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Durkheim's Refutation of Spencerian Methodological Individualism: A Critical Evaluation

A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in Sociology

by

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May 2009

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Keywords: Durkheim, Spencer, individualism, social facts, collective consciousness, division of labor, group mind, morality, contract.

ABSTRACT

Durkheim's Refutation of Spencerian Methodological Individualism: A Critical Evaluation

by

Matthew Bryan Smith

The famed French classical social theorist Emile Durkheim's academic reputation is based largely on his critical rejection of the British utilitarian tradition and specifically the writings of the classical British sociologist Herbert Spencer. In this thesis I critically evaluate Durkheim's critique of Herbert Spencer's methodological individualism. It is found that while select Durkheimian claims merit continued allegiance, his broader critique of Spencer's methodological individualism must be viewed as logically and empirically deficient. In conclusion I examine the implications for Durkheimian sociology and the broader social theoretical enterprise directed at analyzing and conceptualizing the nature of sociality and the social bond.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my deepest appreciation to my thesis committee: Dr. Paul Kamolnick, Dr. Scott Beck, and Dr. Michael Allen, for their support and guidance through this research effort. Special thanks to my committee chairman, Dr. Paul Kamolnick, whose help was immeasurable. I would not have been successful without his patience and hard work.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Central Research Problem

The problem under investigation is the nature of the social bond and how it should be conceived. The French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) suggests that a sui generis entity called “society” is an essential causal factor and that the individual as such is not causally implicated in the creation of the social (Durkheim [1893] 1997). Durkheim’s ethical, metaphysical, and logical claims all stem from his notion that social solidarity and the “collective consciousness” are necessary to sustain happiness and order. Durkheim’s theoretical positions are a direct response to and rejection of utilitarianism and the sociology of Herbert Spencer (1820-1903).

Spencer’s conception of the social bond, in contrast, rests on methodological individualism, social differentiation, and freedom from the state. Durkheim’s critique of Spencer is directed at the soul of his methodological individualism: Spencer’s conception of the relationship of the individual to society, and the significance of this bond for social cohesion, morality, and progress. Durkheim and Spencer’s contrasting views lead to distinctly different conceptions of the sociological enterprise and the relevance of this sociological debate is unprecedented.

The Importance and Background of Durkheim’s Collectivist Critique of Spencerian

Methodological Individualism

Durkheim’s theory of collective forms is a mainstay of sociology as science. Few sociological courses or subjects exist in which Durkheim is not, at some point, referenced.

Durkheim's contributions to sociology surface in the late 19th century and gained notoriety throughout the 20th century.

The two theoretical positions examined in this study focus on efforts to explain the genesis of the social bond, emergence of social properties pertinent to the individual, and the interpretation of social facts. If Durkheim's critique is sufficient, then Spencerian methodological individualism is to be rejected, and on that basis Spencer's social philosophy fails to fulfill its intentions. Yet, even if Durkheim fails to offer a sufficient alternative account of the social bond, other aspects of Durkheim's work, it is argued, may retain considerable theoretical value.

The historical differences in Durkheim's and Spencer's philosophical viewpoints are rooted in a stark contrast in their historical traditions. Durkheim is a product of "the French tradition," exemplified in the work of Baron de Montesquieu, Auguste Comte, and Jean Jacques Rousseau among others (Levine 1995). Spencer, in contrast, is schooled in "the British tradition," influenced by economists and moral philosophers such as Adam Smith, John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, John Stuart Mill, and David Hume (Levine 1995).

Durkheim's sociology, considered as a whole, articulates a structural functionalist conception of collective social life. Social integration exists as a product of societal-generated collective sentiments (Durkheim [1893] 1997), and is secured as individuals are at their healthiest state of being, acting and participating in communal, solidarity-enhancing social practices. According to Durkheim, this also furnishes the basis of a fully altruistic, morally-sufficient social life.

Spencer's sociology, in contrast, articulates a notion of society as an emergent property of individuals and individual-motivated interaction (Levine 1995). Spencer's methodological

individualism leads him to different standpoints on issues Durkheim also confronts including the nature of property rights, contracts, the function of religion, the role of government, and others.

Literature Review

Following the release of Durkheim's *The Division of Labor in Society* (1893), contemporaries, most notably social scientists and philosophers of his day (Andler 1896; Bernes 1895; Fouillée 1896; Mazell 1898; Tarde 1894; Tonnies 1924; Tosti 1898; Tufts 1898) began to critique his unique theoretical position. The thrust of this criticism is directed at Durkheim's 'social realism' (Fouillée 1896; Parodi 1909; Tarde 1894) under-emphasis of the role of the individual in society (Palante 1903), and morality (Belot 1894; Fouillée 1896; Landry 1906; Lukes 1973). Subsequent interest in Durkheim ranges widely and examines such topics as crime (Downs and Rock 1971; Kameyama 1988; Leavitt 1992), punishment (Kennedy 2000), suicide (Kushner and Sterk 2005; Lehmann 1995; Lester 1992), deviance (Konty 2005), religion (Graham 2007; Prades 1991), solidarity (Adair 2008), and various other topics.

Charles Camic suggests "that for generations sociologists have attacked utilitarian social theory as inadequate theoretically" (1979:516), yet there is a reluctance or inability for many sociologists to work outside of the paradigms of the discipline's most prominent founders, such as Durkheim, Weber, and Marx (Runciman 2008). Rick Tilman notes (2002) that Durkheim's direct critique of utilitarianism and the social bond is relatively neglected in recent scholarship. The virtual abandonment of methodological individualism in social theory also likely explains the relative neglect of Durkheim's rejection of the utilitarian.

Studies of the relationship between Durkheim's and Spencer's theoretical positions are generally connected to *The Division of Labor in Society*. Robert Perrin (1975) describes Durkheim's misrepresentation of Spencer's argument in response to R.A. Jones' "Durkheim's

Response to Spencer: An Essay toward Historicism in the Historiography of Sociology” (1974). Perrin argues that Jones fails to reveal that Durkheim’s opposition to Spencer was not accurately based on Spencer’s actual writings, but against general ideas that Durkheim assumes Spencer maintains. Perrin later considers that “Spencer and Durkheim differ very little in their conceptions of the causes of an expanding division of labor,” Perrin remarks for example “they do differ in its effects... Durkheim’s explanation is not necessarily... an improvement on Spencer’s” (1995:791).

