Emile Durkheim
Sociologist and moralist

Edited by
Stephen P. Turner
What are the connections between Durkheim’s activities as a moralist and his conception of sociology? What were Durkheim’s political hopes and how are they connected to his sociology?

International scholarship over the last twenty years has produced a new understanding of Emile Durkheim as a thinker. This book is the first to present the reader with an overview of the best of this scholarship, and provides a taste of research much of which is not available in English elsewhere. Although the essays included reflect a wide range of concerns and styles of thought, there is a startling coherence in the image they present. Durkheim was, from his first reviews to his last written work, a moralist, and this collection reconnects the two parts of the man that other writings have generally separated: the institutionalizer of sociology and the moralist. Emile Durkheim: Sociologist and Moralist provides us with a Durkheim, hitherto known only to specialists, who utilized the insights of sociology for the purpose of intervention into moral development.

‘This collection by distinguished experts presents some of the best scholarship on the wide range of topics on which Durkheim wrote and had influence.’

Kenneth Thompson, The Open University

Stephen P. Turner is Distinguished Research Professor in Philosophy at the University of South Florida, Tampa, USA.

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INTRODUCTION
Reconnecting the sociologist to the moralist

*Stephen P. Turner*

The philosopher and moralist Alasdair Maclntyre closed his influential work, *After Virtue,* with a call for ‘another…Saint Benedict’ (1981: 238–45). The idea of calling for a moral exemplar and savior who could change both forms and practice struck him as the only kind of serious intervention the moral thinker can make under present circumstances, What is lacking in modern life, he reasoned, is a genuine tradition of moral reasoning—moral persuasion and reasoning presuppose such a tradition. So the only choice is to create one. But the creation of a tradition is not something that a professor can do in the study. It is an act, as Maclntyre conceived it, of community formation and the development of a common narrative—what St Benedict did when he created the religious communities of post-Roman Europe through the attractive example of his own way of living as a Christian.

Maclntyre was not sociologically naive in coming to this conclusion. Maclntyre constructed a sociological account of the history of ethics from the heroic societies of Homeric Greece to the present as a basis for a rethinking of the moral situation of the present day. Heroic societies, he reasoned, were societies in which not ‘moral principles’ but rather *virtues* were celebrated and formed the core of ‘moral’ experience. Virtues, he argued, were more or less directly connected to the good of the community, in a visible way. The Homeric heroes, for example, were persons whose excellence in fulfilling the roles set for them in their societies enabled their communities to achieve communal aims. The ancient virtues were closely connected to defined social roles, and when these roles were themselves transformed by the stabilization of Greek politics and the rise of urbanism, they no longer had much application to the actual problems of life, and this posed fundamental intellectual problems for moralists and ultimately for philosophers.

The flowering of Greek ethics at the time of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and their students was a response to these changed social circumstances. Subsequent forms of moral reasoning were, similarly, fitted to the different social worlds of later societies, and came to be fitted in a specific way—through intellectual effort. Maclntyre’s own idea of the path out of the moral confusion of the present day is that virtue, and the associated sense of a purposeful life, need to be re-established in a central place in our morality. He considers that virtues can only
be connected to our community existence through the creation of new narratives in which individuals and communities can tell their own story, in ways in which the individual has a place in a story of the community, and in which the acts of the individual and the virtues of an individual have a narrative connection to the larger story of the life of the community. Similar ideas are found in the writings of other ‘communitarian’ philosophers and sociologists today.

Like Maclntyre, Emile Durkheim was concerned with the problems of creating a morality appropriate to our times and also believed that the key to an understanding of the moral problems of the present was the understanding of moral change across long historical and evolutionary stretches. But the story told by Durkheim is quite different from Maclntyre’s—it has a different center, and a different conclusion. In Maclntyre’s historical narrative, the central figure is the individual moral agent, within a given social situation that is more or less fixed, who is faced with the task of conceiving and articulating solutions to immediate practical problems of action, but has access only to moral ideologies that no longer apply. The individual in Maclntyre is not merely a moral reflector, but an individual who is engaged in a particular human project or individual project—itself constituted out of the materials of a tradition of moral practice and reasoning, the received moral tradition with which one faces novel situations and in terms of which situations are pre-interpreted.

For Durkheim, the reasoning moral agent recedes, and is replaced by a person who is in the grip of social forces—particularly currents of feeling and desire—in ever-changing balance with one another, which are experienced phenomenologically in ways that do not reveal their true nature as causes—a true nature that Durkheim takes to be collective and immaterial. This argument, as it develops in Durkheim’s own thought, shifts the center of Durkheim’s narrative radically. It is this radical shift, and the novel conception of the proper role of the moralist it entails, that is the subject of this volume.

