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## Moral Solidarity and the New Social Science

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### Durkheim's Study of the Individual in Society and Society in the Individual

**D**urkheim wrote on a wide range of topics, from the division of labor to suicide, from treatises on method to studies of religion, from the sociology of knowledge to marriage and the family. Throughout the length and breadth of that work, two major tasks are taken up over and over again: (1) *the identification, establishing, and maintenance of moral institutions that could produce solidarity and regulate individual appetites in modernity*; and (2) *the elaboration of a unified theoretical and methodological basis for the then only-just-emerging social sciences*. In a voluminous collection of books, articles, lecture courses, and other scholarly and political interventions produced during the course of his 30-year career, he made a compelling and original case for a new science called sociology, which he believed to be uniquely capable of answering to the most profound moral dilemmas of modern human society.

Durkheim's thought developed in the context of a major moral concern linked to specific crises and problems of his era, which was undergoing rapid social and cultural change. Industrialization had brought new technology, trade, and, for some, great wealth, but it had also brought new forms of organization of human life that shocked the sensibilities of many caught

up in them. The explosion in the role of machines provoked a significant alteration of the traditional world most Westerners had inhabited prior to the early 19th century. The factory system and its labor conditions changed the nature of work irrevocably. New urban living areas revolutionized family and community life and market relations. The political sweep toward democracy initiated by the French Revolution of the late 1780s and then exported around Europe and other parts of the globe swept away traditional forms and structures of government at all levels. The State rose to a position of prominence in the political landscape that it has not yet relinquished, assuming a great deal more power in the realms of the economy, politics, and education. The patriarchal family system was undone, and spousal and parental roles shifted fundamentally. The Church, which had occupied a position of cultural dominance for so long, was shaken in its supremacy, and belief itself faced the massive challenge of growing scientific knowledge spread by mass media and public education.

All of this brought advances of all sorts, and Durkheim recognized this. But he was certainly not an apologist for change of any kind at any price. Significant social change always brings significant, and frequently unanticipated, social consequences. In his scholarly work, Durkheim set about rigorously examining some of the key consequences of the political, social, and cultural changes that brought about the new kinds of societies that were emerging in the 18th and 19th centuries: highly rationalized, scientific, secularizing, industrialized, capitalist, and democratic. Durkheim, whose mission throughout his adult life has been defined as “to teach men to find in the group their own truth” (Filloux, 1977, p. 259), was interested in exploring ways to counteract the dangers created by these changes.

Within the framework of the first major theme in Durkheim’s work, we see two concrete manifestations of his efforts to resolve the problem of solidarity appearing again and again in his writing, and those two ideas tell us much about his view of the individual’s relationship to society, and vice versa. Durkheim was committed at once to two ideas in creative tension with each other: *The individual relies necessarily on the collectivity for all that makes him truly human, and at the same time the abstract category of the individual is in modernity the most widely shared political, moral, and religious ideal and object of veneration.*

The first solution to the problem of moral solidarity in modern society articulated by Durkheim has to do with the role he envisioned for professional corporate groups—that is, those groups made up of the members of a common profession or trade that serve to set up the moral and ethical practices of the trades, including the organization of the methods by which members of the professions are recruited and trained, and provide a collective

mode of social and political action and mutual support for the individual members. The term “corporate” is derived from a Latin verb “*corporare*,” which means “to make into a body,” and this is precisely what is happening in such a group: A number of otherwise separate and isolated individuals is turned into a coherent, integrated body with collective rather than merely individual interests.

Durkheim looked historically to the institution of the guilds as an example of this kind of corporate group. **Guilds** had existed in the time of the Roman Empire, then had disappeared and reemerged in a different form in medieval Europe before being dismantled with the rise of the Industrial and French Revolutions. These organizations united all the members of a particular trade or craft into a single body and pursued numerous goals in their interests, as do modern trade unions, but they were also deeply involved in the lives of their members even outside of the workplace. In his lectures on the history of the guilds (which we discuss in Chapter 3), Durkheim describes how they functioned in a certain sense as a combination of a second family and a religious group to the members. Durkheim believed that, at their best, guilds had helped to integrate individual members into a social project larger than themselves and to infuse them with a moral spirit essential for the harmonious working of the whole society. When the guilds disappeared, no new such organizational framework had emerged; while he recognized that they had some similarities, Durkheim never saw trade unions as fulfilling the same wide range of functions taken up by the guilds. Without some new social form, adapted to modern conditions, to take the place of the guilds, the glue holding the individual members of society together in a moral community was bound to weaken.