Durkheim and Spencer have occasionally been compared with respect to their formulations of structural-functionalism (Giddens 1976; Maryanski and Turner 1997; Park 1921), social differentiation (Noah 1998), and social evolutionism (Lopreato 1990). Most of this work examines Durkheim’s conception of the “social organism” and also contrasts of Durkheim’s notion of the “collective consciousness” and Spencer’s “methodological individualism”. Finally it has been noted, that Durkheim’s monumental structural-functionalist work *The Division of Labor in Society* may owe a greater debt to Spencer than Durkheim actually acknowledges (Corning 1982). Even Durkheim’s notion of the “cult of the individual” (Marske 1987) would likely not have developed if he had not identified an egoistic nature *within* the individual earlier presumed by Spencer and the utilitarian tradition.

One hundred years after the release of *The Division of Labor in Society*, Hans-Peter Muller (1994) while criticizing some of the text states that it is “well done, but incomplete, [and] full of logical as well as empirical inconsistencies” (1994:73). Nevertheless, he still admits that *The Division of Labor in Society* is a classic and that Durkheim’s analytic scaffolding and analysis of social order, anomie, individual autonomy, and various other topics are pioneering (Muller 1994). J.A. Barnes (1966) in a stark contrast suggests that *The Division of Labor* holds

little value. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* received similar criticisms (R.A. Jones 1977) for its logical, empirical, and metaphysical discrepancies. In a recent essay, E. Tyler Graham (2007) considers some of Durkheim's blunders in *The Elementary Forms* serious enough to have negatively influenced the study of religion years after its release.

Robert A Nisbett's *Emile Durkheim with Selected Essays* (1965) and *The Sociology of Emile Durkheim* (1974) and Steven Lukes' *Emile Durkheim: His Life and Work* (1973) are seminal commentaries that along with Donald N. Levine's *Visions of the Sociological Tradition* (1995) and Turner et al.'s *The Emergence of Sociological Theory* (2007) offers detailed analysis and commentary on Durkheim's scholarship and serves as a highly productive resource for this researcher's analysis and evaluation.

Methodology

A logical analysis is conducted of two seminal Durkheimian texts that provide his chief critique of Spencer's methodological individualism: *The Division of Labor in Society* (1893) and *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912). Because this thesis is primarily concerned with Durkheim's concept formation and the underlying structure of his logical argument, logical or conceptual analysis based in analytical philosophy is both appropriate and relevant.

CHAPTER 2

DURKHEIM'S CRITIQUE OF SPENCERIAN UTILITARIANISM: AN EXPOSITION

Introduction

Durkheim's critique of utilitarianism as well as his direct opposition to the sociology of Herbert Spencer is the subject of this chapter. His assertions pertaining directly to utilitarian individualism and collective social behavior are examined. It is demonstrated how the few similarities shared by these two thinkers are overshadowed by vast differences that consequently lay the groundwork for two very different paradigms in sociology. Two major works: *The Division of Labor in Society* (1893) and *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912) are analyzed because they provide a sufficient understanding of Durkheim's position.

Durkheim's divergence from Spencerian utilitarianism is clearly stated in *The Division of Labor in Society*, when he states,

Like him [Spencer], we have stated that the place of the individual in society, from being originally nothing at all, has grown with civilization. *But this indisputable fact has presented itself in a completely different light than to the English philosopher, so much so that in the end our conclusions are in contradiction to his, more than echoing them* ([1893] 1997:141; italics added).

Agreeing with Spencer "that the place of the individual in society has grown with civilization," Durkheim's dissent bases itself in how Durkheim conceives the relationship *between* the individual and society. Durkheim premises his theory of society in an a priori, organic biological-psychological individual who eventually within society advances and acquires collective sentiments. The major differences between Durkheim and Spencer for the purpose of this study can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1 Major Contrasts between the Sociological Positions of Emile Durkheim and Herbert Spencer

PARADIGMS	Durkheimian Sociology	Spencerian Sociology
<i>Nature of Social Facts</i>	Social facts exist outside of and prior to the individual.	Social facts are emergent products of individual interaction constrained by the psycho-biological nature of humans.
<i>Role of Self-Interest</i>	Self interest disturbs the harmony of the common consciousness and damages society.	Self interest promotes individualistic specialization and improves societal conditions.
<i>Role of Government</i>	Governing authority upholds the collective beliefs, values, and customs of the group.	Governing authority should disintegrate as the individual learns to practice self governance.
<i>Division of Labor</i>	The division of labor can disturb society by causing pathological and abnormal conditions such as disunity and isolation.	The division of labor facilitates society by promoting individual talents and skills through occupational differences.
<i>Religion</i>	Religion strengthens the common consciousness by unifying society with a collective set of beliefs.	Religion is an expression of individualistic belief or disbelief.
<i>Morality</i>	Morality is a product of the common consciousness and social institutions.	Morality is a product of individual interaction constrained by human selfishness.

Table 1: This table outlines basic distinctions in Durkheim’s and Spencer’s sociology. Most of these differences are consistent with Durkheim’s collectivism and Spencer’s individualism. The stark contrasts in these theoretical positions is the basis of this thesis.

The Logical Impossibility of Spencer’s Utilitarian Individualism

Foundations of Contracts

Durkheim rejects Spencer’s conception of the nature, foundations, and limits of the contractual relationship. In *The Division of Labor in Society*, Durkheim writes, “... the normal form of exchange is contract ([1893] 1997:150) [but] the contract is not sufficient by itself, but is only possible because of social origin” (162). This directly conflicts with Spencer’s view that the “contract consists solely in exchange” (Durkheim [1893] 1997:163). Durkheim asserts that Spencer could not formulate a way in which voluntary contracts serve to create or increase social bonds or to sustain social solidarity.

According to Durkheim, contracts alone do not sufficiently bind individuals together over a significant period of time. The contractual relationship remains a surface-level bond, thus

creating what he would refer to as a merely *negative* solidarity produced when individuals were brought together by a “thing” opposed to a natural social relationship. *Positive* solidarity, in contrast links the individual to society without any contractual intermediary (Durkheim [1893] 1997:83). The growth of these negative relationships, Durkheim hypothesized, was an increasing feature of the division of labor but was by itself insufficient for explaining or sustaining the social bond and in particular, social solidarity.

Marriage and adoption are two primary examples Durkheim uses to illustrate how contractual relationships change due to the progression in the division of labor and the emergence of modern societies. In the case of adoption, Durkheim discusses previous forms of contracts that brought about kinship while operating “freely and without [contractual] formality” ([1893] 1997:156). This primitive form of contract served to increase collective properties and strengthen primitive societies.