The manifest focus of Durkheim’s writings, and the focus of the first two parts of the present volume, will be on Durkheim’s central concerns as a sociologist—his deepening realization of the ‘religious’ character and roots of social institutions and his concept of the person. It might be supposed from this emphasis on the religious element that Durkheim was what has come to be called a ‘normative functionalist.’ A normative functionalist believes, on the one hand, that the normative element of action is essential to any understanding of action, but also that norms are themselves to be understood not, as for example Maclntyre does, as a product of individual action and reflection, much less as theories of ethics or narratives, but as a more or less automatic product of the needs of societal systems. Conflicts in normative orders, according to normative functionalism, may arise, especially where moral imperatives or norms and values come into conflict with one another for particular subgroups of society. In these cases there is the potential for ‘deviance’ or for lack of ‘integration’ into the prevailing, functional, normative scheme. But these difficulties are difficulties of individual adjustment to a prevailing normative order that is itself
based on and explained by the functional demands of the social system as a whole.

The defenders of normative functionalism in sociology have found much to employ in Durkheim’s writings, and in their eyes Durkheim was himself a normative functionalist. The points of commonality between Durkheim and normative functionalism are, indeed, many. The role of the individual moral innovator or the ethical thinker is radically diminished in both accounts of morality, in sharp contrast to writers like Maclntyre. But there is more to Durkheim than normative functionalism, and this ‘more’ is essential to an understanding of Durkheim’s full project. Durkheim was as much a moralist as Maclntyre, and like Maclntyre he did not pretend to have discovered a new moral system but considered himself to be analyzing the conditions under which necessary changes in morality were to occur or could occur. Like Maclntyre and unlike the normative functionalists who appropriated Durkheim, Durkheim himself believed both that moral change of a constructive kind was inevitable and that a moral order appropriate to the present level of societal development would emerge, and moreover that the present moral situation was pathological and that some set of events or actions, preferably guided by the new discipline of sociology, was necessary to correct this pathology.

In the last part of this book, we will consider some of the ways in which Durkheim reasoned about the conditions for moral change and the necessary character of novel moral development in modern society. We will see, in this section, that Durkheim was centrally concerned with the problem of assuring commitment on the part of members of society to new moral ideas or their bindingness and less concerned with their content or with the specific problems they resolved (although, in general, he saw the moral problems of modern society as deriving from the central fact of the division of labor and the conflicts between the division of labor).

The results are as tantalizingly unspecific as Maclntyre’s own. But they have the advantage of not resting directly on a problematic philosophical anthropology. Durkheim takes the problem of the diversity of morals seriously. He sees, as his competitors generally have not, that there are few if any human purposes that are not purposes within a societally specific sense of the world, a sense that is more deeply rooted than doctrine and ideology and impervious to mere intellectual change. Maclntyre himself is forced to adopt such an account—to substitute the claim that ‘man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal’ (1981:201) for other versions of the human essence. Durkheim rejected the appeal to philosophical anthropology or ‘human nature’ as an account of social differences and social change. In the long view of intellectual history, this is a deeply radical step. It is also a deeply problematic one.

Durkheim’s novelty in this respect was a matter of the radical character of his approach to the problem. Others had denied, in one manner or another, the idea of an underlying, ahistorical, human nature—notably Marx in his ‘Theses on
Feuerbach.’ Herbert Spencer himself was revered, especially in American sociological circles, eager to declare their independence of economics, for showing that ‘human nature’ was not historically constant. But Durkheim went very far beyond either of them, to move large parts of the explanatory domain of traditional concepts of the moral agent to the realm of the social.1

Durkheim’s slogan against the conventional uses of appeals to human nature was ‘explain the social only by the social.’ This proved a difficult commitment to keep, as Philippe Besnard shows in his chapter in the present volume, even in his own analyses of moral issues. More fundamentally, it seems to conflict with the whole notion of an applied science of morality or indeed with any sort of moralism. If the causes of moral change are in the collective consciousness, they are not open to manipulation through rational persuasion. Yet Durkheim’s reasoning provides a strong basis for understanding why projects for novel moralities and moral regeneration typically have failed, and an approach to the most basic obstacle to any sort of applied moral science. The obstacle is one which is always lurking on the periphery of moral reflection. It is the problem of commitment. As Durkheim understood, ideas and commitments, thought and feeling, are or must be inseparable if the ideas are to have practical moral force. New ideas must not simply promise to bind, but must bind in emotional fact and in so binding transform the individuals who are bound. This problem was the core of his positive efforts as a moralist.