The second solution Durkheim developed in his work to respond to the problem of moral solidarity was what he called the **cult of the human person**. From at least the mid-1890s, Durkheim was convinced of the important cultural contribution that had been made to the modern Western world by religion. Beyond its undeniable role in bringing co-religionists together in a fraternal spirit of community, it had served as the earliest form of complex and collective human reasoning, groping at the reality of the world around us in ways that would ultimately lead to the rational, scientific forms of knowledge on which we depend so heavily today. Many functions fulfilled by religion were crucial to human life, and these functions would need to be performed even if religion in its historical forms passed away, which Durkheim believed it inevitably would. When religion disappeared, we would need another set of beliefs and practices that would unite society in a common cult of worship and recharge our moral batteries with periodic celebrations of its “gods” and the moral codes oriented around them.

What would take the place of religion? Durkheim believed what had emerged as a quickly universalizing sacred object that could serve as the focal point of a new secular body of beliefs and practices was *the human person*. This might sound confused, initially. How could moral solidarity and a sense of mutually invested collective identity be produced by devotion to the human individual? In clarifying, the first thing we should note is that the human person and the human individual are not the same thing, in Durkheim's view. The individual is an empirically presented entity; it is you, or me, or any other member of our society, or any other, taken as an isolated atom. The cult of the human person is not oriented toward the empirical human individual, with his or her personal interests and ideals; it points to the human person as an abstract concept that has been produced by a specific group of human societies, over a specific historical trajectory, and that is filled not with the content of individual interests and idiosyncrasies but with the interests and ideals of the society in which the individual exists. Put another way, what the members of the cult of the human person worship are the elements of the human individual that are put there by society: his ability to reason and create, her concern for her fellow human beings, his capacity to step outside of his merely biological desires and needs and to focus himself instead on transcendent ideals that involve self-sacrifice.

Durkheim alluded to this distinction between the social qualities of the human person—that is, our moral capacities—and the purely biological side of human being—the physical body itself with its material drives and desires and its requirements for basic animal survival—with his notion of *homo duplex*. The emergence of the human individual is at the core of modernity for Durkheim, and he sees our individualism as tied neatly to the social portion of our being. Our merely biological characteristics flatten us out and make us equivalent to all others of our species, but the modern rise of the differentiated self is the first moment in which true individualism emerges in human life. Nonetheless, humankind is, in modernity, becoming at once more individuated and more strictly dependent on society. As the individual has become more autonomous and free of social control of the most primitive kinds, she has nonetheless become more dependent on society and the moral bonds uniting its members. This seeming paradox was seen by Durkheim as at the root of the revolution of modernity. The central fact that emerges from Durkheim's perspective is that the individual is perhaps the central creation of modernity and that the key to directing the modern social world will involve finding an effective way to permit, and even to revel in, the movement toward individuation while at the same time seeing to it that this new individual remains morally interconnected in a functional division of labor with others. Put another way, the problem is how to reconcile two

necessities, one eternal in the human world, the other a product of historical change that now asserts itself as undeniable: *integration* and *differentiation*.

## Individualism and the Intellectuals: The Relation of Individual and Society Summarized

Durkheim's argument for individualism as an obligatory quasi-religion cult of the human person is present throughout his work, but a particularly focused articulation can be found in a public response he made to another figure in the French intellectual scene in a pointed exchange over the Dreyfus Affair.

