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# A Century of Dialogue around Durkheim as a Founding Father of the Social Sciences

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## Abstract

In 2012 social scientists, philosophers and religious scientists celebrated the centennial of the publication of one of the most seminal books in the modern study of religion, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, by the then leading French sociologist Emile Durkheim's (1858–1917); in 2017, we commemorated that author's untimely death at age 59, broken by World War I in which he lost his only son and many of his beloved students. Educated, first as a Rabbinical student then as a modern philosopher, Durkheim earned his place among French thinkers primarily as a “founding father” of the social sciences. Having recently (on the basis of a life-long preoccupation) devoted a book-length study to Durkheim's religion theory, I intend in this essay to highlight major aspects of Durkheim as an exponent of French thought. I shall first briefly situate Durkheim in his time and age, with special emphasis on his political views and his ethnic identity as a secularised Jew. Then I turn to Durkheim's relation with the discipline in which he was originally trained, philosophy. I shall pay attention to the complex relationship between Durkheim and Kant and further highlight his dualism, epistemology, and views on primitive classification, as well as his puzzling realism, the place of *emergence* in his thought, and his moralist tendencies. I shall finally articulate Durkheim's transition to sociology and how he gave over the torch of emerging sociology to his main students, having thus created an adequate context in which to discuss Durkheim's final masterpiece (*Les formes*) and the still dominant theory of religion it expounds.

## Keywords

Durkheim – sociology – Kant – Judaism – epistemology

### 1 Introduction<sup>1,2,3</sup>

In 1995, African American sociologist Karen Fields published a brilliant new translation of Durkheim's masterpiece to replace Swain's 1915 translation.<sup>4</sup> She has remained throughout the following decades a vocal commentator on the French thinker's work. Much to her credit, she has been one of the few to articulate the significance of the fact that Durkheim,<sup>5</sup> from his comfortable West European White urban elite armchair position (albeit somehow at the periphery as an ethnic Jew) and in an age of colonialism and racism, saw no problem in selecting the Australian Aboriginals as the exemplary carriers of the "elementary forms of religious life" of the whole of humankind.<sup>6</sup> This is a most significant fact, in shining contrast with the tendency towards racialism and cultural condescension that was the hallmark of anthropology until the mid-twentieth century.

Not all of Fields' points are well-taken. In passing, and sweepingly equating mass Black activism in twentieth century USA with the far more limited Dreyfus affair of fin-de-siècle France, Fields depicts Durkheim as some kind of social activist of the type propagated by Marxists in the mid-twentieth century – the ones that learn theoretical insights from social contestation,

1 This essay is a revised, updated and edited version of texts published in the book mentioned in footnote (3) below.

2 Émile Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France PUF, 1912).

3 Wim M.J. van Binsbergen, *Confronting the Sacred: Durkheim Vindicated through Philosophical Analysis, Ethnography, Archaeology, Long-range Linguistics, and Comparative Mythology* (Hoofddorp: Shikanda Press, 2018); also at: [http://www.quest-journal.net/shikanda/topicalities/naar%20website%208-2018/Table\\_of\\_contents.htm](http://www.quest-journal.net/shikanda/topicalities/naar%20website%208-2018/Table_of_contents.htm). Accessed 14/8/2021.

4 Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. K. Fields (New York: Free Press, 1995).

5 Karen E. Fields, "Individuality and the Intellectual," *Theory and Society* 31, 4 (2002): 435–462.

6 Classified as "Black" in "White" Australian parlance, also by Durkheim himself in *Les formes*, 159, 201, and – citing Strehlow (Strehlow, Carl, 1907, *Die Aranda- und Loritjastämme in Zentral-Australien, I–III*, ed. von Leonhardi, Moritz, Freiherr, Frankfurt am Main: Baer) – 375, 530; See W. Lloyd Warner, *A Black Civilization: A Social Study of an Australian Tribe* (New York: Harper, 1958).

from *practice*;<sup>7</sup> although in Durkheim's case that would have been, not for the sake of inequalities based on skin pigmentation (that would have been beyond expectations), nor inequalities based on class, but those based on ethnic and religious affiliation – Jewry, in other words. Boldly chiding main-stream sociology as “glib formulas about the ‘social construction’ of ‘collective identities’” and alleging that Durkheim's own insights have nowadays been bowdlerised, Fields sweepingly signals that “we lose sight of the living subjects and active verbs by which Durkheim arrived at the hard-won discoveries of *Forms*.”<sup>8</sup>

This is a most laudable picture, well-intended and idealised, but also one we could expect from a sociologist who, after mainly-documentary research on Zambian religious movements in the 1970s, subsequently seems to have withdrawn into the tower of high social theory. The truth of *Les formes*, if any, was surely not learned by Durkheim from his (never too extensive) participation in the Dreyfus affair, but through prolonged fieldwork among the poverty-stricken, displaced and utterly rejected Australian Aboriginals, with the proverbial sweat, blood and tears that attend all good fieldwork – that which truly makes fieldwork a practice that produces truth. The amazingly non-racialist choice in favour of the Australian Blacks as Durkheim's showpiece of humanity and its religions was lofty and appeals to us Africans and African Americans, but methodologically such “ethnography by proxy” was not in the least a sufficient condition for the production of *any* truth whatsoever. Did Durkheim truly believe (as many subsequent commentators accused him of) to have captured, with the Australian Aboriginals, *the most primitive* form of religion? He was well aware that the Australians had millennia of cultural history behind them, “*comme tous les peuples connus*.”<sup>9</sup>

Durkheim believed that studying what he thought was a relatively simple form of religion, would bring out the essence of the topic most clearly – although his reasons for classifying religions into simpler and more complex varieties remain unspecified, and no doubt are indebted to the evolutionism *en vogue* in his time. Surely, studies of Australian systems of social and

7 See Pierre Philippe Rey, *Colonialisme, néo-colonialisme et transition au capitalisme* (Paris: Maspero, 1971); *Les alliances de classes* (Paris: Maspero, 1973); R. Raatgever, “Analytic Tools, Intellectual Weapons,” in Wim M.J. van Binsbergen, and Peter L. Geschiere, eds, *Old Modes of Production and Capitalist Encroachment* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1985), 290–330; Wim M.J. van Binsbergen, “Can Anthropology Become the Theory of Peripheral Class Struggle?” in Wim M.J. van Binsbergen and Gerti S.C.M. Hesseling, eds, *Aspecten van staat en maatschappij in Afrika* (Leiden: African Studies Centre, 1984), 163–180; also at: <http://www.quest-journal.net/shikanda/ethnicity/peripher.htm>. Accessed 14/8/2021.

8 Fields, “Individuality and the Intellectual,” 436.

9 Émile Poulat and Émile Durkheim, « La Conception sociale de la religion », *Archives de sociologie des religions* 15, 30 (1970): 87–90.

natural classification have revealed the extreme complexities of that continent's cultures,<sup>10</sup> which, compared with those of Ancient Greece, Ancient China, modern folk culture in Western Europe, or some African systems of thought, appear to be wonders of simplicity and transparency ... And let us not think that, even without fieldwork of his own, Durkheim stumbled ignorantly into the Australian Aboriginal world, or lazily warped the ethnographic data to fit his theories. One and a half decades of library studies and preliminary albeit published reviews and synthetic instalments on vital aspects of social organisation (e.g. clan system, incest) went into the preparation of his final book during which he devoured any scrap of relevant ethnographic information available to him in whatever international language.

## 2 Durkheim against the Background of His Time and Age

### 2.1 *Durkheim's Political Views*

Durkheim had a keen eye for the political developments in his native country, France, at the time. During his lifetime (1858–1917) that country went through a period of restored monarchy under Napoleon III, was defeated in the war with Prussia (1870), knew internal turmoil (the *Commune de Paris*) which ended in the Third Republic, and after a period of relative prosperity, bliss and colonial expansion in Africa and Asia, was drawn into World War I (1914–1918). The question of socio-political stability loomed large in Durkheim's theoretical concerns. Here he expected far more from consensual symbolic/moral integration of a nation than from forceful, possibly violent, contestation along the line of Marxism, then emerging as a major theoretical and social force throughout Europe. Durkheim is often mentioned in connection with the conservative French philosophers Louis de Bonald and Joseph de Maistre, who preceded him by a century.<sup>11</sup> They certainly helped to construct a framework within which Durkheim's thought about society and the state could take fruition, but they lacked the social and religious emphasis through which Durkheim's work gave a unique impetus to the development of the social sciences.

With decolonisation, globalisation, the transition to post-capitalism, the rise and fall of the welfare state, the outlines of North Atlantic society today differ greatly from those in Durkheim's time, but his political views continue

10 E.g. Baldwin Spencer and F.J. Gillen, *Northern Tribes of Central Australia* (London: MacMillan, 1904); Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Le totémisme aujourd'hui* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1962b); Alfred Radcliffe-Brown, "The Social Organization of Australian Tribes," *Oceania* 1 (1931): 426–456.

11 Louis G.A. de Bonald, *Oeuvres, I–VIII* (Brussels: Société Nationale, 1845); Joseph de Maistre, *Oeuvres complètes, I–XII*, 2nd ed. (Lyon: Vitte, 1891).

to reflect and inspire neo-liberal thought. In Kurt H. Wolff's important collection on Durkheim,<sup>12</sup> major contributions by Lewis A. Coser and Melvin Richter examine the political aspect of Durkheim's thought. Fittingly, an important part of Alexander & Smith's 2005 *Cambridge Companion to Durkheim* has been devoted to a section dealing with such political implications under the heading "Solidarity, difference, and morality."<sup>13</sup> Recently, James Dingley has even explored the present-day applicability of Durkheim's analyses in the field of political sociology to modern Ireland.<sup>14</sup>

The history of France in Medieval and Early Modern times was largely the history of the interaction between a secular dynastic state and aristocratic class on the one hand, and on the other hand the Christian Church and its hierarchy, (or rather, since the Reformation in Early Modern times, the Roman Catholic Church as well as Protestant denominations). As late as the seventeenth century the centralisation of the French state was to a considerable extent the work of a high-ranking Roman Catholic official, the Cardinal de Richelieu. However, during the Enlightenment agnostic, even atheist thought gained terrain, the Jesuits – for centuries procurers of the best formal education – were expelled from France in 1764, and the Revolution (1789–1795) proclaimed a secular socio-political order. These developments resulted in the fact that in 1871, and especially with the 1905 Law of the Separation of the Churches and the State, France would write *la laïcité* (i.e. "the absence of religion from public life") into its very constitution. Considering the ideological and constitutional-legal significance of the notion of *laïcité* in modern France (recently reinforced by the conflicts on the visibility of Islam in the public sphere), it stands to reason that Durkheim's more recent commentators in particular dwell repeatedly and at length on this topic.<sup>15</sup> In Durkheim's time, French society went through a phase when anticlericalism was politically correct, and the constitutional separation of church and state (i.e. *laïcité*) was self-evident, as were secular schools. On these points Durkheim was simply a child of his time and age. He championed them, and the only thing that needs surprise us is that his statements on the incomparable social merits and truthful reality of religion could attain a pathos only to be expected from a true believer. But was he?