His recognition and tracing of the ‘religious’ character of social institutions and of such values as individualism, discussed in Part I of the present volume, represent a radical alternative both to utilitarianism, which faces the problem of commitment in the form of the free-rider problem, and to virtue moralities, in which excellence in the performance of social roles is visibly conducive to the common good. Durkheim made the connection between commitment or binding and social purposes at a far more basic level—at the level of the primal constitution of society itself (which he saw as fundamentally a religious phenomenon), in the echoes and reenactments of this primal constitutive moment, and in the moments of emotional communion in which society, and morality, are reconstituted. These moments are beyond the direct reach of the moral doctrinaire. But the moralist who seeks to apply the lessons of Durkheimian sociology nevertheless can constructively intervene, Part II examines Durkheim’s revised conception of the moral agent. Part III examines his conception of the role of the scientific moralist.

**PART I

RELIGION AS FONS ET ORIGO**

Part I of this volume begins with Robert Alun Jones’s discussion of the origins of Durkheim’s sociology of religion and the background to the idea that religion was ‘“the most primitive of all social phenomena,”’ the root from which all other institutional forms had derived’ (Jones, infra: 40). Jones approaches Durkheim’s
arrival at this thesis through a consideration of Durkheim’s response to Fustel de Coulages’s work *La Cité Antique*, one of the most influential works of the century, which examined the religion of ancient Greece and Rome. Fustel challenged the notion that the Greeks and Romans provided useful institutional models for nineteenth-century France and challenged the idea that French society, and European society generally, could be seen as the heir of Greco-Roman political achievement. Fustel’s means of arguing proceeded by substituting a mode of explanation in which religion is understood to be closely related to political institutions for the more familiar ideological approach, in which beliefs about institutions are understood as both their justifications and explanations. What separates us from the ancient world, Fustel argued, is the alienness of these religious beliefs and rites, such as their idea of the immortality of the soul and the connected fact of their focus on burial ritual. Fustel shows that these beliefs had formative effects on institutions such as the ‘family, private property, law, morality and the ancient city itself (Jones, infra: 31).

Durkheim, as Jones points out, took over Fustel’s mode of comparative historical analysis. But whereas Fustel’s interests in institutions were genealogical, Durkheim wished to extend the comparative method to the new findings of Australian and American ethnography. The results of these comparative analyses were striking. They confirmed Fustel’s ideas about the ‘priority and explanatory power of religious beliefs’ (Jones, infra: 35) and, with the aid of the ideas and data collected by James Frazer and Robertson Smith, Durkheim extended these ideas to social development generally. They formed the basis of his lecture course on ethics taught at Bordeaux in 1898–1900. In this series of lectures Durkheim takes up another problem that Fustel had become famous for, the problem of the nature and origin of the general right of property. The puzzle Durkheim saw was that it is unclear how a ‘universal’ right could emerge from the familiar duties and obligations owed to co-members of small groups such as clans or families. Durkheim’s conclusion was a generalization of the argument of Fustel, namely that the rationalistic ideologies or utilitarian justifications of these institutions were specious and irrelevant to their explanation. The roots of the idea of private property were in the sacralization of land implied in the rituals of the harvest. In this respect Durkheim followed Fustel in relativizing property rights to historical circumstances, and as Jones points out ‘in this sense it belongs to Durkheim’s lifelong attack on liberal individualism as much as to his sociology of religion’ (infra: 40).

But for Durkheim, the deeper lessons were different. The idea of private property in its historical manifestations was relative. There was, however, a general lesson: that collective appropriation was a pre-condition for private appropriation. The sacralization of land was the collective appropriation of the utility of land, which was the source of the dignity of the right to property. The source of the right to property is thus in society rather than in the private needs and goods of the individual, and, most importantly, the original connection is
made at the primal level of early religious practice, rather than as the result of quasiutilitarian calculations or functional evolution.

The theme of primal religious origins is continued in Pickering’s discussion of the origins of conceptual thinking in Durkheim. In Durkheim’s *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* a particularly strong version of the argument that abstract categories (and the kind of thinking involved in abstraction) are religious in origin is advanced. This interpretation, however, creates a puzzle about the status of Durkheim and Mauss’s 1903 monograph on classification, One interpretation is that the subject matter of the two books is the same and that the 1903 book is ‘evidence for the general thesis of the later book’ (Pickering, infra: 53). Durkheim himself advanced this interpretation. But the topics of the two books are quite different. The discussion on the elementary forms is concerned with such abstract concepts as space, time, cause and totality, deriving from Kant’s critique of pure reason, which Kant calls ‘categories’. The 1903 essay is concerned with *dassifications*. The two are not the same. But what precisely is their relation in Durkheim’s account?