It was not contract considered abstractly that explains the changing nature of contracts, but industrialization and modernity in general that had brought about changes in which “the bond of kinship [was] not the outcome of a binding contractual relationship” (Durkheim [1893] 1997:157). The emergence of restitutory laws additionally illustrates how contracts were bound by structural changes that came with the materialization of new forms of legality (Durkheim [1893] 1997). The primitive form of contract, with its sacred and ritualistic elements, slowly diminishes as the division of labor rises as a key feature of modernity; this changes the social structure and the workings of collective bonds and social relationships. These features apparent in the emerging industrial societies of Europe leads Durkheim to theorize a distinct break with the contractual forms and features of the past.

Methodological Individualism as an Invalid Theory of Social Order or the Non-Contractual Foundations of Contract

The importance of the contractual relationship is crucial to both Durkheim and Spencer, but Durkheim seriously doubts whether this relationship is sustainable. Durkheim surmises that while “mutual interest draws men closer it is never more than for a few moments” and therefore “it can only create between them an external bond” (Durkheim [1893] 1997:152).

Durkheim consistently maintains that “social phenomena arise not in the individual, but in the group” ([1912] 2001:176). Spencer in direct contrast asserts, however, those social phenomena are strictly and exclusively a product of the individual and inter-individual interaction and that all social facts could be understood from this viewpoint: “We should not, as does Spencer, present social life as the resultant of individual natures alone, since, on the contrary, it is rather the latter that emerge from the former” ([1893] 1997:186). “Any personality”, he continues, “however powerful it might be could do nothing alone against a whole society” (Durkheim [1893] 1997:143). Rejecting Spencer’s assertion that the individual could produce anything social without the direct regulation and influence of society at large, Durkheim asserts that “...members of a society can only be dominated by a force that is superior to themselves and there is only one of these that possess this quality: that of the group” (Durkheim [1893] 1997:143).

Moreover, Durkheim also identifies non-contractual forms *within* a contract. He considered this neglect a major oversight on Spencer’s part. In *The Division of Labor in Society*, stating “... in a contract, not everything is contractual” [1893] 1997:158) he identifies several areas indicative of non-contractual properties. First, if two individuals failed to agree about the terms of the contract or in some way misunderstood its content, this could not be considered a

valid exchange and a non-contractual agency is used, i.e. the power of coercive law to bind an individual to a contract. Secondly, the contract's ability to change in the face of a changing progressive society was not deducible from the contract itself. The structure of a society and the differences across societies, not an agreement among parties, served to regulate the mechanisms of a contract and the rules by which an individual must abide.

While Spencer views the contractual process as a private, personal affair between consenting individuals, Durkheim asserts that the continuing complexity of the law often makes the contract a public matter. It has been suggested that the contract as a private event has evolved with the division of labor. "... the closer we come to the highest types of society the more ... legal relationships also lose their strictly contractual character" (Durkheim [1893] 1997:155).

Social Evolution of Organic Solidarity is Real, Irreducible to Individualism, and Alters the Common Consciousness

Societal evolution and technology are, for Durkheim, dramatically changing the structure of European society with profound implications for social solidarity based in what he calls the *conscience collective* or what translates to the *common consciousness* i.e. shared or common beliefs by members of a society. "The common consciousness has a definite character," Durkheim states, "yet this consciousness alters in nature as societies grow more immense" (Durkheim [1893] 1997:230). Durkheim understands that with societal changes "... the common consciousness is itself forced to rise above all local diversities, to dominate more space available, and consequently, to become more abstract" (Durkheim [1893] 1997:230). At this point, the common consciousness would undergo a process of generality while still maintaining itself as a concrete power over individual livelihood.

Social solidarity, *the* key Durkheimian concern, refers to the intensity of group coherence or degree of integration. This concept appears often in *The Division of Labor in Society* but less frequently in Durkheim's other writings. In the most primitive of societies Durkheim believes that individualism is submerged in structures, practices, and mental states shared with the group and it is within this group-identified state that humans experience the truly social essence of their societal membership. He asserts that in these societies "everywhere individuals exist there is altruism, because there is solidarity ([1893] 1997:145).

Mechanical solidarity was representative of earlier human societies whose integration is attained via homogeneity among members of a society. Durkheim posits that the true essence of a *societal* reality and genuine community can be found within this stage of societal development and that this form of solidarity precedes the birth of the individual and the division of labor.

What Durkheim calls "organic solidarity" (1893) accompanied by industrial and technological change that results in the breakdown of the primitive collective occurs. It is at this point in his argument that Durkheim again departs from Spencer. "It is sometimes stated that the level of normal development in an individual could be deduced... from the idea of the individual organism [Spencer]" (Durkheim [1893] 1984:76). Durkheim will go on to suggest that "this is possible, although the rigor in the reasoning is very questionable" (76). Organic solidarity brings about the above-mentioned transformations within society but also holds implications for individual freedom. With advancements and modification come the notion of separation from collective ideals and the adjustments or maladjustments to individual specializations and divisions due to growing heterogeneity.

Even in the circumstances of the organic division of labor and changing societal conditions, Durkheim asserts the logical necessity of *sui generis* social ties, and much of

functionalist sociology stems from his conception: “The individual is so constituted that he can only move as a group, even when separating himself [as in organic societies] from the original group” (Durkheim [1893] 1997:104-105). Durkheim feels that group values and practices supersede individualism, even within this advancing organic social structure. The relationship linking an individual with this type of complex community was unimaginable to Durkheim without presuming this existing social bond.

Of all the changes Durkheim asserts that arise with the division of labor, none is greater than the appearance of occupational specialization. Occupational specialization greatly affects the nature of primitive societies and in contrast to Spencer who claims that specialization depends on external factors, Durkheim asserts, “[f]or specialization of activity to result, the differences must be developed and organized, and this development clearly depends upon causes other than the variations in external conditions” (Durkheim [1893] 1997:208).

Durkheim was not as interested in the *consequences* of specialization as he was in the *reason* why societies underwent these changes. Spencer promotes the idea, Durkheim says, that “happiness grows with the productive power of labor”, but he does not tell us “what the trigger is that sets it off” (Durkheim [1893] 1997:208). Durkheim goes as far as to suggest “that for him [Spencer], the question [concerning reasons for progress in society] does not even arise” ([1893] 1997:208).

Finally, Durkheim disagrees with Spencer regarding the allegedly selfish innate nature of primitive humans, though he does agree that self-interest does exist and thrives among civilized people. He suggests that “a tool has only value for us if we have *need* [italics mine] of it [and] civilized man had learnt to *desire* [italics mine]...” ([1893] 1997:208). Durkheim believes that this ability to *desire* is a product of the modern division of labor, and ultimately requires the

unity and harmony of a new type of altruistic solidarity. This factual, progressive emergence of individual motivation exterior to the group, i.e. individual desire and need, along with materialization of specializations and separateness among individuals has the capacity to break the social bond and cause people to begin to falsely think of themselves as independent of the collective. The final result of this process is the desire that humans exhibit to maximize individuality, which is now a reality though not a morally desirable one, as we soon shall see.