In March 1898, Ferdinand Brunetière, a conservative writer, Sorbonne lecturer, and member of the prestigious Académie Française, wrote a polemically charged piece for the *Revue de deux mondes* in response to the famous Émile Zola letter that exposed the undercurrent of injustice and anti-Semitism in the charges levied against Captain Dreyfus. The article was titled "After the Trial," and in it Brunetière argued that the world of political affairs in France was in danger of absolute corruption from the emergence of a new kind of intellectual figure, the leftist "Dreyfusard." These dangerous anarchists, as Brunetière described them, were engaged in the destruction of the bonds of French society in their abstract, bloodless endorsement of universal rights and freedoms that failed to recognize the moral needs and bonds of human populations.

Brunetière's charge brought numerous public responses by advocates for Dreyfus, among them Durkheim. Writing in the pages of the *Revue bleue*, Durkheim begins by complicating the idea of individualism. Brunetière has defined it in a way, he argues, that is consistent with the "utilitarian egoism" of the philosopher and sociologist Herbert Spencer, essentially the same notion that we find in classical economics of an entirely self-interested, self-contained, self-made human actor (Durkheim, 1898/1973, p. 44). In our own time, this is the same vision of the human being adhered to on the libertarian right and left. Durkheim agrees with Brunetière that this perspective is untenable, even "anarchical," but it does not exhaust individualism (Durkheim, 1898/1973, p. 44). There is *another* variety of individualism, which descends from Kant and Rousseau, and which undergirds the French Revolution's Declaration of the Rights of Man, and this second type of individualism rejects egoism completely (Durkheim, 1898/1973, p. 45). Kant argued that morally proper action must be motivated not by specific interests and situations but rather by the common humanity that connects individuals. The famous doctrine of the general will in Rousseau is not an

individual will but the sum of all such wills, and this is its claim to infallibility, not its assertive voluntarism.

At the root of both these notions, and also of Durkheim's own brand of individualism, is an essentially religious idea: *The human person is a sacred entity in precisely the same sense that gods are sacred entities in existing religions* (Durkheim, 1898/1973, p. 46). It is protected from contact by profane sources and placed in a vaunted position, outside the tawdry commerce of the mundane. Anything that intrudes upon the life, freedom, or honor of the human person horrifies us just as, for example, the Catholic is horrified when the Host is defiled in word or deed. But this new religion of individualism is distinct from existing religion in one important way: Here, the one who worships the god is himself also the god worshipped.

This form of individualism, which we might well call **moral or civic individualism** (Cladis, 2005, p. 385), is both individualistic and collectivist at once. The sacrosanct rights of the person cannot be infringed for any reason of State, yet it is a collective cult that makes this possible and calls all to its worship in a tone that is just as commanding as that we hear from the great monotheistic religions (Durkheim, 1898/1973, pp. 46, 48). This reveals the radical difference between Durkheim's individualism and that of the libertarians and classical economists. For Durkheim, the individual merits this respect precisely because of her humanity—that is, because of an attribute shared with the entire collectivity of which she is a part. Humanity itself is the sacred object, and no single individual exhausts this sacred force; it is diffused through all of them. This means that the true worship of the sacred principle of humanity requires the individual to “come out of himself and relate to others.” The religion of individualism, then, is not about any specific individual but rather about the abstract category of the human person in all its myriad forms. Though it is part of us, it dominates us all the same. So here, in contradistinction to the Spencerian variety of individualism rightly criticized by Brunetière, we find not a form of egoism but a profound respect and “sympathy for all that is human,” a powerful emotional response to all human suffering and a driving desire to undo the forces that cause human persons to be dominated or abused in any way (Durkheim, 1898/1973, pp. 48–49).