Religion plays almost no role in the discussion in *Primitive Classification*. The sole reference to religion is to religious emotion. And this reference appears only in the conclusion. But this ‘emotional’ element in both classificatory and fundamental categories provides a link between the two texts. The argument of the monograph was that classifications of a cosmological kind derived in some fashion from social classifications. Pickering suggests that Durkheim in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* and in his concern with the origins of abstract thinking as such was forced to an even more distant historical origin, to the primal social situations of collective effervescence in which collective representations emerge. The centrality of the moment of fluidity in which collective representations can emerge and bind the participants is a theme that recurs in the final section of this volume. Although the notion of collective effervescence is a part of Durkheim’s late work and is a small part of his discussion, it obviously plays an essential logical role in his analysis. The constitution of societies through collective representations and practices must be itself accounted for. Durkheim does so by the identification of a social situation within which collective representations and practices can themselves originate. Both the particular collective representations of a given moral order and the primal abstract categories of all thought must be accounted for, and there is an element of commonality in Durkheim’s treatment of both.

Durkheim, of course, has other tools to explain the transformation of collective representations, for example in terms of the combination of pre-existing categories. But there is a limit to such explanations. They do not allow for the possibility of genuine moral and religious novelty. Collective effervescence fills the gap created by the limitations of these forms of explanation.

In modern societies, the law takes on the centrality of religious practice in primitive societies. But as Vogt shows in his essay on Durkheim’s sociology of
law, the thesis that ‘Everything social is religious’ (quoted in Vogt, infra: 79) is carried through here as well: ‘All penal law is, more or less, religious,’ (quoted in Vogt, infra: 78) Durkheim says in The Division of Labor in Society. But penal law is not the only law. The problem that Durkheim needs to explain, and to which his sociology of law is in large part devoted, is the transformation of the law in ‘modern’ regimes. The religious idea that informs modern society and modern law is the idea of the individual, and Durkheim is frankly enthusiastic about the social forms and political constitutional forms that are entailed by respect for the individual, He was, of course, concerned to establish—perhaps over-optimistically—that ‘feelings of human fraternity’ (quoted in Vogt, infra: 89) will derive from the enhanced social life and political life of modern orders, yet his vision of modern society is nevertheless, as Vogt points out, ‘optimistic and liberal’ (infra: 89).

Durkheim never constructed a systematic political sociology or political theory. Moreover, as the normative functionalist interpretation of Durkheim stressed, he was deeply distressed by the moral crises of modern society, crises that may readily be interpreted as a product of unrestrained individualism, Durkheim’s political analysis of these problems and of the problem of solidarity is examined by Müiller in his chapter on Durkheim’s political sociology. Vogt made the point that in Durkheim’s lectures, he was often much more frankly normative than his monographs. Müller shows Durkheim at the point of diagnosing the pathologies of development. Durkheim supposed that there was a normal process by which ‘rules develop spontaneously in the course of social intercourse, as part of a gradual process of habitualization in which… exchange is first regulated provisionally, then as a habit and last of all legally’ (Müller, infra: 98). The normal development of such rules, however, might be disrupted. Durkheim’s diagnosis was that it had, indeed, been disrupted and that some sort of intervention was necessary to shorten the transition to the novel forms of social regulation that had pathologically failed to fully emerge. The first problem faced by anyone attempting to help such a transition along is in the correct identification of the new framework which is emerging. The political side of the problem, as Durkheim conceived it, was the lack of sufficiently large and sufficiently powerful institutions between the individual and the state, ‘the result of the abolition of “intermediate bodies” during the French Revolution’ (Müller, infra: 101) and the centralization of the French state. In contrast to Spencer, he regarded the problem of excessive state power as a problem of the lack of opposing intermediate forces rather than the excessive extinction of the state’s activities and powers. Ordinarily, according to Durkheim, the ‘stronger the state the more the individual is respected’ (quoted in Müller, infra: 102). But this relationship holds only when there is a balance of power and communication between secondary or intermediate groups and the state which permits the development of individual autonomy.

Durkheim believed, as Müller shows, that the cult of the individual is the basic modern moral and political idea, and that regressions into archaic collectivism
were abnormal and would, therefore, be transitory. But he did not take the fulfillment of the moral demands of the ‘religious’ idea of the dignity of the person to be automatic. He considered that moral individualism required political regulation and indeed required the political regulation of the economy. These considerations led to his most dramatic predictive errors, to the idea of corporate bodies as the building blocks of future society. In this prediction, and with respect to his concern for social solidarity and justice, Durkheim was a socialist. But, Müller concludes, Durkheim was basically right about the fundamental forces in European society. Individualism combined with the belief in the collective obligation to secure social justice is the basis of the modern European welfare state.

