as to their true nature by being the object of pure cogitation: “if we believe that the individual mind itself assigns categories by an act peculiar to itself” then it would appear that in order “to know what they are and what relationships entertain with one another...it is apparently sufficient for the mind to engage in careful interrogation of itself” that is it is believed that “...the mind has only to grasp intuitively, on the condition that it verifies later, when it is applied” (p. 239).

For Durkheim, this philosophical stance is misguided. The reason for this is that rather than yielding their essential nature when subjected to purely internal reflection the categories are in fact, *opaque* to exclusively theoretical analysis. This is so because “the categories are the net result of history and collective action” whereby the individual has only “an infinitesimal” share of influence in their genesis. Thus, “if we seek to philosophize about *things* rather than words” (p. 239, italics added) we must begin “by confronting these categories as if faced with unknown realities whose nature, causes and functions have to be determined [by empirical investigation of their concrete enactment] before we seek to integrate them into a philosophical system.” In this way Durkheim while acknowledging the importance and the centrality of representations in social life, breaks with the idealist tradition in philosophy, in seeing the nature of representations as not a matter of “ideas” but as rooted in concrete social practices (Rawls 2004). Such a stance would for Durkheim result in a radical transformation of Philosophy, such that it would become a species of “sociological reflection.” In this manner, when “approached from this viewpoint, the problems with which the philosopher deals will assume more than one unexpected aspect.”

This is essentially the same argument for a sociological naturalistic epistemology made in *The Elementary Forms*, accompanied by the methodological precepts to treat “social facts as things” from the *The Rules*. The fact that Durkheim sees the argument laid out in *The Elementary Forms*, as flowing naturally from his methodology in *The Rules*, deals a grave blow to interpretative schemes such as those of Alexander (1982) who see the later religious sociology as representing a radical epistemological break with the earlier work, and thus propose a “two Durkheims” theory (Rawls 2004).

1.2 References

- Alexander, Jeffrey C. 1982. *The Antinomies of Classical Thought: Marx and Durkheim*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Durkheim, Emile. 1982. *The Rules of Sociological Method*. New York: The Free Press.
- Rawls, Anne Warfield. 2004. *Epistemology and Practice: Durkheim's the Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

progressively by way of observation and experimentation from those features which are the most external and the most immediately accessible to those which are the least visible and the most profound.”