12 Kurt H. Wolff, ed., *Essays on Sociology and Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964).

13 Jeffrey C. Alexander & Philip Smith, eds, *The Cambridge Companion to Durkheim* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

14 James Dingley, *Durkheim and National Identity in Ireland* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan., 2015).

15 Jean Baubérot, « Note sur Durkheim et la laïcité », in « Relire Durkheim », *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* 35, 69 (1990): 151–156; Pierre Hayat, « Laïcité, fait religieux et société », *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, 52, 137 (2007): 9–20.

## 2.2 *Durkheim as a Jew*

Against the background of France's insistence on *laïcité*, Durkheim occupied a somewhat precarious position as an originally Jewish leading academician (hailing from a Rabbinical family and himself a former Rabbinical student), and as author of a theory radically relegating all religious belief to a societal basis. Therefore the question as to the impact of Judaism on Durkheim's theoretical outlook deserves close attention.<sup>16</sup>

After Jews had often been the objects of contempt, exclusion, exploitation, and persecution ever since the Middle Ages, Durkheim wrote at a time of Jewish gradual emancipation in Western Europe including France, despite the notorious Dreyfus affair (1894–1906); Durkheim was among the petitioners clamouring in 1898 for retrial of the evidently innocently convicted Jewish Alsatian Captain Dreyfus. However, scarcely two decades after Durkheim's death in 1917, mounting antisemitism resulted in the Holocaust extermination of European Jewry under Hitler's *Third Reich*, an unprecedented slaughter of 6,000,000 people within a few years. In the course of the twentieth century the USA, with the largest Jewish population in the world as a result of its late nineteenth century immigration, became the global centre of academic sociological production as well as the liberator (together with the armies of the USSR) of the Nazi concentration camps with their predominantly Jewish prisoners. Any discussion of Durkheim's Jewish antecedents is necessarily to be informed by awareness of Nazi-perpetrated crimes. By the 1970s, the consolidation of the state of Israel upon time-honoured Palestinian lands, two international oil crises, and the Iranian revolution in the name of fundamentalist Islam, tilted the scales again and brought new global pretexts for antisemitism and violence. As a matter of fact, antisemitism is at present dramatically rising again in Europe, causing hundreds of French, German and Dutch intellectuals to petition their government for protective action. But on the other hand, the celebration of the seventeenth anniversary of the state of Israel in 2018 coincided with the killing of more than sixty Palestinian demonstrators, and in more recent years

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16 Substantial aspects of this problematic are addressed in Ivan Strenski's book on Durkheim and the French Jewry, and in Strenski's contribution to the Idinopoulos and Wilson's collective volume (2002). When reviewing Strenski's book, African American prolific Durkheim commentator Karen Fields observed that, whereas decades ago the master's Jewish connection could be dealt with by Talcott Parsons in a few lines and in passing, more recently a full book is not even enough. See Ivan Strenski, *Durkheim and the Jews of France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Thomas A. Idinopoulos and Brian Courtney Wilson, eds, *Reappraising Durkheim for the Study and Teaching of Religion Today* (Leiden: Brill; 2002); Talcott Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1937).

violence against Palestinians has perpetuated with massive bombing (albeit in the context of mutual exchange) and exclusion from Covid-19 vaccination.

Let us safely return to Durkheim's work. What could be so typically Jewish about his conception of the "sacred," which is at the heart of *Les formes*? The ancient Hebrew root שדק (*qds*: sacred) is attributed to Canaanitic, another Semitic language, with the semantics "to separate, to set apart." It is very isolated and does not ascend etymologically to the *phylum* (Semitic) or *macrophylum* (Afroasiatic) level, let alone to Borean – the oldest reconstructible language form, considered to have been spoken in Central to East Asia in the Upper Palaeolithic, c. twenty-five thousand years BP. In Norbert Wokart's words:

Im *Alten Testament* bezeichnet [Heiligkeit die Göttlichkeit Gottes selbst, die sich in Macht und Herrlichkeit offerbart (*Exodus* 15:11; *Isaiah* 5:16); so wird alles, was zu Gott in Beziehung steht, "heilig" genannt, die himmlischen Wesen, der Mensch, den Gott zu seinem Dienst sich weihte, und sogar die kultische Gegenstände (*Deuteronomy* 33:3; *1 Samuel* 7: 1; *1 Kings* 8:4). Durch die eschatologische Wende des *Neuen Testaments* tritt das im *Alten Testament* vorherrschende dingliche Element gegenüber dem personalen zurück, wodurch sich dann das theologische Problem stellt, wie [Heiligkeit] als Gott allein zukommender Wesensbegriff und zugleich als Begriff für die durch die Gnade gerechtfertigte Kreatur gedacht werden kann' (*1 Corinthians* 1:30).<sup>17</sup>

The above *Old Testament* verses, saturated with logocentricity like all sacred religious texts,<sup>18</sup> already unmistakably contain, in a nutshell, Durkheim's thinking on the sacred. Wokart suggests that this Israelite/Jewish conception of the sacred, although informing subsequent Christian, Scholastic and Early Modern theology and philosophy right up to Kant, was fairly distinctive in the Ancient World. Although this could be endlessly elaborated by philological and theological analysis of a much more specialist and erudite nature than

17 Norbert Wokart, "Heilig, Heiligkeit," in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, I–XIII, eds. Joachim Ritter, Karlfried Gruender, and Gottfried Gabriel (Darmstadt: WBG, 2001), cols. III, 1034; See also O.C. Whitehouse, "Holiness: Semitic," in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, I–XII, eds. James Hastings, et al., (Edinburgh, Clark/New York, Scribner, 1909–1921), VI, 751–759.

18 The word "logocentric" is used by post-structuralist philosophers, especially Jacques Derrida, to denote the text-centredness associated with the emergence, around 5 thousand years BP, and the subsequent installation at the heart of society of the package of writing, the state, organised religion and proto-science.

this essay can offer, the Jewish roots of Durkheim's sacred are now sufficiently identified. In the background we perceive another absolute distinction peculiar to Judaism: the opposition between "clean, permitted" (notably food), and its opposite. However, we must not jump to conclusions on the basis of this short and superficial exploration. In his impressive study of Germanic cultural and political history through the medium of language history, the British philologist D.H. Green claims that a "permitted/prohibited" division similar to the one in Hebrew (as belonging to the Semitic branch of the Afroasiatic linguistic macrophylum) may be detected at the root of the lexicon of "sacrifice in Germanic (as belonging to the Indoeuropean branch of the Eurasiatic linguistic macrophylum),"<sup>19</sup> even though the linguistic – and, considering recent history, emotional – affiliation of the two cases could scarcely be further apart. Also, the great Christian theologian Nathan Söderblom, in his lemma on "holiness: general and primitive" in James Hastings's authoritative *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (1909–1921), implicitly maintains that the Israelite conception is rather continuous with much more ethnographic data worldwide. This opens the possibility that, even though undeniably Jewish on the surface, Durkheim's approach may yet not be totally determined by the Jewish/Israelite heritage alone and may after all contain something of the "elementary forms of religious life." However, scholar's renderings of a religious tradition different from their own cannot be taken at face value, and an alternative reading of the same situation would be that Green's and Söderblom's scholarly interpretations were unintentionally "contaminated" by Durkheim's (whom Söderblom cites) so that the suggestion of a peculiar Jewish/Israelite perspective may stand.

In Durkheim's religion theory, a major role is further played by the concept of *effervescence*: an altered state of consciousness, where individuality is supposed to have given way to great collective excitement over the blessings that society allegedly bestows upon us. Even though Durkheim was fortunate never to have experienced a pogrom, such antisemitic mass slaughters were already going on in Eastern Europe during his lifetime and had triggered a westbound mass migration of Azkenazy Jews. And as a contemporary of Gabriel Tarde and Gustave Le Bon, he might have realised even a few decades before Nazism and World War II and half a century before René Girard, that this kind of "*gesundes Volksempfinden*" is also what one risks taking on board when putting one's faith in *effervescence*.<sup>20</sup> In Durkheim's time already, every intellectual had access

19 D.H. Green, *Language and History in the Germanic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

20 German: "healthy popular pastime/experience" – the Nazi expression for patriotic collective activities propagating Adolph Hitler's *Third Reich*.



to knowledge about the persecution of Jews in Medieval Western Europe, as well as the Inquisition and the Christian *autos-da-fe* in the New World when not only Jews but also Muslims and any non-Christians were the victims, while such staged events also emulated an astonishing level of religious mass murder in the form of human sacrifice that, as a matter of fact, had equally been endemic among Aztecs, Incas, and their regional neighbours before the arrival of the Europeans. All these were blatant acts of violence perpetrated in the name of religion. In this light we may ask the following question: Was Durkheim's surprising, dogged belief in the moral powers of religion to bring out the best in humankind perhaps primarily the expression of a Jew's desperate hope that history would not repeat itself? Or, even beyond the anxiety over collective survival which has been part of the shared history of Jewry, are we here dealing with an implicit but constant trait of Jewish diasporic culture across two millennia – an irrational optimism also found in otherwise very different Jewish thinkers such as Baruch Spinoza, Jacques Derrida, Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas,<sup>21</sup> to the effect that the human condition is fundamentally not totally hopeless, that all is well as long as existential awareness of the Name is not lost?

Fortunately, other commentators have displayed greater subtlety than Miles E. Simpson and George H. Conklin (and probably myself) in their approach to Durkheim against the background of Judaism.<sup>22</sup> Adam B. Seligman, in his otherwise extremely enthusiastic review of Donald A. Nielsen's study of Durkheim, sounds the following well-taken note of caution as regards interpreting the French philosopher's work from a Jewish angle:

Nielsen makes certain broad claims to the diverse influences on Durkheim, from Aristotle and Bacon to Spinoza and Renouvier. He also attempts to tie his understanding of society and of the individual to Durkheim's Jewish heritage, and he situates Durkheim within a line of Jewish thinkers ranging from Philo of Alexandria through Maimonides to Spinoza. This less-than-successful tack leaves the reader unconvinced. Philo, Maimonides, and Spinoza were highly complex thinkers and their relation to the Jewish tradition could not have been more diverse. While it is no doubt true that one senses a deep Jewish resonance in Durkheim's writings, especially in

21 Perhaps a Messianism gone underground, as Wexler suggests, to whom we shall turn shortly. See Philip Wexler, "A Secular Alchemy of Social Science," *Theoria* 116, 2 (2008): 1–21.