Ethical Superiority of a Solidaristic 'Non-Anomic' Order

The Flaw in Spencer's 'Happiness Claim'

Durkheim rejects Spencer's presumption that utility is capable of producing pleasure, and that social differentiation and occupational specialization is a gateway to happiness (Durkheim [1893] 1997). While recognizing that human motivation, pursuit for pleasure, and "the need for happiness that may impel the individual to specialize more and more" (Durkheim [1893] 1997:180), Durkheim also claims "there is no need to ask oneself whether happiness increases with civilization... the most simple creature and the most complex one experience the same happiness if they both equally realize their own nature" (Durkheim [1893] 1997:188-189). The increase of suicide in modern societies ([1893] 1997:191), for example, leads Durkheim to reject the facile suggestion that modernity per se leads to an increase in human happiness, but ultimately to the more resolute conclusion "that there is no connection between the variations in happiness and the progress of the division of labor" (Durkheim [1893] 1997:194).

This view directly contrasts with Spencer's progressive model of the division of labor. The attainment of happiness was subject to several limits. This is clearly stated in *The Division of Labor in Society* ([1893] 1997):

It is the need for happiness that may impel an individual to specialize more and more... If happiness increased as a pleasant stimuli became more frequent and more intense, it would be entirely natural for man to seek to produce more so as to have still greater enjoyment. Yet in reality our capacity for happiness is very restricted. (180-181).

Durkheim asserts two key claims. First, he suggests that the quest for happiness as a goal in itself is restricted by the limited amount one can attain because "... if the division of labor in reality had only made progress in order to increase our happiness, it would have arrived at its extreme limit long ago..." (Durkheim [1893] 1997:182). Durkheim's pessimism regarding the utility of this constant search for more and more of *something* that *should* exist exemplifies his break with utilitarianism.

Second, the relentless desire for human happiness over-inflates the scope given to the individual ego and under-inflates the moral value of social solidarity. Individualistic pleasure and enjoyment are values that require unending individual obsession and thereby encourage distancing from the group and undermines the natural and proper status of group affiliation that brings happiness without the constant pursuit of something "more" than can be realistically attained. Durkheim's research on suicide similarly concludes that "there is no connection between the variations in happiness and the progress of the division of labor" (Durkheim [1893] 1997:194).

A Non-Happiness Based Value – Solidarity – Superior to Happiness

While happiness is a key individual value, Durkheim assigns particular importance to societal solidarity as a non-happiness, i.e. non-eudemonistic based value. In *The Division of Labor in Society*, Durkheim states that "every society is a moral society... no individual is sufficient unto himself [and] it is from society that he receives all that is needful" ([1893] 1997:173). "[M]an is only a moral being," he states, "because he lives in society" (331). This statement again evidences his opposition of Spencer's claim that society is in actuality a product

of individual motivation and the emergent property arising in the increasing complexity of individual-individual interaction.

In *The Division of Labor in Society*, Durkheim suggests that “the more closely knit the members of a society, the more they maintain various relationships either with one another or the group collectively” (Durkheim [1893] 1997:25) and that “members of a society form a determinant system with a life of its own” (Durkheim [1893] 1997:39). Social solidarity and what his critics would label “social realism” was at the heart of Durkheim’s sociology and serves as its foundation stone. His social realist thesis and assertion of “the collective” as a separate body is evident in the following statement:

... there is in the consciousness of each one of us two consciousnesses: one that we share in common with our group in its entirety, which is consequently not ourselves, but society living and acting within us; the other that, on the contrary, represents us alone in what is personal and distinctive about us, what makes us an individual. (Durkheim [1893] 1997:84).

Throughout his career Durkheim never suggests that the modern organic division of labor would necessarily destroy social solidarity but that pathological forms could. “If normally the division of labor produces social solidarity, it can happen,” Durkheim states, “that it has entirely different or even opposite results” (Durkheim [1893] 1997:291). Two of Durkheim’s primary concerns – disunity and isolation – arise with the growth of individualism and threaten and possibly destroy social solidarity.

The threat of disunity can be traced directly to the emergence of “large-scale” industry. Durkheim’s negative evaluation of large-scale industry stems from his wariness about increasing differentiation and overspecialization. “... Small-scale industry, where work is less divided up, affords the spectacle of a relative harmony existing between employer and worker” (Durkheim [1893] 1997:293). It is under conditions of large-scale industrialism that social relationships

begin to suffer and competition becomes overly fierce. With the progression of modern industry, Durkheim suggests that “specialization becomes greater [and] revolts become more frequent” (Durkheim [1893] 1997:293). This risk of disunity is owing to the disintegration of harmonious social relationships and more proximately from individual unhappiness with one’s occupational status. In most cases, Durkheim suggests disunity arises when individuals do not choose their status, lack the ability to mobilize, and experience frustration of their ambitions.

Individual isolation is a second major consequence of a pathological form of the division of labor: Whereas disunity threatens to break social bonds through strife and discontent, isolation undermines solidarity by separating individuals from the group. The modern scientific researcher illustrates this state of isolation because once “specialization was introduced into scientific work each scientist shut himself off increasingly, not only within a particular science, but within a particular kind of problem” (Durkheim [1893] 1997:294). Isolation is found in other forms of work and increases with the growth of industry.

Disunity and isolation both create what Durkheim terms *anomic* conditions. “In all these cases, if the division of labor does not produce solidarity it is because the relationships between the [societal] organs are not regulated; it is because they are in a state of anomie” (Durkheim [1893] 1997:304). Durkheim views this potential loss of regulatory capacity in a growing industrial society as extremely dangerous and psychologically disorienting.

Despite Durkheim’s overwhelming predilections for collective altruism, he nevertheless admits and recognizes functional egoism as well. “...strictly speaking these two springs of behavior [altruism and egoism] have been present from the beginning in every human consciousness...” (Durkheim [1893] 1997:145-146). It is with growing heterogeneity and specializations that a *solidarity-threatening* egoism emerges. “For the civilized person... egoism

insinuates itself even to the very center of the higher [collective] representations” (Durkheim [1893] 1997:146). Whereas the defense of increasing specialization for the sake of happiness is a centerpiece for Spencer’s utilitarian individualism, Durkheim does not concede such a result (See Figure 1). The increase in destructive, isolated egoism negated ethical justification for the increasing specialization as a collective good. Because enhanced solidarity is a fundamental Durkheimian value, hyper-individualism must, by definition, be sacrificed for the good of this solidarity.