But how then can individualism, even if defined as Durkheim defines it, avoid ending in fracturing anarchy, as Brunetière charges? What principles can allow for harmony and order to emerge from a worldview in which all are equally meritorious of respect, all have equal rights to speak, to pose questions, to present cases? The question is a profound one, as anyone in the contemporary United States will instantly recognize. It often seems the case today in American society that anyone and everyone can pose as an

authoritative speaker on nearly every topic, and debates on matters of important public policy often turn quickly from discussions of fact into mutual accusations of bias and ignorance, with no possible common ground on the qualifications of experts and sound knowledge. Durkheim argues in the strongest possible terms against such a state of affairs. The valuing of individualism of the kind he describes does not in the least commit us to a “right to incompetence,” and along with his freedoms every citizen also has the responsibility to know and accept the limits of his own knowledge. On issues on which an individual is insufficiently informed or even incapable of forming any reasonable opinion at all due to a lack of required education, he is compelled to adhere to the competence of experts (Durkheim, 1898/1973, p. 49). That adherence must be based on reason—that is, it is not simply charisma, or power, or mere agreement with one’s already existing ideological beliefs that should generate authority, but rather scientific or some other rational intellectual expertise and mastery. For this reason, Durkheim rejects Brunetière’s insistence that abject subordination to the legal and military tribunal decisions on the affair of Captain Dreyfus are required; this is pure and blind submission to power. In a Republic, the accused must be permitted to defend himself according to a doctrine of impartial law, and reason must be the mechanism that determines the outcome (Durkheim, 1898/1973, p. 50). Nonetheless, it is inescapable that no one will be capable of the mastery required in all fields for competent judgment, so mutual deference and a collective sense of mutual reliance on one another for sound judgment will be necessary.

So moral or civic individualism is, according to Durkheim, “the only system of beliefs which can ensure the moral unity of the country” (Durkheim, 1898/1973, p. 50). Brunetière and his conservative allies argue that such work can only properly be done by religion, and Durkheim agrees, but with the qualification that religion must be more sociologically articulated. It is not fully defined by “symbols and rites . . . or temples and priests,” but must be understood more broadly as “a body of collective beliefs and practices endowed with a certain authority” (Durkheim, 1898/1973, pp. 50–51). Any goal that is collectively pursued by a group of people automatically takes on the moral power that is held by religion. Religion, in other words, can change, and the question faced in Durkheim’s France is not how to apply existing religion to the moral problems of French society, but what new form of religion will be capable of addressing them.

Durkheim then summarizes some of the facts of modernity that had motivated his thesis on the division of labor and social solidarity. As older, traditional forms of collective life and solidarity are undone by the new structures of modernity, “individual variations” become too strong to be limited as

they previously were. The increased division of labor pushes people into differentiation and “each mind finds itself . . . reflecting a different aspect of the world, and consequently the contents of consciousness differs from one person to another” (Durkheim, 1898/1973, p. 51). Increasingly, in this state of affairs, the only commonality uniting us all is the idea of our common humanity, and it is only some set of practices and beliefs that revolve around this theme—that is, that focuses on the divine, sacred nature of the essential human character that we all share—that can hope to bind together such a diverse set of viewpoints and interests.

Brunetière offers Christian morality instead as the force to bring these disparate modern individuals together, but Durkheim cleverly shows that the development of Christian thought leads to the cult of the human person. It consists of nothing more than an increased emphasis on the individual as the source of spiritual and moral energy. In ancient Rome, pagan religions had focused almost entirely outside the individual on practical rites, and in opposition to this Christianity from its inception had emphasized the “inner faith” of the individual (Durkheim, 1898/1973, p. 52). Durkheim also notes that this focus on the interior life of the believer in Christianity, especially in its Protestant forms, had contributed to the growth of scientific inquiry, as the Christians firmly separated “the spiritual and the temporal,” leaving the latter to be investigated by reason while the former was governed by faith (Durkheim, 1898/1973, p. 53). Thus, the cult of the human person is really only the logical extension of what had already been happening within Christianity.

Assaults on the rights of the individual such as that manifested by the attack on Dreyfus constitute a sacrilege to the cult, and they threaten the very existence and solidarity of a society based on such a set of beliefs. Thus, a defense of the individual Dreyfus does not undermine social order at all. It constitutes a defense of society’s most basic interests and its most strongly held collective beliefs (Durkheim, 1898/1973, p. 54).