22 See Miles E. Simpson and George H. Conklin, "Socioeconomic Development, Suicide and Religion: A Test of Durkheim's Theory of Religion and Suicide," *Social Forces* 67, 4 (1989): 945–964; Alexandre Derczansky, « Note sur la judéité de Durkheim », *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* 35, 69, « Relire Durkheim », (special issue, 1990): 157–160.

his conceptions of the self and its relation to community (as in his idea of the *sacred*), much more serious work needs to be done in this direction than the casual and unsubstantiated remarks Nielsen throws out.<sup>23</sup>

An even bolder attempt to fathom the alleged unconscious depth of Durkheim's Jewishness is made by Philip Wexler when he seeks to interpret something as aetherial as the possible significance of the lack of mention of a Jewish Messianic tradition<sup>24</sup> – an omission of which both Durkheim and Freud are found guilty. Both were, of course, secular Jews with an almost unrivalled impact on the intellectual life of the twentieth century; Wexler, however, believes he can make out in Durkheim an undercurrent of Ḥasidic thought. Far-fetched though this may seem in a renegade Jew exploding transcendent religion into a societal device, Wexler may yet have a point. Is Durkheim's *effervescence*, even though mediated through layers of *logocentricity* and secularisation, perhaps ultimately a generalised expression for the well-known joyful rapture marking the ritual interaction between the Ḥasidic leader and his followers?

With the above-mentioned concept of *logocentricity* we have already hit upon what is perhaps the most important aspect of Durkheim's Jewish identity. He came from a tradition where textuality/textual study (*lernen*, according to the Yiddish expression) had for two millennia constituted the principal means of Jewish ethnic diasporic survival, and where textual contemplation in itself is considered to have socially elevating and spiritually redeeming qualities. Against such a background, it comes as no surprise that even a brilliant social analyst such as Durkheim could lose sight of the overwhelmingly non-textual aspects of social and religious life and genuinely believe that he may capture the essence of people on the other side of the globe without sharing their lives and without knowing their language of living their culture, in other words without engaging in prolonged professional fieldwork and by merely working on the basis of an (ethnographic) text.

23 Adam B. Seligman, review of Donald A. Nielsen, *Three Faces of God: Society, Religion and the Categories of Totality in the Philosophy of Emile Durkheim*, in *Contemporary Sociology* 29, 4 (2000): 679–680.

24 Wexler, "A Secular Alchemy of Social Science," *Theoria*, 1–21.

### 3 Durkheim and Philosophy

#### 3.1 Introduction

Until fairly recently (i.e. early modern times, as far as the increasingly globalised, intellectual tradition of the northern hemisphere is concerned), most of the branches of science and scholarship now distinguished in academia resorted to the heading of philosophy. Sociology and the other social sciences also went through an incubation time of a few centuries at least, when their subject matter was classified as philosophy – in fact, one of the first sociologists, Ibn Ḥaldun, writing in Tunis in the fourteenth century CE, was primarily a historian whereas the first truly modern philosopher, Immanuel Kant, taught anthropology and most of the natural sciences as a matter of course. At least two of the founding fathers of sociology, Durkheim and Marx, started out as philosophers. Durkheim's fascination for the essence of society and religion was in the first place an (empirically grounded) philosophical fascination. In this light Durkheim's explorations in the fields of epistemology and pre-modern ("primitive") forms of classification straddled the time-honoured stately garden of philosophy and the small cabbage-patch that was only beginning to be cleared for the social sciences. Probably Durkheim's greatest achievement was to articulate *the social* as an ontological level not to be entirely reduced to individual consciousness and motivation, and to be approached by a methodology, a conceptual apparatus and a theory of its own.<sup>25</sup> Besides, Nielsen's *Three Faces of God* offers a refreshingly original perspective on Durkheim, stressing the latter's Jewish roots,<sup>26</sup> presenting Durkheim not so much as a scientific sociologist but as a philosophical monist whose thought comes strikingly close to that of another renegade Jew, Spinoza, already previously mentioned.

#### 3.2 Durkheim and Kant

As a product of the French educational system Durkheim's "default" frame of reference in philosophy would be in the first place Descartes's radical

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25 Michael Halewood, *Rethinking the Social through Durkheim, Marx, Weber and Whitehead* (London: Anthem, 2013); Edward Royce, *Classical Social Theory and Modern Society* (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).

26 "The book provides a comprehensive examination of Durkheim's major and minor writings, especially his theory of religion and the categories, and compares his work with Aristotle, Bacon, Kant, and Renouvier. The author places Durkheim's thought in the context of an encounter between traditional religious ideals, especially Judaism, and modernizing scientific and philosophical currents." Nielsen, *Three Faces of God*, author's summary.

rationalism.<sup>27</sup> Yet, due to Durkheim's few years of academic studies in Germany and also to the influence of his contemporary, the neo-Kantian Charles Renouvier) Kant was the greatest philosophical influence on Durkheim.

In terms of their significance in the history of ideas, there is a striking similarity between Kant and Durkheim to be considered. In a way, Durkheim did for the social sciences what a century earlier Kant did for modern philosophy: establish the fundamental points of departure, on which there is no longer any going back – for Kant the critical realisation that all knowledge is essentially representation and therefore distortive and partial; for Durkheim the realisation that the social represents a level of existence in its own right, not to be reduced to the individual. The two positions are similar, which allows Alfred Gell to embrace in one argument both Durkheim and what he considers neo-Kantian classic American anthropology of the mid-twentieth century.<sup>28</sup> However, in another respect the two positions are fundamentally different, as we shall shortly see, and it is anachronistic to present them as equal and interchangeable, especially since Kant, implicitly and indirectly yet demonstrably, exercised a considerable influence on Durkheim. What is more, Paul K. Hirst brought to light major epistemological shortcomings in Durkheim when tracing the latter's links back to Kant.<sup>29</sup>

The Kantian connection may also be looked at from a different angle. Robert F. Company<sup>30</sup> follows Terry F. Godlove in a Kantian framework-model perspective on Durkheim (albeit through what is claimed to be a misreading) and further on to the recent philosopher Donald Davidson. But when Godlove thus stresses the extent to which religion offers a framework to interpret the world,<sup>31</sup> we should be heedful of Durkheim's admonition:

*La religion, en effet, n'est pas seulement un système d'idées, c'est avant tout un système de forces. L'homme qui vit religieusement, n'est pas seulement un homme qui se représente le monde de telle ou telle manière,*

27 Durkheim wrote an introduction to Octave Hamelin, *Le système de Descartes*, ed. L. Robin (Paris: Alcan, 1921). Hamelin is among the French philosophers claimed to have exerted considerable influence on Durkheim.

28 Alfred Gell, *Time and Social Anthropology*, Senri Ethnological Studies (Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, 1998).

29 Paul Q. Hirst, *Durkheim, Bernard and Epistemology* (New York/London: Routledge, 1975).

30 Robert F. Company, review of Terry F. Godlove, *Religion, Interpretation, and Diversity of Belief*, in *History of Religions* 31, 4 (1992): 420–423; Scott Davis, review of Godlove, *Religion, Interpretation, and Diversity of Belief*, *The Journal of Religion*, 72, 2 (1992): 299–300.

31 In African Studies this kind of perspective has been vocally articulated by Robin Horton in his arguments on conversion, triggering a protracted debate. See Robert Horton, "African conversion," *Africa* 41 (1971): 85–108.

qui sait ce que d'autres ignorent; c'est avant tout un homme qui sent en lui un pouvoir qu'il ne se connaît pas d'ordinaire, qu'il ne sent pas en lui quand il n'est pas à l'état religieux. La vie religieuse implique l'existence de forces très particulières. Je ne puis songer à les décrire ici; rappelant un mot connu,<sup>32</sup> je me contenterai d'en dire que ce sont *ces forces qui soulèvent les montagnes*. J'entends par là que, quand l'homme vit de la vie religieuse, il croit participer à une force qui le domine, mais qui, en même temps, le soutient et l'élève au-dessus de lui-même. Appuyé sur elle, il lui semble qu'il peut mieux faire face aux épreuves et aux difficultés de l'existence, qu'il peut même plier la nature à ses desseins.<sup>33</sup>

Kant and Durkheim – that would in the first place indicate a certain epistemology. “*Overlooked, misunderstood and underestimated*” – this is Anne Rawls’s assessment of Durkheim’s epistemology.<sup>34</sup> The same message dominates her splendid book-length study of *Les formes*,<sup>35</sup> which, in her opinion:

... has been consistently misunderstood. Rather than a work on primitive religion or the sociology of knowledge, Rawls asserts that Durkheim’s analysis represents an attempt to establish a unique epistemological basis for the study of sociology and moral relations.<sup>36</sup>

32 It appears as if the non-Christian Durkheim, deliberately or unaware here attributes to a common expression and appropriates what is in fact a literal quotation from the Christian *New Testament*: St Paul’s 1 *Corinthians*, 13:2. Durkheim the agnostic, atheist, or renegade Jew, gives way here to the (meta-)sociologist who believes to have discovered that religion is really the backbone of all social life, and hence worthy of our greatest respect. Incidentally, Durkheim’s characterisation of religion as lifting the believer (like one in love?) above her or himself, reminds us of Plato’s evocation of “transcendence” as the movement that, starting from immanence, lifts the soul upward and then let it return to earthly immanence again. See Plato, *Phaedrus*, 246a f., *Symposium*, 209e f.; Plato, 1975, *Plato in Twelve Volumes, I–XII*, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge MA Harvard University Press/London: Heinemann, 1975).

33 Émile Durkheim, « Le sentiment religieux à l’heure actuelle », *Archives de sociologie des religions* 14, 27 (1969): 73–77, 74; first published under the title: *Le sentiment religieux à l’heure actuelle* (Paris: Vrin, 1914); my italics – W.v. Binsbergen.

34 Anne Warfield Rawls, “Durkheim’s Epistemology,” *American Journal of Sociology* 102, 2 (1996): 430–482.

35 Anne Warfield Rawls, *Epistemology and Practice: Durkheim’s The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

36 Nicholas, J. Allen et al. claim that theirs is the first book to be devoted to *Les formes* (Nicholas, J. Allen, William S.F. Pickering, William Watts Miller, eds., *On Durkheim’s Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (New York/London: Routledge, 2012), but in the light of Rawls’s 2004 book as cited above that is simply not true.