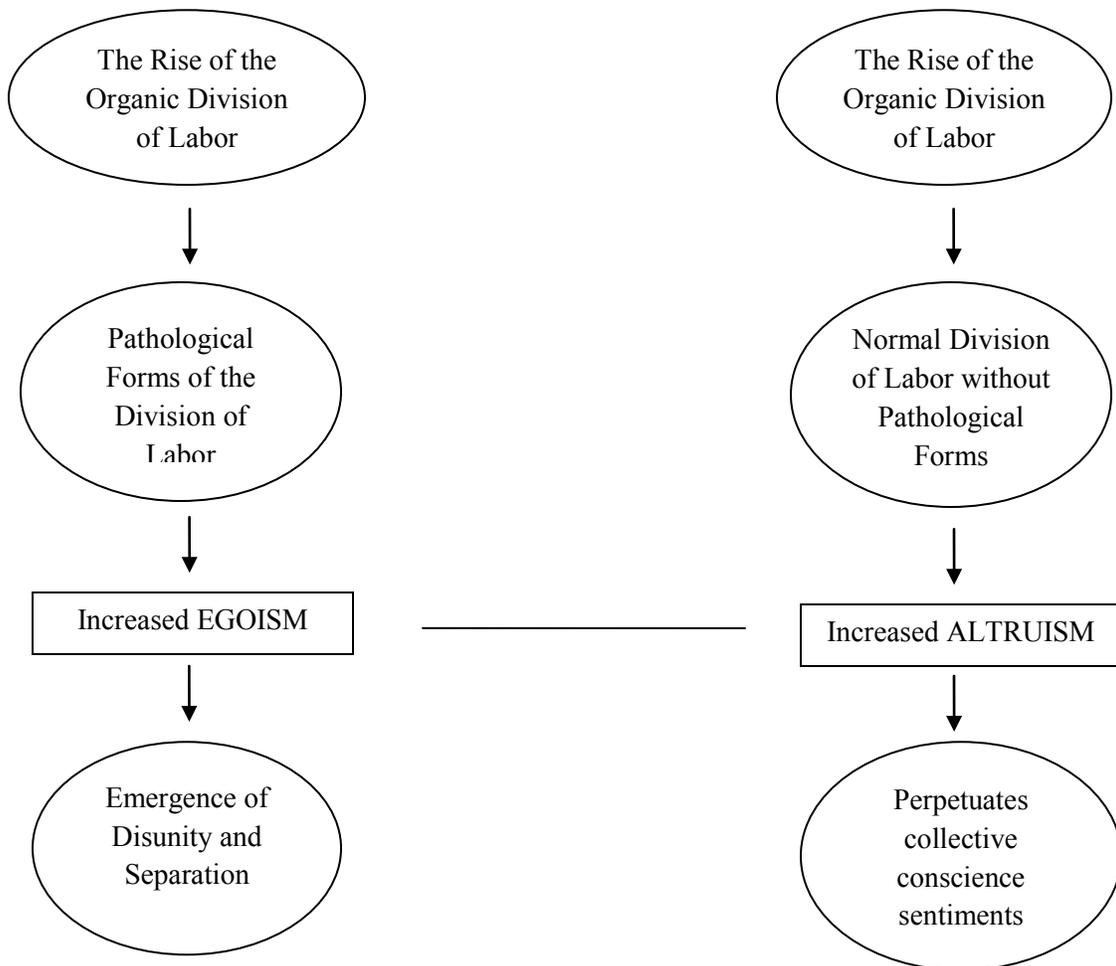


Figure 1 Egoism, Altruism, and the Division of Labor

The modern organic division of labor greatly alters the social bond and creates the conditions for differentiation and specialization. Durkheim's paramount goal and desire was to protect solidarity for the sake of the values of altruism and social cohesion. "Altruism is not destined to become as Spencer would wish, a kind of pleasant ornament of our social life," Durkheim states "but one that will always be its fundamental basis" (Durkheim [1893] 1997:173).

CHAPTER 3

DURKHEIM'S CRITIQUE OF SPENCERIAN UTILITARIANISM: AN EVALUATION

Introduction

In this chapter, an evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of Durkheim's critique of Spencerian utilitarianism is presented. Chapter 2 suggested that all of Durkheim's logical and ethical arguments are drawn from modern French society and are generally a critique of British empiricism. Durkheim's lack of faith in democracy and progress led him toward a reformist position in which he sought reconciliation with fundamental principles of the past. Durkheim's secular-rationalism and anti-individualism are the basis of both praise and criticism.

Logical and Empirical Evaluation

The Contractual Relationship

Durkheim's major criticism of Spencer's conception of the social bond arising in contractual exchange is based on his assertion that unintended non-contractual facts are intrinsic to the process of contractual exchange. Likely Durkheim's strongest empirical argument against a strictly intentionalist methodological individualism is that non-contractual elements are indeed present within the exchange relation. These unintended elements rest in the "constraint of religion, morality, or law – or all of these" (Nisbett 1974:77).

Though some of Durkheim's strongest critics reject his empirical argument on the basis of his misunderstanding of modern contracts¹, non-contractual elements *can* and *do* bring about constraint in the relationship. These constraints can weaken social bonds in the same way that Spencer's view of exchange can and does bring individuals together. What remains in question

¹ Early critics of Durkheim (Tarde 1894, Tönnies 1924) already noted Durkheim's underestimation and devaluation of individual uniqueness and rejection of the contractual relationship (Lukes 1973).

is how non-contractual features can be explained or altered. Durkheim fails to sufficiently address this question; he merely infers that primitive forms of contracts are applicable to present circumstances. Though non-contractual elements can constrain, facilitate, and frame interaction and sustainable relationships, Durkheim's assertion that *contractual* attachment is necessarily contingent and short-lived is not supported by the evidence. While some contractual relationships are based on "profit-maximizing" and "interest-actuated" (Nisbett 1974:76) exchange, Durkheim underestimates and virtually neglects possible long-term bonds established by individuals within an ongoing exchange process. His logical reduction of exchange relations to purely utilitarian motives creates an insuperable barrier between him and Spencer that would disconnect and fundamentally destroy the intellectual dialogue.

Durkheim also rejects any notion that contract could replace status because he believes that self-interest necessarily invades and disrupts the social bond arising between two or more individuals. Again, Durkheim does not account for the fact that a contract *can* strengthen the social bond. His focus on self-interest and egoism dilutes the reality of the development of *new* bonds. What Durkheim refers to as *superficial contact* ([1893] 1997) is in reality, the basis of contemporary social interaction and relationships. If this contact is indeed superficial, why do individuals freely continue to seek such transactions, often with the *same* cooperating individuals time and time again?