And yet, Durkheim adds, the version of individualism provided by the French revolutionary tradition, which is one of the central sources on which he is drawing, is somewhat in need of revision. This 18th-century doctrine presents only a “negative” definition of individualism insofar as it emphasizes a number of freedoms (“to think, to write, to vote”) provided to the individual to allow his emergence from the “shackles” of pre-Revolutionary French social structure (Durkheim, 1898/1973, p. 55). These freedoms must be understood not as ends in themselves but only as a means to a larger collective goal. If those advances are seen as the end of the evolution of the individual, and if individualism devolves into a worship of the individual’s right to reject membership in a collective that exerts effective control over



her, we find ourselves in a “dangerous” situation. A similar exultation at the falling of political repression and emphasis on individual rights over against society also framed the establishment of the Third Republic of Durkheim’s lifetime. In this case, an initial wave of joy was followed by a stark admission that “we did not know what to do with this hard-won freedom” (Durkheim, 1898/1973, p. 55).

The goal toward which these rights point, in Durkheim’s view, is a fully harmonized socialist society. These liberties must be put to work to make “the social machine” function more effectively and smoothly, to enable each individual to climb to the heights permitted by his natural talents and abilities so that the promise “to each according to his labor!” can be made good (Durkheim, 1898/1973, p. 56). This further movement would constitute not the restraint or defeat of individualism but its completion.

## The Scientific Study of Society and Its Implications in Moral Life

When Durkheim wrote, there was nothing yet that could properly be called “the sociological method.” He had to invent it, and so invent it he did. In his early efforts to find inspiration for such a system of thought, Durkheim was strongly drawn to psychology, especially the work of the celebrated Théodule Ribot, because of its strong commitment to an empirical and scientific method (Fournier, 2007, pp. 73–75). The already existing French efforts at social science were, in Durkheim’s view, theoretically lacking in rigor, overeager to apply tentative observations to social reform, and generally insufficiently grounded in scientific method (Fournier, 2007, p. 83).

A strong thrust of Durkheim’s early methodological work thus was in the direction of establishing the scientific status of sociological method. But the true complexity of Durkheim’s efforts here has been oversimplified in the textbooks and in much of sociological common knowledge. The dominant interpretation of Durkheim’s methodological ideas paints him as a crude positivist who understands human action in precisely the same way the chemist understands the actions of chemical reagents. General and deterministic laws, it is asserted, govern everything that can happen, and agency and consciousness, along with any notion of free will and choice, must be jettisoned. The question of the meaning of social action to actors is considered irrelevant, and the task of the sociologist is to remove herself utterly from any investment or role in moral and political matters in the interests of true scientific objectivity.

A close reading of the breadth of Durkheim's work reveals this caricature as fundamentally distorted. He was undeniably a scientific rationalist who believed the domains of the physical sciences and the human sciences were not wholly separate. He believed that humankind is part of nature, and if the elements of nature can be studied by science, then so too can human beings, individually and collectively. Yet there is much in Durkheim's writing on sociological method to suggest that he was neither a materialist nor a determinist. Even in the single work, *The Rules of Sociological Method* (Durkheim, 1982/1895), which is most often taken by readers to make a case for positivist social science, Durkheim explicitly denies the label and approaches the question of the determination of human action by social structures with a nuance seldom reflected in commentary on this book. It is clear in *The Rules* that sociology must center on **social facts** and not on individual action, and further that these social facts surpass the individual in important ways: They are external to her and they compel her in certain ways. Yet they do not completely *determine* human action. Moreover, human action cannot be studied in precisely the same ways that the natural and physical sciences proceed for reasons having to do with the impossibility of controlling the subjects studied. Only *indirect* experimentation is possible, and this limits the parameters of how and what we can know about the human world.

During the period in which he was working on his book on religion, he distances himself even more clearly from crude positivism and sounds rather like a contemporary cultural sociologist, arguing for the relative autonomy of human cultural productions from the material sources from which they spring. In his later work, the concept of collective representations becomes the central conceptual tool for Durkheim. There is still a recognition, as with the concept of social facts, that these structures provide the field in which human action can operate, but there is now a greater sense in which the *meaning* of these structures, in addition to their effects on human action, is important for the sociologist, and the contours of the beliefs involved must be studied as a factor that can in principle at least be separated from the material structures that give rise to them.