She elucidates Durkheim's *dualism* as both "Anti-Kant and Anti-Rationalist" and dwells on Durkheim's notions of the "double man" and of "two layers of knowledge."<sup>37</sup> There is a considerable risk of misunderstanding on this point. Dualism may refer to any conceptualisation revolving on a fundamental distinction,<sup>38</sup> from the relation between Lower and Upper Egypt, to body-mind dualism (Plato, St Augustine, Descartes), the Zoroastrian and Manichaean cosmology in which good and evil are considered to be complementary, or to a political system that is *de facto* composed of two major political parties, like for decades in the USA and the UK, etc. Anyway, the meaning that applies here is clearly defined:

Durkheim felt so strongly about the centrality of his position on dualism to the argument of *The Elementary Forms* as a whole, and was so disappointed that the argument was misunderstood, that, in response to criticism of that book, he wrote an article devoted entirely to an explanation of his position on dualism. The article, "The Dualism of Human Nature and its Social Conditions" was published in 1914, in the Italian scholarly journal *Scientia* two years after the publication of *Les formes*. In the *Scientia* article Durkheim argued that there are two aspects of each human being: a pre-rational animal being and a rational social, or human, being. These two aspects of the person conflict with one another, producing the internal tension that philosophers across the ages have referred to as dualism.<sup>39</sup>

The *Scientia* article was recently separately reprinted.<sup>40</sup> Incidentally, Durkheim's central association of evil with the individual, and of good with society could well serve as an illustration of the Jewish undercurrent in Durkheim's thought: e.g. Maimonides in the *Guide for the Perplexed* expounds the same view.<sup>41</sup> Are we justified to draw up the equation that for Durkheim *social: sacred = individual: profane...?*

Taking the reader by the hand, Rawls shows rather convincingly that *Les formes* is, indeed, not in the first place a study of primitive religion or of the sociology of knowledge, but a highly original epistemology and ontology

37 See Rawls, *Epistemology and Practice*.

38 Simone Pétrement, "Dualism in Philosophy and Religion," in *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, ed. P.P. Wiener (New York: Scribner, 1973), II, 38–44.

39 Rawls, *Epistemology and Practice*, 72.

40 Émile Durkheim, "The Dualism of Human Nature and its Social Conditions," *Durkheimian Studies* 11, 1 (2005): 35–45.

41 Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed* (Skokie IL: Varda, 2002 [[c.1190 CE]]).

disguised as ethnography waiting to be decoded by readers who (like herself) are both philosophically and sociologically specialised. Thus, she explains (Rawls 2004: 2n) how Durkheim's treatment of categories – which in the light of both Aristotle and Kant is surprisingly selective and notably leaves out *classification* as an *a priori* category in its own right – can only be understood and appreciated by the trained philosopher. It is the perennial bane of the social sciences: once having hived off from their intellectual and institutional original basis (i.e. philosophy and the humanities in general) around 1900 CE, social scientists (and particularly anthropologists) have insisted on “going it alone” and have haphazardly (and usually implicitly) applied their gaudy and fragmentary package of naïve common sense to immense problems of individual and social human existence – hilariously unheeding of the work of many centuries done on these crucial topics by philosophers.<sup>42</sup>

Even more amusingly, virtually all of Rawls' innovative finds and claims are dismissed by another Durkheim scholar of uncontested stature, Warren Schmaus.<sup>43</sup> (Unfortunately, the scope of this essay will not allow me to seek to formulate a Judgment of Paris or Judgement of Solomon between these two positions). Nor is Rawls vs Schmaus the only exchange devoted to categories in Durkheim. Nielsen, who explicitly addresses Durkheim in the first place as a philosopher rather than as a theoretical sociologist, writes insightfully on Durkheim's category of *totality* as an overarching concept in which God, society and religion all seem to come together in the individual experience.

### 3.3 *Durkheim's Sociology of Knowledge*

In an impressive study, Hirst examined in detail the epistemology underlying Durkheim's *Les règles de la méthode sociologique* and pronounced it to be simply impossible,<sup>44</sup> for it was implicitly based on the Kantian division between natural sciences and cultural sciences and yet seeking a science of man predicated on the non-subjectivist natural-science model that is nonetheless to be non-positivist.<sup>45</sup> A few years before the publication of *Les formes*, Durkheim

42 Wim M.J. van Binsbergen, *Intercultural Encounters* (Berlin/Hamburg/London: LIT, 2003a); also at: [http://www.quest-journal.net/shikanda/intercultural\\_encounters/Intercultural\\_encounters\\_FINALDEFDEF9.pdf](http://www.quest-journal.net/shikanda/intercultural_encounters/Intercultural_encounters_FINALDEFDEF9.pdf), especially chapters 1 and 15, 15 f. and 459 f. Accessed 14/8/2021.

43 Warren Schmaus, “Rawls, Durkheim, and Causality,” *American Journal of Sociology* 104, 3 (1998): 872–886.

44 Émile Durkheim, *Les règles de la méthode sociologique* (Paris: Alcan, 1895).

45 Paul Q. Hirst, *Durkheim, Bernard and Epistemology* (New York/London: Routledge, 1975).

presented an argument specifically on epistemology.<sup>46</sup> For this aspect of Durkheim's work, Rawls could hardly find enough superlatives:

Durkheim's epistemology, the argument for the social origins of the categories of the understanding, is his most important and most neglected argument. This argument has been confused with his sociology of knowledge, and Durkheim's overall position has been misunderstood as a consequence. The current popularity of a 'cultural' or 'ideological' interpretation of Durkheim is as much a misunderstanding of his position as the 'functional' interpretation from which the current interpretations seek to rescue him. Durkheim articulated a sophisticated epistemology in the classical sense, a point that has been entirely missed.<sup>47</sup>

Durkheim was not the only founding fathers of the social sciences to initiate a *sociology of knowledge* and to argue for the social origin of our categories of thought.<sup>48</sup> Although ignored by Durkheim, Marx's epistemology has come to be better known.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, given its embeddedness in a materialist view of history as revolving on class struggle it is also more transparent and less steeped in societal mysticism, despite the perspective of the classless society at the end of history. The Durkheimian/Maussian adage that "the classification of things reproduces the classification of humans" lies at the root of Claude Lévi-Strauss's reviving the studies of *Le totémisme aujourd'hui* and *La pensée sauvage* in the 1960s<sup>50</sup> – thus reinforcing the influential school of structuralist anthropology, notably in France, Great Britain, Belgium and the Netherlands.<sup>51</sup>

46 Émile Durkheim, « Sociologie religieuse et théorie de la connaissance », *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 17, 6 (1909): 733–758.

47 Anne Warfield Rawls, "Durkheim's Epistemology: The Neglected Argument," *American Journal of Sociology* 102, 2 (1996): 430–482, 430.

48 In Durkheim's case together with Mauss, see Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, « De quelques formes primitives de classification », *L'Année sociologique* 6 (1901): 1; English translation *Primitive Classification*, translated with introduction by Rodney Needham (London: Cohen & West, 1963/1970).

49 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Karl Marx – Friedrich Engels, Gesamtausgabe* (MEGA), I–XXVI, (Berlin: Dietz, 1975–1983); Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Marx-Engels Collected Works, I–XLVIII* (London: Lawrence & Wishart 1975–); Peter M. Worsley, "Emile Durkheim's Theory of Knowledge," *Sociological Review* 4 (1956): 47–62; John Torrance, *Karl Marx's Theory of Ideas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press & Paris: Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 1995).

50 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *La pensée sauvage* (Paris: Plon, 1962a); Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Le totémisme aujourd'hui* (Paris: PUF, 1962b).

51 See Edmund R. Leach, ed., *The Structural Study of Myth and Totemism* (London: Tavistock, 1968); Jan Petrus Benjamin de Josselin de Jong, *Lévi-Strauss's Theory on Kinship and*



In a thoughtful overview David Bloor concedes the value of the aforementioned perspective,<sup>52</sup> but also reminds us of Charles Elmer Gehlke's and William Ray Dennes's criticisms that Durkheim's approach within the context of a Kantian conception of mind (i.e., as "the subject's system of cognitive faculties") is on this point "ambiguous, even nonsensical."<sup>53</sup> The same topic comes back, albeit succinctly, in Jeffrey C. Alexander's consideration of social logic in the light of Marx and Durkheim;<sup>54</sup> in Susan Stedman Jones's reconsideration of categories in *Les forms*,<sup>55</sup> and in Tony Edward's contribution to the volume on Durkheim's theory of religion edited by T.A. Idinopoulos and B.C. Wilson.<sup>56</sup> Rawls has not been the only one to claim that Durkheim's theory of the social background of thought was in fact, his principal and lasting contribution to sociology and philosophy.<sup>57</sup> Dominick LaCapra also devotes important pages to Durkheim's epistemology, which he considers "a corollary of his social metaphysic."<sup>58</sup> Moreover, it is his approach to rules, classifications and causes that made Durkheim one of the great inspirers of a movement prominent among sociologists in the late twentieth century and subsequently subsided, that is, ethnomethodology.<sup>59</sup>

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*Marriage* (London: Brill, 1952); Luc de Heusch, *Rois nés d'un coeur de vache* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982). A reconsideration of Durkheimian categories was also part of the 2012 centennial volume *On Durkheim's Elementary Forms*, notably in Warren Schmaus's contribution: "Durkheim on the Causes and Functions of the Categories," 176–189.

- 52 David Bloor, "Durkheim and Mauss Revisited," *Studies in the History and Philosophy of Science* 13, 4 (1982): 267–297.
- 53 Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, (1983a [1781/1787]), in *Kant, I., Werke in zehn Bänden*, vols. III & IV (1983a [1781/1787]), *Sonderausgabe*, ed. W. Weischedel (Darmstadt: WBG, 1983a [1781/1787]).
- 54 Jeffrey C. Alexander, *Theoretical Logic in Sociology, II* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982).
- 55 Susan Stedman Jones, "Durkheim, Anthropology and the Question of the Categories in *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*", in *Durkheim in Dialogue*, ed. Sondra L. Hausner (New York/Oxford: Berghahn, 2012b), pp. 143–166. Jones is also the author of an interesting general study on Durkheim: Stedman Jones, ed., *Durkheim Reconsidered* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001).
- 56 Tony Edward, "Durkheim, Kant, and the Social Construction of Categories," in Idinopoulos et al., eds., *Reappraising Durkheim*, 73–84.
- 57 See Rawls, "Durkheim's Epistemology" and *Epistemology and Practice*, o.c.
- 58 Dominick LaCapra, *Emile Durkheim* (Ithaca NY New York: Cornell University Press, 1972), 2521f.
- 59 Stephen P. Turner, *The Search for a Methodology of Social Science* (Dordrecht/Boston/Lancaster: Reidel, 1986); Richard A. Hilbert, *The Classical Roots of Ethnomethodology* (Chapel Hill/London: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

### 3.4 *On Primitive Classification*

Tracing in detail the Kantian and neo-Kantian echoes in Durkheim would be rewarding and revealing, but it would require a specialist philosophical study in its own right. However, let me mention one point that has fascinated me ever since my first encounter with Durkheim's work, in 1965. For Durkheim (and Marcel Mauss with whom he pioneered this breakthrough notion),<sup>60</sup> the fundamental categories of our thought, i.e., time, place, causation, number, logical operations (among others) are not innate in the human individual but are a product of social life – they emerge from the structuring of reality that is brought about by “the elementary forms of the religious life.” For an intellectual whose founding of the sociological discipline did not leave him the time to make, at the same time, major contributions to historiography (contrary to Max Weber),<sup>61</sup> this position on humankind's fundamental categories is absolutely seminal – even though it admittedly echoed and rephrased earlier similar pronouncements made by Marx. If our fundamental categories derive from society, then, instead of being innate, universal and immutable, they may vary from place to place, from period to period and from culture to culture. They are inevitably subject to a cultural history whose outlines and remotest periods we may not be able to capture, but whose implications we can at least attempt to think through.