For example, if Individual A seeks an exchange relationship with Individual B, the relationship is valid if both parties' needs are met through reciprocal exchange and mutual satisfaction through the transaction. If both parties depart satisfied with the arrangement there is nothing to suggest that a social bond has been broken; if anything, the mutual respect and

cooperation will increase and develop the bond (this is assuming that the exchange was agreed upon as fair and beneficial by both parties).

In this scenario, individuals are acting upon rational choice independent of social structure and collective life; however, the result of this contractual exchange *does* benefit society far beyond the individual level. The construction of schools, churches, and homes as well as the institutions of marriages and adoption all result in the promotion of social bonds through modern exchange. Contractual-based relations are possible beyond momentary exchange and can sustain broader patterns of cooperation based on reciprocal need satisfaction. The difficulty for Durkheim rests on his inability to accept individual expression and decision apart from the group. The contractual relationship can, as Spencer suggested, make the individual aware of the freedom one possesses and the growth, not detracting, of social life.

Durkheim's Fatal Empirical Flaw

Durkheim states in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* a position that echoes his earlier declaration from *The Division of Labor in Society* rejecting utilitarianism:

... man is twofold. Within him are two beings: An individual being that originates in the organism and whose sphere of action is strictly limited by this fact; and a social being that represents within us the higher reality of the intellectual and moral order that we know through observation – by which I mean society... this duality of our nature makes it impossible to reduce a moral ideal to a utilitarian motive; and in the realm of thought, this duality makes it impossible to reduce reason to individual experience (Durkheim [1912] 2001:18).

Durkheim's position may be succinctly stated: everything social is caused by a collective entity "society" and individuality is a *product*, not a *premise* of such. More specifically, Durkheim asserts that norms, values, and traditions that a society shares are produced by the common consciousness. This 'common' or 'group mind' must be protected and defended at any

cost to avoid anarchism arising from the weakening of the collective and its detrimental effects on social solidarity.

In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim explains how social realism manifests itself. The emergence of a 'group mind' appears through collective effervescence, i.e. a form of energy that emerges through the intensity of a social gathering (See Figure 2). These collective thoughts shared among members of a society are a societal reality, and unites individuals in a coherent commonality. Though individuals are still unique in a limited sense, they now are bound to the group and this group identity is central to their happiness and livelihood (Durkheim [1912] 2001).

Durkheim's logical case against Spencer and utilitarianism is generally premised in his metaphysical position, *social realism*. Social realism was a controversial theory when developed and remains so. As Lukes succinctly declares: "Critics continue to characterize [social realism]... as dogmatic, scholastic, even mystical, as unverifiable, and unscientific or alternately as a denial of the freedom and uniqueness of the individual, and sometimes as immoral, entailing advocacy of the subordination of the individual to the group" (1973:497).

Spencer's claims that "... individuals, as we find them, and the community they form will inevitably present certain traits; and *no* [italics mine] community having such traits can be formed out of individuals having other structures and instincts" (Peel 1972:97-98). Durkheim ardently defends his position suggesting that Spencer was wrong because "[Spencer] did not see in societies a true reality existing by itself..." instead "for Spencer it is an arrangement instituted [merely] by individuals so as to extend the length and scope of [individual] human life" ([1893] 1997:281).

Durkheim asserts repeatedly this central empirical claim throughout his career, i.e. the notion that a ‘group mind’ exists separately from the individual as a *sui generis* entity produced by “society” and that the individual *cannot* survive without. All of Durkheim’s most consequential studies (e.g. suicide and religion) were conducted on this presumption of the *sui generis* existence of a group mind.

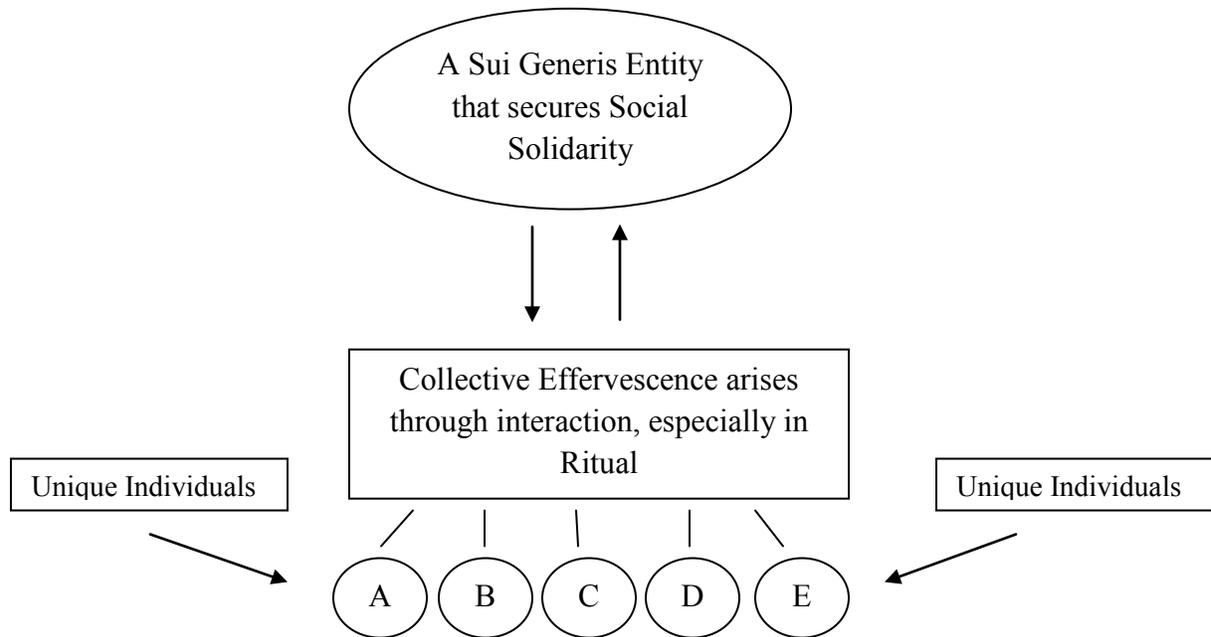


Figure 2 The Emergence of a Group Mind through Mystical Collective Effervescence

Durkheim’s societal essentialism and construct of a ‘group mind’ is logically unfalsifiable and also reminiscent of Comte’s sociology defending a metaphysically-conceived “religion of humanity” (Lukes 1973). The greatest problem with Durkheim’s social realism is the fact that it cannot be empirically tested and he fails to provide evidence for his position. Throughout his lifetime he answers criticism with arguments that were purely speculative in

nature.² Durkheim's only real "evidence" was his personal conviction that he was correct and his relentless efforts displaying this when trying to convince others of his claim.