One of the central problems with much textbook summary of Durkheim's thought on sociological method has to do with an imputation of a false and even impossible consistency, when the reality is that he argued different things about this at different times. One telling example involves his sense of the sources of data relevant to sociological work. The early Durkheim was convinced that ethnographic data were extremely limited in their utility, and for this reason he advocated that sociologists confine themselves to the use of more or less official historical documents regarding social and legal

structures and macro-level statistical information on practices. Later he would embrace the use of ethnographic data wholeheartedly, although he refused to limit his vision to that of the single-minded ethnographer narrowly describing one small society with no interest in broader generalizations but rather remained interested in analyses that could speak to the condition of humans in society more generally.

Another of the myths that emerge from the textbooks would have Durkheim viewing the science of sociology as radically disconnected from the realm of the moral and politics, but here again the reality is more complicated. It is powerfully telling that, as Durkheim's colleague and friend Georges Davy put it, when the outbreak of the First World War faced French society, Durkheim put aside his interest in the purely scholarly questions of the origins of totemism and exogamy and turned with a passion to the study of the sociological origins of the war (Davy, 1995/1919, p. 98). It was never the isolated task of the scientist alone, studying the abstruse ways of distant human groups such as the Arunta or the Bantu, that moved Durkheim. He was motivated by a desire to understand *contemporary* human groups and their workings, with an eye toward using knowledge of their workings to better them. From the first pages of his thesis, Durkheim rejected the idea of a purely speculative scientific project and embraced a social science that is both moral and political by nature.

The moral meaning of the scientific life is vividly apparent in an early piece of writing Durkheim produced in the form of an address to his *lycée* students at the conclusion of the 1883 school year. The main question at hand is whether men of genius are a menace to the mediocre, or whether the general health is dependent on this elect group. Durkheim cites the philosopher Ernest Renan as an example of those who side with the great in history and reject even the idea that the great should attempt to introduce high culture to the "small minds" (Durkheim, 1883/1975a, p. 412). Renan's vision is a "somber" one of serious, renunciatory thinkers on the one side, doing the work of advancing the race for all of humanity, and the frivolous, mediocre masses on the other, worshipping the great men though they do not understand them and contenting themselves with the "sweet illusions of the ignorant" (Durkheim, 1883/1975a, p. 412).

In opposition to this unapologetically aristocratic vision, there is what we might call a mass society position on the matter. Here, it is not a few great individuals who make a nation, but rather the mass of the citizenry, who can have no interest in the work produced by the poet, the artist, and the philosopher for their aristocratic patrons (Durkheim, 1883/1975a, p. 414). A society that spends energy on producing such great individuals necessarily does so at the expense of the greater majority and thereby runs the risk of

creating “dangerous inequalities,” so it is, in this vision, obviously preferable to prioritize the average member of the society and the “middle-class culture of the mind” that interests him (Durkheim, 1883/1975a, pp. 414, 415).

Durkheim’s response is critical of both of these positions. He accepts Renan’s claim that the life of the mind is superior to the common life of tradition and ignorance, but it is unconscionable in his view, if one properly understands the meaning of truth and knowledge, to deny access to it to the mass of society. “All individuals,” he writes, “however humble they may be, have the right to aspire to the superior life of the mind” (Durkheim, 1883/1975a, p. 413). But Durkheim finds the argument for radical leveling and the uselessness of great men advanced by the most extreme democrats “perhaps more dangerous” than Renan’s Nietzscheanism, and the third way Durkheim advocates turns out to be significantly closer to the latter than to the former (Durkheim, 1883/1975a, p. 414). It amounts to a kind of evolutionist theory of great men as moral, scientific, and spiritual points of superiority that emerge here and there to indicate to the masses, which tend toward a “satisfied mediocrity,” the proper direction for the continued progress of humankind (Durkheim, 1883/1975a, p. 415).