For Durkheim, the main competitor to his sociology, at least in the 1890s, was a large body of geographical and geopolitical thinkers. The increasing emphasis on the religious origin and character of social institutions of forces of Durkheim’s later career raises the question of what he thought in this later period of the causal conditions and forces that he had previously considered important. Social morphology is the broad heading under which Durkheim had originally addressed these problems, and the fate of these concerns is an interesting index of the changes in Durkheim’s conception of his own task. The basic elements of ‘social morphology’—population size, density and social integration—are given an important role in Durkheim’s earliest writings. Indeed, we are told that the facts of social morphology play a ‘preponderant role’ in collective life and in sociological explanations (quoted in Andrews, infra: 118). His experience of 1895, in which he claims to have first recognized the importance of religion, marks a turning point in Durkheim’s writings on morphological variables themselves.

In his later writings, the autonomy of collective representations and practices and their independence from their original morphological base comes to be more heavily stressed. But Durkheim, though he obviously became fascinated with the significance of crystallized facts of collective representation, never abandoned or repudiated his earlier claims about the concrete facts of social morphology. Indeed, in 1897 and 1898 Durkheim’s yearbook, the Année Sociologique, provided for a new subfield of ‘social morphology’. In his introduction to this section Durkheim restated many of his original claims about the importance of such facts as density of population. Andrews shows that much of Durkheim’s discussion of these issues reflected the competition between Durkheimian sociology and geography. Durkheim came to the problem of social morphology in part as a critic of the explanatory ambitions of human geographers, and sought to annex much of this territory for sociology, understood as a broadly synthetic discipline. This effort was paralleled by Georg Simmel who, in Germany, was attempting to define a specific subject matter for sociology. Durkheim’s vision was broader and more imperialistic. He believed that such specialized sciences as political economy, the comparative history of law and religions, demography and political geography had previously been wrongly pursued, and wrongly pursued
because they had been conceived as independent wholes whereas they were in fact concerned with manifestations of ‘one and the same collective activity’ (quoted in Andrews, infra: 127). Durkheim thus did not so much abandon the explanatory variables that concerned him in his earlier writings as gradually reconceived them in terms of his more fully developed sociology.

The lesson of Part I may be summarized simply. Durkheim came to see the fundamental character of social institutions as ‘religious.’ The relevance to Durkheim’s notion of morality and the possible tasks of a moralist is complex. First, by establishing the religious origins and character of the central phenomena that the moral reformer wishes to reform or treat as incorrect ideology, he shows that the moralist has made a fundamental error about the subject matter, and implicitly, an error about the possibility of intervening in the development of morality. Second, by locating the connection between the fundamental institutional facts of society and ‘religious’ collective sentiment at this primal level—in the beginnings of history, coeval with conceptual reasoning itself—and by showing this ‘religious’ character to persist in the most fundamental, secular and ‘individual’ phenomena of modern life, such as the modern sense of personhood and individual dignity, he shows that any attempt to treat moral phenomena in a utilitarian fashion or to read the dictates of morality directly off of considerations of present social utility are doomed. The connection between social institutions, such as property, and collective feeling is at a level beyond that reached by utilitarian justifications of rights in philosophy and beyond the level reached by normative functionalism in sociology. Changes in deep collective sentiments, such as the individualism that arises in modern societies, are rooted in the longest and deepest processes of social development, and are not merely some sort of ‘reflection’ of the day-to-day functional steering demands of society.

PART II
MORAL AGENTS, SOCIAL BEINGS

The individual as conceived by normative functionalism is, in Harold Garfinkel’s famous phrase, a ‘cultural dope’. The individual in Durkheim might also appear, superficially, to be merely the victim of larger forces originating in the collective consciousness. Nevertheless, Durkheim’s conception of action is considerably more complex than that of normative functionalism. In his chapter, Paolo Ceri begins with the point that our conventional understanding of agents and human agency is itself informed by individualistic and subjectivistic premises. Durkheim, he points out, begins from collectivistic and objectivistic assumptions, so that in an important sense Durkheim’s conception of social action falls outside the category of ‘action theory’ entirely. When Durkheim uses the term ‘social action,’ Ceri notes, he means the action of society on the individual (Ceri, infra: 140).
Society means durable associations between people living together. Duration as Durkheim sees it, can be explained only by reference to the existence of rules which are upheld as duties, and the fundamental relationship between the individual and the group is the reciprocal relationship between duty and interest. With this kind of reasoning, of course, we are in the conceptual world of the ‘moral scientists’ of Germany, such as Rudolph von Ihering, with the difference that where Ihering begins with interest and finds himself driven to accept the explanatory necessity of ‘social’ forces which morally constrain the individual, Durkheim’s individual is first and foremost the product of moral rules.