The anonymous reviewer “B.” of Rodney Needham's 1963 English edition of Durkheim and Mauss' *Primitive Classification* for *The Journal of the American Oriental Society* and using Needham's own words, calls our attention to a remarkable oversight:

... it is an odd and perturbing fact that [Durkheim and Mauss' work on primitive classification] is virtually unknown to the majority of professional anthropologists ... and even the distinguished gathering of linguists, anthropologists, psychologists and philosophers who met in 1953 to discuss Whorf's hypotheses<sup>62</sup> about the relationship of linguistic

60 Durkheim and Mauss, « De quelques formes primitives de classification », 1.

61 Although history was very much implied in Durkheim's approach to society, as historical sociologist Robert N. Bellah asserts; see Bellah, “Durkheim and History,” in *Émile Durkheim*, ed. R.A. Nisbet (Englewood Cliff NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1965), 153–176.

62 More commonly known as the Whorf-Sapir Hypothesis severely criticised for its lexical determinism; see Benjamin Lee Whorf, *Collected Papers on Metalinguistics* (Washington: Foreign Service Institute, 1952); Benjamin Lee Whorf, *Language, Thought, and Reality* (New York/London: MIT Press, 1956); Harry Hoijer, “The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis,” in *Language in Culture*, ed. Harry Hoijer (University of Chicago Press, 1954), 92–105; Max Black, “Linguistic Relativity,” *Philosophical Review* 68 (1959): 228–238; Edward Sapir, *Selected Writings of Edward Sapir*, in *Language, Culture and Personality*, ed. D.G. Mandelbaum

categories to conceptions of the world nowhere mention Durkheim and Mauss's essay in the result on their proceedings.<sup>63</sup>

Archaeology, historical linguistics and molecular genetics are the three sciences that, in the course of the last few decades, have made tremendous progress in reconstructing humankind's remotest past with ever greater confidence and methodological credibility, and of late they have been joined by comparative mythology.<sup>64</sup> We may postulate that the emergence of anatomically modern humans (AMH) in Africa some two hundred thousand years ago or their subsequent spread to other continents, from circa eighty thousand years ago, already concerns a form of humanity in the full – albeit perhaps still implied and unfolding – possession of such fundamental categories akin to the ones that characterise and sustain our human existences today. The existence of hundreds of quasi-universals of culture suggests that the out-of-Africa exodus of AMH spread across the globe an initial cultural package that had been incubated on the African continent for more than one hundred thousand year,<sup>65</sup>

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(Berkeley: University of California Press, 1929/1949); Edward Sapir, *Language* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1921). I doubt whether the reviewer's indignation is not simply anachronistic. The compartmentalisation between national fields of science production bounded by national languages used to be a fact until in the second half of the twentieth century. English eclipsed all rival languages (e.g. German, French and Latin) as vehicles of international scientific communication. Moreover, when the French School of social science half a century after Durkheim spawned anthropological structuralism, this was initially so fiercely contested as to be ignored by an international crowd contemplating the claims of such American linguists as Whorf and Sapir.

63 Needham, "Introduction," *Primitive Classification*, x; quoted in review of *Primitive Classification*, in *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 83, 2 (1963): 278.

64 Michael Witzel, "Comparison and Reconstruction: Language and Mythology," *Mother Tongue*, 6 (2001): 45–62; *The Origins of the World's Mythologies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Wim M.J. van Binsbergen, "Mythological Archaeology," in *Proceedings of the Pre-symposium of RIHN and 7th ESCA Harvard-Kyoto Roundtable*, eds. Toshiki Osada, with Noriko Hase (Kyoto: RIHN, 2006), 319–349, also at [http://quest-journal.net/shikanda/ancient\\_models/kyoto\\_as\\_published\\_2006\\_EDIT2.pdf](http://quest-journal.net/shikanda/ancient_models/kyoto_as_published_2006_EDIT2.pdf). Accessed 14/8/2021; Wim M.J. van Binsbergen, "Further steps towards an aggregative diachronic approach to world mythology, starting from the African continent," paper read at the *International Conference on Comparative Mythology*, Peking University, China, at: [http://www.quest-journal.net/shikanda/ancient\\_models/Further%20steps%20def.pdf](http://www.quest-journal.net/shikanda/ancient_models/Further%20steps%20def.pdf). Accessed 14/8/2021.

Wim M.J. van Binsbergen and Eric Venbrux, eds, *New Perspectives on Myth: Proceedings of the Second Annual Conference of the International Association for Comparative Mythology* (Haarlem: Shikanda, Papers in Intercultural Philosophy/Transcontinental Comparative Studies, 5 (2010); also at [http://www.quest-journal.net/PIP/New\\_Perspectives\\_On\\_Myth\\_2010/toc\\_proceedings\\_IACM\\_2008\\_2010.htm](http://www.quest-journal.net/PIP/New_Perspectives_On_Myth_2010/toc_proceedings_IACM_2008_2010.htm). Accessed 14/8/2021.

65 Donald E. Brown, *Human Universals* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1991).

and that contained most or all of our modern fundamental categories. But what went before? How did these categories come into being? No doubt as a result of the gradual differentiation and transformation of productive, reproductive, social, communicative and mental faculties based on emergent social life in very small largely kin-based groups, since the Lower Palaeolithic.

This is a social and implicitly historical answer to the question of origin and growth inevitably raised by Kant's revolutionary position, when he claimed that these same fundamental categories were not in themselves knowledge and the fruits of knowledge formation, but categories *a priori*, for which he therefore claimed the irreducible and often misunderstood status of being "transcendental."<sup>66</sup> It is here where Kant and Durkheim converge, and where the latter begins to quicken Kant's essentially static, eternal and origin-less transcendental categories with the pulse of the earliest social life and of remotest history – with in other words "the elementary forms of the religious life." In a way, after Kant's "Copernican Revolution" in philosophy,<sup>67</sup> Durkheim's insistence on the social nature of the transcendental categories went one further step that is comparable, in importance, to the theory of relativity.<sup>68</sup> Little wonder that Rawls here pins down Durkheim's greatest intellectual contribution.

### 3.5 *Durkheim's Puzzling Realism in His Approach to Religion*

Karen Fields not only produced an excellent new translation of *Les formes* to replace Swain's of 1915,<sup>69</sup> she also enriched the international Durkheim literature with a series of penetrating studies on the topic. Significantly, she opened the long introduction to her translation with a reminder to the effect that for Durkheim, religion is not an illusion, but is founded upon and expresses

66 See Henry E. Allison, *Kant's Transcendental Idealism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973); Otto Dirk Duintjer, *De vraag naar het transcendentale* (Leiden: Universitaire Pers, 1966); J. Everet Green, *Kant's Copernican Revolution* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1997).

67 It is the leading thought of Kant's critical philosophical writings that we humans cannot know the world as it is but can only know the (inevitably distorted) representation of the world that we form in our minds. This central idea brought about the "Copernican Revolution" in Western philosophy – two and a half centuries after Copernicus did something similar for astronomy with his heliocentrism; see Nicolai Copernicus, *Nicolai Copernici Torinensis De reuolutionibus orbium coelestium, libri VI* (Norimbergae: Petrejus, 1539); Giovanni Virginio Schiaparelli, *Die Vorläufer des Copernicus im Alterthum* (Leipzig: Quandt & Händel, 1876); Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Copernican Revolution* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1957).

68 Albert Einstein, *Relativity: The Special and the General Theory* (London: Methuen, 1960 [1917]).

69 Karen E. Fields, "Translator's Introduction," in the 1995ed. of *Les Formes*.

“the real” – notably, the reality that in religion, society becomes conscious of itself and becomes the object of religious veneration.<sup>70</sup>

*Réalisme* in the Durkheimian context does *not* have the usual, non-specialist meaning “the resigned common-sense attitude of accepting things as they are,” but specifically indicates the epistemological position according to which we truly have the capability of knowing reality as it really is – either as projections of concrete models out there (Plato), or as the concrete embodiment of such models (Aristotle). Since Kant, Western philosophy has largely abandoned these complementary conceptions of reality for one of radical idealism and according to which we can only know the images of things we have formed in our mind. Again, we must expose Durkheim as ultimately un-Kantian. In the words of my Rotterdam colleague Henk Oosterling, since Kant we have been “moved by appearances.”<sup>71</sup> However, it may be more correct and do greater justice to both the fact and the incredible powers of religion to incorporate the Kantian position as only one limiting condition and in a more comprehensive ontology according to which we continuously oscillate – albeit in ways we hardly understand and cannot yet control but which is yet the essence of *being in this world* – between (a) mere appearances with all the implied ignorance (Kant), and (b) true reality with all the implied true and essential knowledge with all the power that entails. In such an ontology, the Aristotelian logical mainstay of classic scientific thought (i.e., “where is P, there is not not-P”) would again be relegated to a boundary condition, and religion would occasionally appear as a social/symbolic technology to tap the unlimited resources of the universe.