How are they to do this? They are to provide a demonstration to the masses in their lives, but especially by their dedication to the “superior life” of the mind, that “humanity is not made to endlessly indulge in easy and vulgar pleasures,” and to lead the masses to “despise that inferior life, in order to detach humanity from this mortal slumber and to persuade it to march ahead” (Durkheim, 1883/1975a, p. 416). The life of the mind, the scientific life, is the ideal to which all should aspire, even though not all will be capable of adhering to it. After explicitly naming several of the more typical categories of the “great man”—for example, the artist, the poet, and the thinker—he closes his address by calling on the young graduates not to blush in according to superior men a just deference, for “there is a certain manner of allowing oneself to be guided that does not at all take away independence,” and one must know how to respect “all natural superiority” (Durkheim, 1883/1975a, p. 417).

### **The *Année Sociologique* Group: Collective Labor in a Calling**

We might reasonably assert that Durkheim is one of the founders of the discipline of sociology based solely on his ideas, but the claim is considerably strengthened once we understand how he worked institutionally to create the discipline and preserve it from attackers. In the mid-1890s, following the

publication of his *Rules of Sociological Method*, Durkheim was increasingly recognized as the central figure in the emerging French social sciences. He had perhaps won allies to his cause with the book, but he had also become a target for intellectual attacks of various orientations. Philosophers denounced what they saw as an effort to steal their thunder by rejecting their claims to speak to questions of human life and meaning without grounding them first in a social context. Psychologists and historians too saw Durkheim's new social science as an effort to trump their own disciplinary approaches.

Durkheim increasingly understood that the only effective way to push social science forward in the face of such trenchant criticism and obstinacy was to create a research center of like-minded colleagues, mostly younger men of great motivation and talent, who could, together, carve out the intellectual space needed to establish sociology in the French academic world. He was spurred on by some of his allies in the struggle, especially by Céléstin Bouglé, a young philosopher who had already done much to open up one of the central French philosophical journals, the *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, to sociological investigations. By mid-1896, Durkheim was steadily working on the project of launching a new journal that would bring together the work of a large group of associates both in France and abroad. He convinced a major Paris academic publisher, Félix Alcan, to take on the journal and set about recruiting members of the editorial team. These included Bouglé himself and a number of others who made up the organizational core of the new journal: Paul Fauconnet, Gaston Richard, Marcel Mauss, Henri Hubert, François Simiand, Maurice Halbwachs, and Hubert Bourgin. Dozens of other young scholars contributed to the journal's voluminous collection of book reviews of all the major work in fields of sociological interest, whether philosophy, ethics, law, domestic and family history and ethnography, economics, geography, criminology, linguistics, history and ethnography of religions, or aesthetics. In addition to the huge number of reviews published in each issue, there were original, often lengthy articles on topical themes, and Durkheim himself published some of his most important work here.

From 1898 to 1913, the first series of the journal carved out a space for sociology with this intensely collective form of intellectual life. There is much evidence in his correspondence with members of the editorial team that Durkheim saw the journal group as something more than a merely scholarly team; the group was a moral force as well. The collective labor of the journal and the solidarity produced by a shared project was another powerful element of its nature. As one commentator puts it, "Durkheim did not do sociology as an isolated individual, but rather as a team leader" (Tiryakian, 2009, p. 2). A good deal of the writing for the journal was done in small

collective units, with close editorial supervision by Durkheim and other central figures. In the very process by which he produced his own intellectual work, Durkheim was attentive to the central rule of the doctrine he developed—that is, the eminently social nature of all human endeavor. It is evident in his correspondence that he frequently considered the *Année* a tremendous burden in terms of the time and energy he put into it, but this burden was balanced by the collective spirit and the advances made possible by individuals working together. In one startlingly clear passage in a letter to Mauss from June 1897, during the early effort to get the journal underway, Durkheim encourages his nephew to the task of working in the collective project that he sees as a central vehicle for the articulation of a radically new view of the nature of society: “I hope that from the *Année sociologique* will emerge a theory, exactly opposed to that of vulgar and simplistic historical materialism . . . , which will make religion, rather than the economy, the womb of social facts” (Durkheim, 1998, p. 71).