Economic man, or interest-driven man, tears durable social orders apart. Regulation and integration hold them together. These binding forces are ‘made up of representations (especially values and norms) which are associated with more or less intense collective sentiments, reflecting the force of the associative relations within the group’ (Ceri, infra: 144). These moral elements are bound in different degrees of crystallization. Some are established over time and become formal, others are momentary states of collective feeling. These ‘crystals’ are different not only with respect to stability over time, but with respect to concentration, the degree ‘of nearness or farness from a state of collective fusion’ (Ceri, infra: 144). One of these combinations, the state of fusion itself, a state of collective enthusiasm in which there is a high level of instability and closeness, is, as we have already noticed, of particular interest from the point of view of moralism. The moment of maximum cohesion, the moment in which collective life is strongest, is also the moment of creative social action. Creativity is possible because of the strength of group feeling. At this moment, the collective representations that arise can become greater than, and silence, individual representations and interests—in contrast to atomistic exchange situations, in which individual representations and sentiments dominate. But for Durkheim, as Ceri points out, the strength of moral forces is not so much a product of the specific content of moral representations as of the intensity and degree of diffusion of collective sentiments. Variations in clarity and intensity explain rates of specific individual actions.

The creative process, in which new moral orders are formed through the collective enthusiasm of groups in a high state of fusion, is countered by processes by which the force of these collective representations diminishes, such as is described in Suicide, which is a study of the decay of, or crisis in, social regulation. In The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life, Durkheim refers to political and moral crises which concern social integration. Crises of social integration are overcome in moments in which change and moral regeneration are possible, and these are the mainspring of the civilizing process. Durkheim’s analysis implies that individual action is sometimes more, sometimes less, governed by collective forces. But he reasons that the explanation of variation in the strength of collective forces is, itself, collective. Individual freedom or autonomy, consequently, is not conceived in a utilitarian manner as something that the individual yields up to society, but as something which is granted within the
framework of collective causality. The autonomy of individuals in modern societies is not a product of freedom from society, but results from the membership of the individual in ‘multiple societies.

Differentiation, meaning the creation of new but small crystals of determinate social order in such areas as occupations, produces an intensification of social life rather than a disappearance of collective forces. Yet the result is a kind of individualization, since individuals no longer face a monolithic, localistic order and set of ties. The individual or person becomes sacralized, and the sacredness of the individual becomes the dominant element and the legitimization of the rules binding together groups at the highest and least ‘local’ level. This value is not in itself enough to insure social order, and it is for this reason that Durkheim seeks to promote intermediate groups such as corporativist bodies, and insists on the importance of educational institutions in assuring moral integration.

Durkheim, Ceri suggests, failed to explore adequately one of his own most important insights, the phenomena of differentiation understood as the creation of multiple societies and multiple membership. Of course he recognized that normative systems of different groups can conflict and that ‘multi-membership’ may lead to the weakening of moral control of the individual. But in such works as *Suicide*, where he might appropriately have pursued such thoughts, he did not. The idea of multiple membership and the general problems of the intensity of collective life implicit in the recognition of multiple societies are, Ceri suggests, a potentially fruitful path for the development of Durkheim’s ideas.

The idea of integration, to which Ceri’s chapter is largely devoted, is more developed in Durkheim’s writing than the theory of regulation. As Philippe Besnard observes in his chapter on regulation, the lack of systematic development of Durkheim’s ideas on this subject provides us with a series of interpretive puzzles at the core of Durkheim’s most famous intervention into practical moral reform, his book *Suicide*. The lack of regulation, or anomie, is a major explanation given by Durkheim. But Durkheim confuses the issue by his presentation, and raises the question of whether his insistence on the need for greater regulation is special pleading. He minimized the importance of the phenomena of fatalistic suicide, the antithesis of anomic suicide. It is in connection with divorce that we find the clearest modern examples of this type, and Durkheim’s handling of the problem of marital discipline is revealing with respect to his difficulties in applying his sociological ideas to actual problems of moral intervention and policy.

The legalization of divorce and the liberalization of divorce laws was one of the central issues for both moralists and social thinkers of the late nineteenth century. The legalization of divorce in France dates from 1884, three years before Durkheim’s own marriage, and he himself was a participant in subsequent debates on the reform of divorce law. In his major contribution to this public debate, as Besnard shows, Durkheim claimed that the ‘fragility of the matrimonial bond is just as harmful to married women as it is to married men’ (Besnard, infra: 172), The possibility of divorce, he maintained, has scarcely any
effect on female suicide. But he explained this by claiming that in general ‘the state of marriage has only a weak effect on the moral constitution of women’ (Durkheim, quoted in Besnard, infra: 172). In fact, as Besnard points out, this assertion is contradicted by the statistical material in *Suicide*. But the reasoning enabled him to say that divorce by mutual consent was harmful because it would destroy the matrimonial regulation necessary to moral health and happiness.