Durkheim's Untenable Theory of 'Social Facts'

Durkheim's theory of "social facts" is a second distinct element and further extension of his societalist metaphysics. According to Durkheim, social facts are components of everyday life (religious beliefs, law, social structure, etc.) that exist outside or exterior to the individual (Lukes 1973). Social facts, by Durkheim's estimation, prove the existence of a social reality that is later inscribed in individual human consciousness. He suggests that individual-level biopsychological traits and dispositions have *nothing* to do with the development of social facts. Because social facts remain and are sustained as exclusive products of collective reasoning, he offers no explanation for those individual motivational drives that produce neither social needs nor the phenomena of individual ability, want, and desire.

For Durkheim, individual belief, need, and fortitude do not exist apart from society's influence, and the individual is discarded as practically causally-insignificant against the resilience of societal structure (Lukes 1973). Despite limiting his conception of the individual to a mere social product, Durkheim nevertheless erroneously maintains that he recognizes individual attributes. Again, Durkheim offers a position that cannot be empirically tested and must be rejected.

It is not clear what Durkheim means when he suggests that only social facts can explain social facts or that they have a meaning of their own (Durkheim [1893] 1997). Social life *does* exert influence on the individual, but does not obviate the fact that individual variation also influences society. The existence of an individual's religious beliefs, political positions, and other personal attributes *do* exist *prior* and *external* to the individual; however, it is individual

² See for example his debate with Gabriel Tarde cited in Lukes 1973:302.

variation that brings changes to the nature of these institutions. Theological and ideological differences in religious and political institutions result from individual variations that exert themselves *upon* society, not the opposite.

The maturing individual is certainly immersed in facts about society, but the question must be asked: How did social facts come about? Durkheim never satisfactorily explains this. The past is a good indicator for understanding the world we live in (e.g. norms, beliefs) but we must question how the social world was developed and how much individual variation contributed. The individual is certainly influenced by society but can also wield influence that changes structure. If social facts are understood as created by human activity, then how can they be explained as a *sui generis* reality existing independent of this nature?

If social facts cannot be known beyond reflection, then they cannot be scientifically measured. Biological and psychological factors *can*, along with social reality, explain the nature of social life. Intelligence, motivation, physical strength, and personality traits are all indicators that social facts cannot be explained as an entity existing independent of humans if it depends on humans for its development and sustainability.

In sum, Durkheim's failure to recognize the social attributes of modern contractual exchange and discrepancies within his metaphysical positions on social facts and 'social realism', require that his positive argument be rejected. It must be reiterated that the pre-social individual is limited in Durkheim's empirical world and plays a minimal role in the development and sustainability of society. His theory on non-contractual elements of the exchange process serves as an adequate explanation of distracting and dismantling possible social relationships, but this relationship requires further investigation.

Normative and Ethical Evaluation

Durkheim's Portrayal of Spencer's Normative and Ethical Positions

Durkheim critiques Spencer's normative and ethical philosophy on the basis that it presumes hedonistic individualism and self-interest as a motivational anchor for social life. Durkheim's "anti-individualism" and "pro-collectivism" reflect his ethical convictions; Nisbett accurately states "Durkheim rejected individualism on every possible ground... [and] found it insupportable as a principle of social solidarity [and] as an ethical or moral value..." (1974:16). Durkheim's rejection of bio-social explanations is near absolute yet his assertion that morality is a product of social life is *not* consistently operationalized to every sphere of the social. The natural instinct of womanhood is an exception to this general rule³.

Durkheim's Criticism of Spencer's Moral Theory

Durkheim's critique of Spencer's moral theory is analogous to his critique of Spencer's logical methodology. If for Durkheim social solidarity is the cardinal, societal, unfettered basis of morality, individualism must be opposed. According to Durkheim, social progression and industrialization lead to individualistic pursuit of self-interest thus disrupting the common consciousness and the moral structure of society. Durkheim hypothesizes that differentiation and specialization are departures from society's natural, happy, altruistic state.

In *The Division of Labor in Society*, Durkheim describes the importance of a governing authority's, individual's, or group's primary function: "to ensure respect for beliefs, traditions, and collective practices" ([1893] 1997:42). In this particular scenario, Durkheim is referring to local authorities in primitive societies, but he desires to also apply this principle to modern societies. He considers dutiful respect for authority figures at any level to be both necessary and

³ Lukes, *Emile Durkheim: His Life and Work, A Historical and Critical Study*, p. 18

desirable for sustaining the collective ideas of the common consciousness. Opposed to limited government, radical individualism, and the values of unbridled individuality and its right and will to self-govern, Durkheim prescribes the need for a dominating normative order to protect and preserve society's social order.

Similarly in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim addresses moral authority by stating that “[s]ociety requires us to become its servants” ([1912] 2001:154). The intention behind his demand is expectation of the increased state of altruism arising through self-service simultaneously benefitting the common consciousness. Durkheim goes on to suggest that “the collective voice has a resonance that a single voice cannot have” ([1912] 2001:155-156). Again, this is a decisive departure from Spencer and the utilitarians. Where Spencer would fight for moral individualism, Durkheim again asserts the moral priority of the collective. He would always view the power, strength, and authority of the collective body as something that supersedes the capability of the individual *qua* individual.

Is Durkheim's Alternative Moral Theory Valid?

One of Durkheim's primary objections to Spencer in *The Division of Labor* is the individualistic assertion that social differentiation and occupational specialization are possible gateways to happiness. The fear Durkheim confronts is that social distance within this framework will weaken the social bond and lead to pathological conditions. At this point, Durkheim asserts a strong contradiction within his own social philosophy. In *The Division of Labor* he states “the most simple creature and the most complex one experience the same happiness if they both equally realize their own nature” (188-189). He goes on to suggest that “that there is no connection between the variations in happiness and the progress of the division of labor” (194). The contradiction is as follows: Durkheim asserts that happiness *can* exist

independent of the progress of the division of labor but contrarily suggests that the mechanisms of this division can be the root *cause* of unhappiness and egoism. Durkheim asserts that an individual *can* be happy as long as one recognizes his or her own nature. We can therefore conclude by Durkheim's paradox that happiness *can* be attained within the process of social differentiation and occupational specialization.