Robert Alun Jones, another important writer on Durkheimian matters believes he can lay bare the roots of this surprising “realism” on the part of Durkheim. He writes the following in his contribution to *Relire Durkheim* (a 1990 French-language collection from the Paris-based École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales):

L'Évolution pédagogique en France éclaire des aspects peu connus de la pensée Durkheim, tels que son anti-cléricalisme ou son engagement en faveur de l'école laïque. On sait que Durkheim considérait l'Église médiévale comme le dépositaire de certaines vérités fondamentales: la nécessité de former « l'homme total », l'interpénétration de la foi et de la raison dans la philosophie scolastique, et, par dessus tout, l'idée chrétienne du devoir. A l'inverse, il s'en prit à la Renaissance et aux Lumières pour leur

70 Ibid.

71 Henk A.F. Oosterling, *Door schijn bewogen* (Kampen: Kok Agora, 1996).

interprétation sociologiquement incohérente du Moyen-Age, pour leur intérêt excessif porté au goût, à l'élégance et au style, pour leur adoption des valeurs païennes, à l'origine de la corruption du sens du devoir hérité du christianisme, enfin, pour leur « mentalité mathématique » qui aboutit à un goût trop simplificateur pour les généralisations et l'abstraction. En fait, les mérites que Durkheim reconnaît au réalisme pédagogique de Comenius, Leibniz, W[u]ndt et, de façon plus générale, au protestantisme allemand, opposé au « formalisme » du Moyen- Age et de la Renaissance, constituent le contexte à partir duquel il énonça sa célèbre injonction: *considérer les faits sociaux comme des choses*. C'est de partir de là aussi qu'il en appela à un « nouveau rationalisme », plus inductif, complexe, historique, et par-dessus tout plus attentif à l'importance première des choses que ne l'était le rationalisme dépassé d'un Descartes.<sup>72</sup>

One can understand and corroborate Jones's nutshell summary of European intellectual history but, frankly, contrary to his initial assertion and brainwashed as I have been for half a century by the *emic/etic* distinction that dominates modern anthropology,<sup>73</sup> I fail to see how this compels us "to consider social facts as things" – an imperative already stated in *Les règles*.<sup>74</sup> This, in fact, is what Harold Garfinkel,<sup>75</sup> the founder of the sociological movement known as "ethnomethodology," considers to be "Durkheim's aphorism" – upon which, as Garfinkel asserts, the entire programme of ethnomethodology is based. As we have already seen, it is a position that was endorsed by one of the brightest minds in current Durkheim studies, the philosopher/sociologist Anne Warfield Rawls, who edited and introduced Garfinkel's ethnomethodological *Program* and, throughout several publications,<sup>76</sup> maintained that it is not Durkheim's theory of religion or society but his thesis of the social production of what since Kant would be called *a priori* categories, that constitutes Durkheim's main claim to fame – had Marx not made a similar point half a century earlier.

In relation to the conceptualisation of *space*, Godlove takes up related issues and traces Durkheim's indebtedness to Kant through the nineteenth-century

72 Robert Alun Jones, "Religion and Realism," *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* 35, 69, special issue: « Relire Durkheim » (1990): 69–89.

73 See Thomas N. Headland, Kevin L. Pike, and Marvin Harris, eds, *Emics and Etics* (Newbury Park: Sage, 1990); van Binsbergen, *Intercultural Encounters*, 22 f.

74 Durkheim, *Les règles de la méthode sociologique*.

75 Harold Garfinkel, ed. with an introduction by Anne Warfield Rawls, *Ethnomethodology's Program* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002).

76 Anne Warfield Rawls, "Durkheim and Pragmatism," *Sociological Theory* 15, 1 (1997): 5–29.

neo-Kantians Renouvier and Octave Hamelin and,<sup>77</sup> moreover, asserts the complementarity rather than mutual exclusiveness of Kant and Durkheim. But other authors have been dismissive of Durkheim's epistemology from the beginning, and this may explain how Rawls could perceive a general lack of appreciation of Durkheim's merits on this point.

When insightfully discussing Durkheim's implicit *emergentism*,<sup>78</sup> Keith R. Sawyer takes the opportunity of pointing out how precisely the above "aphorism" has earned Durkheim the most severe criticism from the part of modern sociologists such as Anthony Giddens, Steven Lukes and Jeffrey C. Alexander.<sup>79</sup> Already much earlier Alexander A. Goldenweiser, a vocal American anthropological author on totemism at the time of the publication of *Les formes*, phrased his misgivings in the following terms:

*The author's attempt to derive all mental categories from specific phases of social life which have become conceptualized, is so obviously artificial and one-sided that one finds it hard to take his view seriously, but the self-consistency of the argument and, in part, its brilliancy compel one to do so. In criticism we must repeat ...: in so far as Durkheim's socially determined categories presuppose a complex and definite social system, his explanatory attempts will fail, wherever such a system is not available. The Eskimo, for example, have no clans nor phratries nor a totemic cosmogony (for they have no totems);<sup>[80]</sup> how then did their mental categories originate, or is the concept of classification foreign to the Eskimo mind? Obviously, there must be other sources in experience or the psychological constitution of man which may engender mental categories; and, if that is so, we may no longer derive such categories from the social setting, even when the necessary complexity and definiteness are at hand. In this connection it is well to remember that the origin of mental categories is an eternally recurring event; categories come into being within the mental world of every single individual. We may thus observe that the categories of space, time, force, causality, arise in the mind of*

77 Terry F. Godlove Jr., "Is 'space' a concept?," *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 32, 4 (1996): 441–455.

78 R. Keith Sawyer, "Durkheim's Dilemma," *Sociological Theory*, 20 (2002): 2: 227–247.

79 See Anthony Giddens, *Capitalism and Modern Social Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Lukes and Andrew Scull, *Durkheim and the Law* (Oxford: Robertson, 1983); Jeffrey C. Alexander, *Theoretical Logic in Sociology, II* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982); Jeffrey C. Alexander and Philip Smith, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Durkheim* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

80 For empirical evidence to the contrary, see van Binsbergen, *Confronting the Sacred*, 64n.f.

the child far ahead of any possible influence from their adult surroundings by way of conscious or even deliberate suggestion. To be sure, these categories are, in the mind of the child, not strictly conceptualized nor even fully within the light of consciousness, but their presence is only too apparent: the individual experience of the child rapidly supplements the congenital predisposition of the mind.<sup>81</sup>

Goldenweiser here takes an advance on the future outcome of one of the most complex research programmes in developmental psychology. Half a century later, and clearly with Kant's list of *a priori* categories in mind, Jean Piaget gained world fame with a long series of studies on this point. Their innateness (as suggested by Goldenweiser) is again a moot point – championed by great minds such as Noam Chomsky or Carl Gustav Jung, but also contested by many anthropologists who prefer to restrict the acquisition of culture to a sensorily-supported social communication process. Even so, it looks as if Goldenweiser, when stressing such learning processes in the child, is missing Durkheim's point. The latter's claims as to the social origin of the categories was not just about intergenerational transmission, in other words about the way they are learned by every specific child, but about their very genesis. Without society they would not exist – as if Durkheim was in fact speaking of *culture*, a concept scarcely elaborated in his time but that was to become *the* pivotal, theoretical concept in the twentieth century. Remains the problem of *émergence* – what then produced society in the first place, for it to be able to generate the categories?

What looms behind this entire problematic is the question of *émergence*: if we need a society in order to be venerated in religion; and in order to produce categories of thought and classification, what then produces society in the first place, and how is the threshold of emergence crossed, which leads from incipient, inchoate social relations to the kind of enduring structure that might be able to produce the many effects and characteristics Durkheim attributes to society? Few Durkheim commentators have given any thought to answer this crucial question. Jean-Claude Filloux speaks of a reconciliation of individualism and socialism and of “the emergence of a society founded on the religion of the individual,”<sup>82</sup> but from a Durkheimian perspective the latter would be

81 Alexander A. Goldenweiser, review of *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse. Le système totémique en Australie* by Émile Durkheim, *American Anthropologist*, New Series 17, 4 (1915): 733; my italics.

82 Jean-Claude Filloux, « Personne et sacré chez Durkheim », *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, special issue: « Relire Durkheim », 35, 69 (1990): 41–53.



merely begging the question. Far more to the point is Sawyer when he points out that “[t]he concept of emergence is a central thread uniting Durkheim’s theoretical and empirical work, yet this aspect of Durkheim’s work has been neglected,”<sup>83</sup> and continues to discuss the links between Durkheim’s implicit emergentism and theories of emergence developed by contemporary philosophers of mind:

In recent decades, emergence has been extensively discussed by philosophers of mind, psychological theorists, and cognitive scientists because these fields are increasingly threatened by the potential of reduction to neuroscience. The threat – analogous to the threats of methodological individualism<sup>[84]</sup> facing sociology – is that these disciplines will be reduced to explanations and analyses of neurons and their interactions. These conceptions of emergence have been inspired by computational models of emergence processes, including connectionism (Clark 1997), artificial life (Brooks & Maes 1994; Langton 1994), and multi-agent models of social systems (Gilbert & Conte 1995; Prietula *et al.* 1998).<sup>[85]</sup> In this recent formulation, *emergent systems* are complex dynamical systems that display global behavior that cannot be predicted from a full and complete description of the component units of the system.<sup>86</sup>

Durkheim implicitly breaks with Kant by insisting upon the social reality that he alleges to lie behind the symbols and on the knowability of that reality, instead of resigning himself, with Kant, to the mere images we have in our human minds. What Durkheim gains is thus to begin to be able to explain

83 Sawyer, “Dilemma.”

84 *Methodological individualism* is the theoretical position which, even given the scientific and philosophical discovery around 1900 of *the social* as a category *sui generis*, continues to consider the individual-centred perspective (the main current of Western thought ever since Graeco-Roman Antiquity), as the only valid explicatory paradigm in the human sciences. See Steven Lukes, “Methodological Individualism Reconsidered,” in *Sociological Theory and Philosophical Analysis*, eds. D. Emmet and A. MacIntyre (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 76–88; Joseph Agassi, “Methodological Individualism,” *British Journal of Sociology* 11 (1960): 244–270; Christopher Cramer, “Homo Economicus Goes to War,” *World Development* 30, 11 (2002): 1845–1864.

85 Andy Clark, *Being There* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1997); Rodney A. Brooks and Pattie Maes, eds, *Artificial Life IV* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1994); Christopher G. Langton, ed., *Artificial Life III: Proceedings Volume XVII* (Reading MA: Addison-Wesley, 1994); Nigel Gilbert and Rosaria Conte, eds, *Artificial Societies* (London: UCL Press, 1995); Michael Prietula, Kathleen Carley and Les Gasser, eds, *Simulating Organizations* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1998).

86 Sawyer, “Dilemma.”, p. 228.

the scope and force of religion; what he loses is all anchorage in the single most constructive insight in modern philosophy (i.e., Kant's "Copernican Revolution"). In the process Durkheim particularly forfeits a credible answer to those who remind us on quite substantial grounds that, after all, the beings venerated in religious ritual do not exist. In other words, they are not in any way real to begin with (although they may be virtual in the sense of having real effects).<sup>87</sup>

Impossible as Durkheim's epistemology may seem according to Hirst, it yet captures successfully one side of the religious medal: the capability of generating realities.

It fails, however, to capture the other side and the mechanism behind it: the constant oscillation (which I believe is nothing less than the ontological essence of reality) between the real and the unreal, and between (a) symbols that refer to their referents and (b) symbols that no longer do so – these, situationally, take on a life of their own.