The thrust of his argument is to deny the distinctiveness of female suicide, and thus implicitly to deny the existence of fatalistic suicide in its most obvious modern form. Besnard points out that Durkheim’s original analysis concerned the discovery that ‘the more frequent divorce is, the more the immunity of husbands decreases relative to bachelors and the more the immunity of wives increases relative to single women’ (infra: 174). What Durkheim’s own data indicate, however, is that the relationship holds differently for men and women in different regions. ‘Since the marital tie is weaker in Paris than in the provinces, the fact that, in the provinces, the married woman is less protected than when compared to the single woman in the Seine’, is a central finding of this data. What it suggests, however, is that fatalism is the cause of the suicide of married women in the provinces. Durkheim, however, forces a quite different conclusion, based on a theory of differences in sexual desire between the sexes. Regulation helps the married man who would otherwise suffer from the morbid desire for the infinite which always accompanies anomie. As women’s desires are naturally limited, monogamous marriage is of no help to women. Since restraint on women serves no purpose, it is excessive. Women, in Durkheim’s picture, are closer to children and animals in this respect.

This is, of course, a natural or biological rather than a social explanation, and as such is contrary to Durkheim’s own principles of searching for explanations of social differences in other social differences. Besnard considers some ways of rethinking this explanation in Durkheimian terms. One remedy might be to reconsider the notion of fatalistic suicide. Durkheim elaborates the theory of anomie by distinguishing various modalities and forms such as chronic and acute, and progressive and regressive. As Besnard shows, some elements of this differentiated scheme are more properly assigned to fatalism. Besnard proposes a new scheme utilizing two distinct determining factors of anomie: acute anomie refers to the temporary absence of norms; chronic anomie refers to the presence of the ideology of progress at any cost. These absorb many of Durkheim’s cases. The remaining cases of anomie may be reclassified within the categories of acute and chronic fatalism, with acute fatalism taking the cases of the individuals whose circumstances change in such a way that intolerable obstacles of a novel kind are placed before them, and chronic fatalism taking over the case of norms that are inflexible and impossible to interiorize.

Besnard’s chapter illustrates several of the most important peculiarities of Durkheim’s attempts to manage the relationship between himself as a sociologist and as a practical moralist and moral policy maker. On the one hand, Durkheim was not above stretching a point when his statistical data did not warrant it, nor
was he above ignoring evidence that was contrary to his own basic conception, as in the case of suicides of wives in the provinces. The solutions to the problems he identified, on the other hand, were nevertheless consistent with his sociology. He did not simply rely on moral exhortation or direct legal repression of the activities he disapproved of, but rather considered policy, in this case divorce law, to serve the purpose of reinforcing a social institution that was itself a means or a framework in which a particular moral order, in this case a conjugal society, could be maintained. The means in this case are both indirect and supplementary. The main effects are effects of conjugal society itself. The law is merely a crutch, though a necessary one. By permitting what ought not to be permitted, the law may also have deleterious effects. For example, Durkheim considered that consensual divorce ‘institutionalized’ anomie in the marital relationship.

In this case, the policy implications of the data, as reinterpreted by Besnard, point to an ambiguous or at least ambivalent result, since it is clear that strengthening the marital bond through strengthening divorce laws does have a deleterious effect on provincial married women. It is this rather typical complexity of policy making that Durkheim’s elaborate theoretical analysis of the case attempts to overcome, in favor of a simpler argument for stronger regulation of conjugal society. The causal ambivalence of policies is a feature that social policy makers have become considerably more cognizant of since Durkheim’s time, and the very fact that Durkheim found himself wrestling with these difficulties indicates the significance of his rise to sociology from moralistic reformism. Durkheim appreciated, though he attempted to suppress, the difficulties in social policy making that the reformers of his own age tended to overlook. For them, sociology was a science of human welfare which unambiguously supported particular policies. Durkheim, though in an inchoate way, as Besnard emphasizes, moved beyond this to the beginnings of a sociological coming to terms with the problematic character of social intervention. The fact that he failed to fully abandon the moral convictions he brought to his analysis in the face of these difficulties indicates the extent to which Durkheim was still a moralist in the old sense.