## **Prelude: The Individual and Society in the Four Great Books, and Elsewhere**

Virtually the entirety of Durkheim’s work offers an ongoing examination of the basic questions and themes described in this chapter. In *The Division of Labor in Society* (1984/1893), Durkheim first sketched his argument concerning the modern origins of the individual. Primitive humankind contained no individuals; human beings were simply and totally subsumed into the social collectivity and were in all essential ways interchangeable and indistinguishable. Some of his intellectual opponents, including the English philosopher and social thinker Herbert Spencer, would have had it that individualism was the rule in early human life, and that society came from this primal state after the individuals agreed to rationally bind themselves to one another. Durkheim showed clearly that it was precisely the other way round. The individual personality and the phenomenon of individualism more generally are products of the progressive growth of the division of labor in human society.

*The Rules of Sociological Method* presents a treatise in anti-individualist sociology. Society is a reality in and of itself, hovering above and ruling over individuals in countless ways, and the science of sociology must take collective life as its essential fact. The social fact is the central theoretical principle upon which sociology relies, and in Durkheim’s formulation it reveals the dependence of the individual on the group for all of the most essential elements of her mental life and action in the world.

*Suicide* was a calculated effort to put the doctrines of *The Rules* into operation in an empirical study. Durkheim deliberately chose a phenomenon that seems, superficially, entirely a matter of individual psychology and pathology, and demonstrated that it is a sociological phenomenon to the core. Yet the analysis is nuanced, and Durkheim proves himself a careful and antireductionist thinker in this important study.

In his final book, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1995/1912), Durkheim once again returned to the dependence of the individual on collective life. The most basic categories by which humans have understood our world, from the earliest times to the present, have been provided to us by group life, and the individual who would escape these collective representations would become something less than human. Here, the doctrine of *homo duplex* is presented in full articulation to show how the most individual level of the human being is the body as a desiring, biological object, while the most fully human part of our being is the part that comes to us from the social and the cultural.

In his body of writing on the family, marriage, sexuality, and related topics, he argues for the marital bond and the conjugal family as among the primary contemporary institutional forces that hold the excesses of individualism at bay by tying individuals closely together into relations of interdependency and mutual responsibility. In his lectures on professional ethics and civic morals, he reveals the State and the individual as allies. The latter is a product of the growth of the former and depends utterly on the State for the production and protection of his rights and legal status. In his courses and writings on education, he produces a complex vision in which the individual is seen to naturally require the moral authority of the collectivity.

Durkheim's central concerns require considerable conceptual stretching for many contemporary readers. We are today in an age where even the social scientists produce works justifying the most antisocial forms of individualism, with scarcely a wisp of concern at the lack of moral solidarity among the atomic elements making up the human population. We see, for example, sociological bestsellers that describe the phenomenon of "families of one" in more or less celebratory terms, refusing any grander vision of social architecture and willfully refusing to see how this phenomenon of more and more people living alone, with no families and minimal connections and commitments to moral communities, is in large part the inevitable consequence of an increasingly merciless economic system that requires individuals to dedicate themselves to work (without the professional corporate groups Durkheim advocated for) in a more totalizing and dehumanizing way than has ever been the case previously. In this context, a return to Durkheim—if not to fully and uncritically embrace every aspect of his project,

then at least to endeavor to discover what can be learned from him—promises much in the way of a more vibrantly sociological sociology.

### A few questions

- What additional evidence can be seen in developments of the last century for Durkheim's notion of a cult of the human person?
- Are there other varieties of individualism beyond those described by Durkheim in his essay on individualism and the intellectuals?
- Is Durkheim's view of the scientific life compatible with contemporary conceptions of democratic culture?
- In what ways might collective intellectual work differ in substance from work produced by one individual working alone?
- How does the notion of *homo duplex* enhance the sociologist's ability to explain the social world?