As I argue in detail in my recent book *Sangoma Science*,<sup>88</sup> we have in the studies of religion proceeded beyond the limits of applicability of standard, Aristotelian, binary logic – the one governed by the adage "If P, then not (not P)." Although exposed to the Kantian and Hegelian traditions, Durkheim remained too much of a rationalistic Cartesian to dare admitting that in this oscillation lies the true "elementary form of religious life" more than in any of the institutions and concepts he studied in such detail in *Les formes*.<sup>89</sup>

### 3.6 *Durkheim the Moralist*

The common insistence on Durkheim's theoretical-sociological side and his almost total appropriation by academic sociology (at the expense of philosophy) in the course of the twentieth century, cannot capture the thrust of his thought in its entirety. He wrote not from a detached scientific interest but as a deeply concerned member of western European society around 1900 – a time which he perceived to be one of anomie and of secularisation (of which Durkheim himself was a telling example), even though his attention was

87 I have returned to this problematic succinctly in Chapter 10 of *Confronting the Sacred* and extensively in my most recent book: Wim M.J. van Binsbergen, *Sangoma Science* (Hoofddorp: Shikanda, PIP/TraCS, 2021); also at: [http://www.quest-journal.net/shikanda/topicalities/Sangoma\\_Science\\_version\\_Juli\\_2021.pdf](http://www.quest-journal.net/shikanda/topicalities/Sangoma_Science_version_Juli_2021.pdf). Accessed xx/xx/xxxx.

88 Ibid.

89 So was Montesquieu, on whom Durkheim wrote his Latin-language doctoral dissertation. See P. Lassman, review of *E. Durkheim, Montesquieu: Quid Secundatus Politicae Scientiae Instituendae Contulerit*, ed., with a commentary W. Watts Miller, trans. W. Watts Miller and Emma Griffiths (Oxford: Durkheim Press, 1997) and W. Watts Miller, *Durkheim, Morals and Modernity* (London: UCL Press, 1996) in *History of the Human Sciences*, 11, 3 (1998): 137–140.

admittedly not focused on social inequality, class conflict, the colonial subjugation of large parts of the globe, nor – except towards the end of his life when the issue of peace entered into his writing – on the mounting international tensions that led to World War I (a war that not only saw many of his students killed but also his own son, an event from which Durkheim as a father never recovered and that sent him to an early grave, aged 59).

The way Durkheim writes about religion is puzzling: he is not preaching any particular creed and remains himself a non-believer in any form of organised religion or any deity; yet he passionately impersonates the believer and the strength the latter derives from religion and *from society* via religion (as Durkheim thought). This lends to much of his writing a moral dimension, which we cannot sweep under the carpet simply because the present-day academic sociologist no longer sees her or himself as a moralist, a prophet and a healer. François-André Isambert is one of the commentators to pick up this vital dimension of Durkheim's work; Stephen Turner devoted an entire book to this issue.<sup>90</sup> The moral aspects of Durkheim's view on society and religion have been clearly discussed by Robert N. Bellah.<sup>91</sup> Confronted with the serious allegation of having misrepresented Durkheim,<sup>92</sup> Talcott Parsons (for decades one of the leading American sociologists and Durkheim's most influential commentator) adduces Bellah as sharing his opinion and responds to his own critics Whitney Pope and Abner Cohen by making only a slight correction to his earlier rendering of Durkheim:<sup>93</sup>

At this point I wish to modify the position I took in *The Structure of Social Action* (1937).<sup>[94]</sup> In dealing with the concept of constraint, I said that Durkheim set forth three principal conceptions – constraint by the facts of the environment, constraint by sanctions used in enforcing norms, and constraint by voluntary consent to the binding character of internalized norms, *i.e.*, by moral authority. My change of view has been that, though the last concept came to be central in Durkheim's later work, he by no means abandoned the others, particularly the first. Durkheim's

90 Stephen P. Turner, *Emile Durkheim* (New York/London: Routledge, 1993).

91 Norbert N. Bellah, « Morale, religion et société dans l'œuvre durkheimienne », *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, special issue « Relire Durkheim » 35, 69 (1973): 9–25.

92 Whitney Pope, « Classic on Classic: Parsons' Interpretation of Durkheim, » *American Sociological Review* 38 (1973): 399–415: « Parsons[']s attempts to document Durkheim's shift from positivism to the voluntaristic theory of action and to idealism. Neither attempt is successful. » Pope, *Classic on Classic*, 399.

93 Pope, *Classic on Classic*; Abner Cohen, *Two-Dimensional Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974).

94 Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action*.

view of the social environment<sup>[95]</sup> can be interpreted, as I was not aware at the time of writing *The Structure of Social Action* (1937), as the internal environment of the action system, in a sense parallel to Claude Bernard's concept ...<sup>[96]</sup> of the internal environment of a complex organism. In my view Durkheim never abandoned this conception of social facts, and it was correct for him to maintain the position he did.<sup>[97]</sup>

### 3.7 *Durkheim and Other Philosophers*

In addition to the philosophical strands from Descartes and Kant as highlighted above, many commentators have stressed how Durkheim built on Auguste Comte's positive philosophy as a religion of humanity.<sup>98</sup> Still, while greatly respecting Comte as a proto-sociologist, Durkheim seldom engaged in debate with Comte's work. Much attention has been paid over the decades to Durkheim's relationship with Pragmatism. Several studies have elaborated this point.<sup>99</sup> Here, an obvious role should have been played by Armand Cuvillier's<sup>100</sup> reconstruction of Durkheim's own lecture course "*Pragmatisme et sociologie*" given at the Sorbonne in 1913–1914. But, then, we already know about Rawls's complaint in regard to Durkheim's epistemology: "overlooked," "misunderstood" and "underestimated."<sup>101</sup>

If Durkheim does not personally and explicitly engage in debate with Marx despite their converging view on selected points (notably the social origin

95 Talcott Parsons, "Durkheim on Religion Revisited," in *Beyond the Classics?*, eds. Charles Y. Glock and Philip E. Hammond (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 156–180.

96 A concept of Claude Bernard in *Introduction à l'étude de la médecine expérimentale* (Paris: Baillière, 1865).

97 Talcott Parsons, "Comment on 'Parsons' Interpretation of Durkheim' and on 'Moral Freedom Through Understanding in Durkheim,'" *American Sociological Review*, 40, 1 (1975): 106–111.

98 Auguste Comte, *Cours de philosophie positive, I–III* (Paris: Bachelier, 1830–1842).

99 Gerard Deledalle, « Durkheim et Dewey », *Les études philosophiques*, 14, 4 (1959): 493–498; "French Sociology and American Pragmatism," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, 38, ½ (2002): 7–11; Dennis Rusche and Rick Tilman, "The Aims of Knowledge," *The European Legacy: Toward New Paradigms*, 12, 6 (2007): 695–713.

100 Émile Durkheim, *Pragmatisme et sociologie: Cours inédit prononcé à la Sorbonne en 1913–1914 et restitué par Armand Cuvillier d'après des notes d'étudiants* (Paris: Vrin, 1955); D., H. [only initials given], review of *Pragmatisme et sociologie* in *Archives de Sociologie des Religions* 2, 3 (1957): 175–176; K.H. Wolff, review of *Pragmatisme et Sociologie* in *American Journal of Sociology* 62, 1 (1956): 100–101.

101 Anne Warfield Rawls, "Durkheim and Pragmatism," *Sociological Theory* 15, 1 (1997): 5–29; *Epistemology and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

of the categories),<sup>102</sup> some Marxists and Durkheimians have done just that.<sup>103</sup> Douglas F. Challenger,<sup>104</sup> writing when Marxism had already gone out of fashion once more in the international social sciences,<sup>105</sup> made the remarkable point that the real challenge for social theoreticians is to formulate an alternative to the Marxist paradigm. Subsequently, Challenger set out to demonstrate that viewed “through the lens of Aristotle,”<sup>106</sup> Durkheim does precisely that. However, as reviewer Dawne McCance cannot but point out,<sup>107</sup> Challenger’s

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- 102 However, see Durkheim’s review of Labriola’s Marxist exposé: “Durkheim, Émile,” review of J.R. Labriola, *Essai sur la conception matérialiste de l’histoire*, in *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l’Étranger* 44 (1897b): 645–651. Durkheim also wrote a book on socialism whose 1962 English translation was edited by the prominent American sociologist Alvin W. Gouldner, while the original French introduction was by Mauss: Émile Durkheim, *Le socialisme* (Paris: Alcan, 1896).
- 103 See Tom Bottomore, “A Marxist Consideration of Durkheim,” *Social Forces* 59, 4 (1981): 902–917; Armand Cuvillier, « Durkheim et Marx », *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie* 4 (1948): 75–97; Jean-Claude Filloux, *Durkheim et le socialisme* (Genève/Paris: Droz, 1977); Timo Järviokski “The Relation of Nature and Society in Marx and Durkheim,” *Acta Sociologica*, 39, 1 (1996): 73–86; Anthony Mansueto, “Religion, Solidarity and Class Struggle,” *Social Compass* 35, 2–3 (1988): 261–277.
- 104 Douglas F. Challenger, *Durkheim through the Lens of Aristotle* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995).
- 105 Which says nothing about the persisting value of that theoretical perspective, nor about my own lasting if partial and situational commitment to it; see Wim M.J. van Binsbergen, *Religious Change in Zambia* (London/Boston: Kegan Paul International, 1981); also at Google Books; Wim M.J. van Binsbergen, “Production, Class Formation, and the Penetration of Capitalism in the Kaoma Rural District, Zambia, 1800–1978,” in Cristiana Panella, ed., *Lives in Motion, Indeed* (Tervuren: Royal Museum for Central Africa, 2012a), 223–272; also at: [http://www.quest-journal.net/shikanda/topicalities/class\\_formation.pdf](http://www.quest-journal.net/shikanda/topicalities/class_formation.pdf). Accessed 14/8/2021; also see Wim M.J. van Binsbergen and Peter L. Geschiere, eds, *Old Modes of Production and Capitalist Encroachment* (London/Boston: Kegan Paul International, 1985); also at Google Books.
- 106 The metaphor is amusingly anachronistic: spectacles only came into use in the high Middle Ages, 1500 years after Aristotle; centuries after Aristotle, the Emperor Nero, in the first century CE, was reputed to peep through a *beryl*, i.e.  $\text{Be}_3\text{Al}_2(\text{SiO}_3)_6$  crystal, and this provided the etymon for *Brille/bril*, “spectacles,” in German, Dutch and so on. As I have extensively argued from an African and intercultural-philosophical perspective, it often turns out to be condescending and implicitly hegemonic to try and view the modern world “through the lens of Aristotle” – which for example specialists in rhetoric as a branch of philosophy have tried to do for South Africa’s transformation towards majority rule in the 1990s. See Philippe-Joseph Salazar, Sanya Osha, and Wim M.J. van Binsbergen, eds, *Truth in Politics, Rhetorical Approaches to Democratic Deliberation in Africa and beyond*, special issue of *Quest: An African Journal of Philosophy* 16 (2002): 1–2; also at: <http://www.quest-journal.net/2002.htm>. Accessed 14/8/2021. van Binsbergen, “Postscript: Aristotle in Africa,” *Truth in Politics*, 238–272.
- 107 Dawne McCance, review of Challenger, *Durkheim through the Lens of Aristotle*, *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 28, 4 (1995): 786–787; Steven Stack, review of Challenger, *Durkheim through the Lens of Aristotle*, *Social Forces* 75:1 (1996), 349–350.