Durkheim comes to accept solidarity as a value superior to happiness. As noted in Chapter 2, disunity and isolation are viewed as two outcomes of an individualistic division of labor. Durkheim fails to consider that the inevitable result of society growing heterogeneous independent of large scale industry could also lead to forms that he considers pathological. Disunity is a result of differentiation *within* and *outside* of industry. Durkheim also ignores manufactured items produced through specialization that *can* and *do* increase social bonds.

Isolation is Durkheim's other concern. Isolation is more prevalent in the industrial sector alone. Similar to disunity, Durkheim assumes that specialization leading to an individual working apart from the group also damages solidarity. Like disunity, the fruits of industry through isolated work can also increase social bonds. Examples of this include advancements in science and technology that bring individuals together through social networking and sophisticated forms of communication. Durkheim correctly assumes that self-interest deflates altruism, but also potentially neglects the prominent existence of self-interest and lack of altruism within social solidarity. Collective needs often propel similar features as individual needs. Self-interest and individualistic motivation did exist in primitive, collective societies, and every member of a group is not always cooperatively satisfied with outcomes. An example of this selfishness in primitive societies would be the power, influence, and oversight of the *Chief*, or so-called moral authority.

Durkheim's societalist concept of morality as product of social structure denies the causal significance of individual self-preservation as a motivational force in society. Though "evolution gave us the preconditions of morality"⁴ for him, it is the inescapable influence of one's society, i.e. social institutions, that predominate and overwhelm the moral motivational traits of the individual.

Drifting from the accepted position that morality is primarily a product of social structure and institutions, the notion of *Durkheimian moral authority* must come into question. Durkheim proposes yet another position that places limits on the individual by mechanisms of constraint and compliance to rules (Lukes 1973). Durkheim gives the impression that individual deviation from collective morality is not only undesirable but in some way poses danger to the individual and society as a collective whole.

Finally, the ultimate connection, societalism and morality, is found in the concept of the church; a social institution Durkheim praises for infusing collective cohesion and social bonds: "A church is not simply a priestly brotherhood; it is the moral community formed by all believers in the same faith, worshippers, as well as priests" (Durkheim [1912] 2001:44). Religion, like morality, is produced and experienced communally. He stressed that "religious beliefs proper are always held by a defined collectivity that professes them and practices the rites that go with them" (Durkheim [1912] 2001:42).

Durkheim's emphasis on the importance of religion would go further: He suggests "nearly all great social institutions are born of religion" and he continues, "[t]he idea of society is the soul of religion. Religious forces are then human forces, moral forces" (Durkheim [1912] 2001:314). This relationship between religion and morality creates order and stability in society because contrary to utilitarian philosophy: "... religion seems to dwell entirely in the innermost

⁴ Levy, *What Makes Us Moral: Crossing the Boundaries of Biology*, p. 205

of the individual, the living spring that feeds it is still found in society” (Durkheim [1912] 2001:320). In short, Durkheim considers religion to be the original form of the common consciousness and the basis for social cohesion (Lukes 1973) and notes that religious beliefs originate from the group.

There are two major problems with Durkheim’s religion-morality claim: First, Society as *Subject* is an invalid, empirically dubious logical abstraction. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim states that “a society is quite capable of arousing the sensation of the divine, simply by its influence over the minds of its members” ([1912] 2001:154). Again, Durkheim resorts to a weak metaphysical argument consistent with his theory, ‘social realism’. Durkheim makes no effort to explain to his peers how this is logically possible.

Secondly, Durkheim may have observed that religious beliefs spring from commonality among the group, but he completely ignored religious diversity *within* these groups. Had Durkheim studied Christianity or Islam, i.e. individualistic religions today, the results of his studies would have been quite different. Religion evolves over time and Durkheim’s case of study is not representative of contemporary religion. It may not even be representative of primitive religions (Lukes 1973). Historical progress would reveal individualization within religion the same way it proved within the division of labor (Nisbet 1974). Progress within religion brought about the same results as progress within society due to the division of labor.

CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION

The fatal flaw in Durkheim's critique of Spencer rests in a misunderstanding of and disregard for innate human uniqueness and the asocial genetic nature of the human individual. Though individuals often share numerous similarities with their social group, human's process and internalize social life in different ways (Nisbett 1974). Durkheim ignores social-psychological assumptions and basic differences among humans. Our ability to interpret, conceptualize, and integrate into society is distinctive in itself (Lukes 1973). In sum, Durkheim's claim that individual life is born of collective life disregards all possible bio-psychological explanations of individual variations including natural instinct and genetic disposition. Robert Nisbett states that:

Durkheim, from the beginning of his scholarly career, opposed... biologism. Neither in the collective germ plasm of race nor in the germ plasm of the individual did Durkheim find more than a point of departure for sociology. Biological explanations may be adequate – that is, a part of the larger picture – Durkheim argued, but they can never be *sufficient* (Nisbett 1974:17 [italics added]).

Though Durkheim confronts Spencer with strong arguments and a vast body of research, most of his claims fail due to lack of vision concerning historical progress, illogical examples of contemporary societies, and faulty metaphysics. Morality as a product of society is the strongest challenge Durkheim presents toward Spencer (Durkheim [1912] 2001). His metaphysical position 'social realism' is the most disputable of all his viewpoints. Though 'social realism' makes up the framework of Durkheim's sociology, his contributions are still noteworthy as an effort by the French to make sociology distinctly *separate* from the natural sciences.

The study of the individual's relationship to society and the basic conditions of the social bond must be confronted for the future success of sociology as a discipline. If the

individual is not a subject completely produced from the cloth of society, then there *are* individual variations within humans that are uniquely expressive and separate from the system in which we find ourselves. It is these variations that causally contribute, for better, or worse, to the societies in which we live.

This thesis does not promote utilitarian self-interest but does provide evidence that social bonds *can* and *do* increase within the modern division of labor; a claim that Durkheim continuously rejects. It has also been this researcher's ambition to provide evidence that Durkheim's collective consciousness paradigm and Spencer's theory that individual variation is the sole explanation of societal composition should both be rejected for a position that recognizes the veracity and importance of the influence of *both* realities upon each other.

Most philosophers and social theorists who challenged Durkheim in the past have virtually disappeared from scholarship, yet Durkheim's theories remain at the center of sociology. The great danger in rejecting Durkheim's most prominent claims may imply genuine danger for sociology as an academic discipline. The denial of Durkheimian 'social facts' would lead some academics to conclude that sociology is neither distinct nor necessary and that the remaining content could be studied under the heading of another academic discipline such as psychology or biology. There are too many observable phenomena that *are* social in nature for this to occur, but a denunciation of some of Durkheim's most notorious ideas is both essential and necessary.

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