subsequent treatment of major postmodern philosophers leaves too much to be desired to buy his surprising Aristotelian solution lock, stock and barrel.<sup>108</sup>

Durkheim was not the only French philosopher with a passion for ethnographic literature and for problems of intercultural comparison and cultural origins. Anthropologists were early alerted to the work of Durkheim's colleague Lucien Lévy-Bruhl through the initially enthusiastic reviews of his work by E.E. Evans-Pritchard, a colonial anthropologist stationed in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. Evans-Pritchard would soon, through his writings on the Nuer, the Shilluk and the Azande with special emphasis on their religion, magic, divination and kingship, become one of the most prominent British anthropologists. One of Lévy-Bruhl's principal works was published in the context of Durkheim's seminal journal *L'Année sociologique*,<sup>109</sup> the backbone of the latter's sociological school. Durkheim used one and the same article to present a summary of both Lévy-Bruhl's book and of his own *Les formes*,<sup>110</sup> stressing the continuity between the two approaches. The closeness between Durkheim and Lévy-Bruhl may surprise social scientists today. For in today's discourse Lévy-Bruhl (with such book titles as *Les fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures* (translated as *How Natives Think* in the English edition) and *La mentalité primitive* (*Primitive Mentality*)),<sup>111</sup> became emblematic of a particular, discarded, apparently racist construction of the colonial subject as inferior to the western European colonisers.<sup>112</sup> By contrast, Durkheim, although inviting likewise our criticism because of his systematic avoidance of issues of social inequality, exploitation, class struggle and violence (hence dissimulating the very reasons why today we distance ourselves from the products of colonial science), largely managed to escape Lévy-Bruhl's stigmatisation. This was not in the first place because of the wider scope and relevance of Durkheim's thought, but more specifically because the latter, from today's perspective that inevitably sees such a thought as anachronistic because of political correctness, made the right choice in *Les Formes* by holding Australian Aboriginals, hitherto classified as "Blacks" and among the most wretched of marginalised peoples around 1900, as exemplary of the whole of humankind and its religion.

108 Who, obviously, would be much more likely candidates than Aristotle for offering a viable sociological interpretation of our present, postmodern world; see "Postscript."

109 Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *Les fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures* (Paris: PUF, 1951 [1910]).

110 Émile Durkheim, review/announcement of *Les Fonctions* and *Les Formes*, in *L'Année sociologique*, 12 (1909–1912): 33–37; Dominique Merlié, and Émile Durkheim, « Lévy-Bruhl et Durkheim », *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'Étranger*, 179, 4 (1989): 493–514.

111 Durkheim, *Les Fonctions*.

112 The present limited scope cannot accommodate the question, very hot in the 1960s–1980s, as to the extent to which pre-1960 anthropology may be considered the handmaiden of colonialism; see van Binsbergen *Confronting the Sacred*, 70n, with references.

### 3.8 *From Philosophy to Sociology*

Ironically, Durkheim succeeded in creating a viable sociology from his philosophical background precisely by detaching it from philosophy – leaving to subsequent generations the task of creating a viable intercultural philosophy, i.e., one cut to the measure of decolonisation and globalisation, (brought about by a whole range of factors and processes, including the capitalist mode of production, world religions, formal education, modern science, global migration, the emerging global politics of knowledge, digitalised information and communication on a global scale, and so on). When I took over the Rotterdam Chair of Foundations of Intercultural Philosophy in 1998, well over a century after Durkheim had acceded to the first French chair in sociology at the University of Bordeaux in 1887–1888, I came to realise that painfully little progress on this philosophical side had been made in the meantime.<sup>113</sup> The social sciences had effectively been established and had reached their highest culmination around the middle of the twentieth century, but by the end of the century the position of *academia* within postmodern, post-democratic society had already become very weak, and the increasingly volatile, uncontrollable forces of corporate capital in collusion with military and post-imperialist international ambitions had largely deprived academic intellectual production of all hope at relevant, responsible and independent societal impact. What is more, within academia the self-assertive vocalicity of the social sciences of the 1960–1980s had given way to a guilty aloofness and reticence, as if convinced of their own irrelevance. One of the symptoms of this process was that my new philosophical colleagues at Rotterdam – and, with them, postmodernists throughout the present-day world at large – could afford with impunity to totally ignore or ridicule the empirical basis and methods of the variety of social-science-based intercultural philosophy I had come to represent in their midst. With considerable exaggeration, one might say<sup>114</sup> that postmodernism (including the Foucaultian and Deleuzian encroachments and attempts to reinvent the social sciences on a personal basis without being answerable to empirical data and intersubjective method), had exploded the social sciences that Durkheim had created at the cost of excessively hard work and an early death.

Even so, the twentieth century was the century of the social sciences. The latter had supplanted the individual-centred image of humanity that – I repeat – had dominated Western thought, art and the *belles lettres* since Graeco-Roman Antiquity, (perhaps with an interlude during Medieval collectivism under the

113 See van Binsbergen, *Intercultural Encounters and Vicarious Reflections* (Haarlem: PIP-TraCS, 2015); also at: <http://www.quest-journal.net/shikanda/topicalities/vicarious/vicariou.htm>. Accessed 14/8/2021.

114 See van Binsbergen, *Vicarious Reflections*, 37f.

aegis of the Christian Church). That the social had established itself as a category *sui generis* testified to the culminating success of Durkheim's life's project.

Such a triumph (although already wearing out towards year 2000), could not have been the work of just one man. Admittedly, Durkheim was not the only founding father of the social sciences – we must not overlook Marx, Georg Simmel, Ferdinand Tönnies, Weber, Vilfredo Pareto, Ernst P.W. Troeltsch, among others. Moreover, Durkheim had shown the intuition of the true social scientist by realising that scientific truth is a collective product and had constantly steered towards the institutionalisation of his insights in the form of an authoritative journal and institutional basis, *L'Année sociologique*. In fact, the maturation and dissemination of Durkheim's social thought was largely in the hands of his three closest students, Mauss, Robert Hertz (even though he was already killed in 1915 in World War I), and Henri Hubert. These were loyal but independent minds, whose contributions also consisted in correcting elements of one-sidedness in Durkheim's own work. Hertz's greatest merit has perhaps been to stress the negative aspects of the "sacred" which, in *Les formes*, appears in exaggerated glory and splendour – an antidote that equally renders Durkheim's veneration of society somewhat more palatable and realistic, and less corporatist-inclined as much as less potentially fascistic. Further, Stefano Martelli highlights a disagreement between Durkheim and Mauss concerning the nature of the sacred.<sup>115</sup> The differences, in certain respects fundamental, between Durkheim and his closest co-workers have recently been articulated once more around the concepts of "soul" and "spirit," with an application to Vietnamese commemorations of the war dead.<sup>116</sup>

Outside France, Durkheim's impact upon twentieth-century sociology has been rather more limited – especially outside the restricted field of the sociology of religion – than that of Weber, and even more so after Hans H. Gerth, C. Wright Mills and Karl Mannheim made Weber's main books originally written in German available in English translations. Weber's sociological methodology differed from Durkheim's in stressing the subjective, interpretive, and by implication individual-centred, *complementary* dimension of social life and of social research – against Durkheim's radical sociologicistic insistence on his claim that "social facts are things."<sup>117</sup> If social facts were indeed things, they ought to be capable of existing without the necessary intervention of the human subject's conscious mind, perceptions and motivations – the latter

115 Stefano Martelli, « Mauss et Durkheim », *Social Compass* 40. 3 (1993): 370–387.

116 Heonik Kwon, "Spirits in the work of Durkheim, Hertz and Mauss," *Journal of Classical Sociology* 14, 1 (2014): 122–131.

117 Durkheim, *Les règles de la méthode sociologique*.



being the very object of Weber's *Verstehende* sociology – which was more in continuity with the individual-centred orientation of Western thought since Antiquity.<sup>118</sup> Weber's philosophical roots were not so much directly Kantian or Cartesian, but had primarily been pioneered by Wilhelm Dilthey in a bid to establish the Humanities on a more secure epistemological footing by the late nineteenth century.

Durkheim's radical positioning elicited much criticism even as soon as within a year.<sup>119</sup> However, true to life and fortunately for the 20th-c. CE development of the social sciences, Durkheim's application of his own programmatic statements has not been without contradictions and inconsistencies. Thus, in *Les formes* for instance there is a considerable appeal to the conscious perceptions and motivations of the Australian carriers of the alleged "elementary forms of religious life." We should therefore not be too surprised to see Durkheim listed even among the precursors of interpretative sociology.<sup>120</sup>

#### 4 Concluding Words

We have discussed in this essay some of the philosophical strands that informed Durkheim as an exponent of French thought and that enabled him to become one of a handful of founding fathers of the social sciences. We have highlighted more than in most current discussions of Durkheim, his Jewish background and his firm rootedness in the main European philosophical tradition from Descartes to Kant. We touched on his sociology of knowledge, his emphasis on classification, his puzzling realism in regard to religion, and his moralism. Steering away from his original field of academic philosophy so as to establish the new field of the social sciences, Durkheim did not work out these orientations into consistent philosophical discourse; yet they have continued to inform French thought and the social sciences internationally to this very day.

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118 See Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft I–III* (Tübingen: Mohr (Siebeck), 1985 [1919]); Theodore Abel, "The operation called 'Verstehen,'" *American Journal of Sociology* 54, 3 (1948): 211–248, is a much cited but essentially mistaken discussion rejecting *Verstehen* as a sociological method; see the Diltheyan dichotomy between natural and social sciences on which it is based: Wilhelm Dilthey, *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften* (Leipzig: Duncker & Humboldt, 1883); "The Understanding of Other Persons and Their Life-Expressions," in *Theories of History*, Patrick Gardiner, ed., (New York/Glencoe IL: Free Press, 1959), 213–226; *Meaning in History* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1961).

119 Gustavo Tosti, "The Delusions of Durkheim's Sociological Objectivism," *American Journal of Sociology* 4, 2 (1898): 171–177.

120 Jules J. Wanderer, *Interpretive Origins of Classical Sociology* (Lewinston: Mellen, 2005).

## Biography

Wim van Binsbergen (1947–) read third-world sociology, anthropology and linguistics at the University of Amsterdam. He taught theoretical sociology at the University of Zambia, prior to establishing himself as a leading Africanist and anthropologist of religion. In mid-career he acceded to the Chair of Foundations of Intercultural Philosophy, Erasmus University Rotterdam. He is the author of numerous articles and books in a range of disciplines from archaeology and linguistics to ethnography, comparative mythology, and philosophy. Most of his publications are freely accessible at: <http://quest-journal.net/shikanda>.