Besnard also identifies a fundamental turning point in Durkheim’s image of the moral agent. He began with an Aristotelian image of the individual who finds a happy medium between two extremes—a relic of philosophical anthropology. From *Suicide* on, this image changes to the image of an individual impinged upon by conflicting forces.

**PART III**

**THE ROLE OF THE SOCIOLOGICAL MORALIST AND THE MORALIST**

There is a fundamental conflict, at least from the point of view of the older idea of moral science, between Durkheim’s reasoning about religion as the root of
various modern social forms and forms of thought, and the idea of moral intervention. Phenomena that are fundamentally religious in character are not subject to policy manipulation in the usual ways, such as through the institution of new laws and regulations. Nor are they the product of rational moral exhortations or persuasion of the kind favored by some of Durkheim’s German predecessors. Religious phenomena are *sui generis*. They arise spontaneously, though there are conditions that favor their development, and have unpredictable consequences. Thus, to envisage society or morals as phenomena closely akin to or derived from religion is to envision a society for which neither social policy nor self-conscious moral theorizing can have a significant constructive role. What role, then, can the moral thinker play in modern society?

Durkheim, it is clear, believed that sociology *could* play a constructive role in, so to speak, the creation of more satisfactory moral constitutions for the multiplicity of societies that modern individuals were members of. Yet his sociological principles limited the potential role of sociology, and did so in a way which his interpreters have found extremely puzzling. Part of the difficulty in determining whether Durkheim was a radical, a liberal or a conservative derives from this self-limitation.

In this final part, the conception of moral intervention that Durkheim accepted is examined in detail. Isambert’s chapter stresses the continuity and volume of Durkheim’s writings on morality and the role of the German moral science legacy in forming his description of the issues in the study of morality. One of these issues, central in particular to the work of Ihering, who is discussed in greater length in Joas’s chapter, is the issue of the causal and emotional force of moral rules. This focus is equally central for Durkheim, as Isambert shows in his treatment of Durkheim’s discussion of another German moral scientist, the psychologist Wilhelm Wundt. Durkheim’s real innovation in this tradition, Isambert argues, was the notion of moral fact.

The problem of securing cooperation was central to post-utilitarian moral theorists. Durkheim applied the notion of moral fact to the problem of cooperative morality, the morality which obliges one to ‘be useful’. Durkheim approaches the problem by looking for the moral facts that in the highly diverse situations and milieus of modern society actually do serve to ensure practically meaningful cooperation, Where Durkheim differs from such thinkers as Ihering is in his recognition of moral diversity, even diversity at the same stage of evolutionary development.

Thinkers like Ihering were evolutionists, but they did not, as Durkheim did, have a means by which they could identify what Durkheim considered to be pathological moral facts. This is highly relevant to the possibility of moral criticism based on ‘science’. Durkheim could say that some moral facts found in modern societies are pathological and, consequently, not obligatory, and identifying these moral facts and arguing that they were not morally appropriate or binding could be a contribution of sociology to practical moral discussion.
Isambert examines a question that the preceding chapters raise implicitly: if the primary social forces and social institutions are religious in origin and partly religious in character, what is the role of morality? As Isambert points out, Durkheim identifies numerous connections of kinship between religion and morality, including common historical roots and the fact that social necessity and the phenomenological sense of externality are common to both. By social necessity, Isambert means the causal fact that moral and religious thinking is conditioned and, indeed, largely determined by the causal force of currents of the collective consciousness, on which we may as moral agents reflect. In the case of both the sacred and morality, there is a duality—between desire and duty in the case of morality, and fear and attraction in the case of the sacred. These two faces of morality and sacrality—sanction and collective desire for collective goods—are central to both Durkheim’s analysis of morality and his analysis of the sacred. These commonalities might lead one to suppose that the one could be reduced to the other in some manner. But Durkheim refuses to reduce morality to religion or religion to morality, for fear, apparently, of falling into a utilitarian analysis of religion.

The duality between the disciplinary and the value aspects of morality, morality as a goal—or object-oriented science, such as utilitarianism would make it—and morality as disciplinary or a duty-oriented science, runs through Durkheim’s writings on morality. The Kantian sound of Durkheim’s discussions of duty raises questions about Durkheim’s notions of moral freedom. As Isambert suggests, the kind of moral freedom Durkheim envisions is not Kantian autonomy or freedom of the will, but the reasoned acceptance of moral facts based on the reasoning of science. The science, of course, is sociology. The distinction is that the sociologist, unlike the Kantian moralist, must treat morality as an unknown quantity. But Durkheim supposes that this kind of study of moral facts can yield pure precepts or ideals rather than mere descriptions of moral practice, which is inevitably tainted by human weakness and other distortions. So the aim of this kind of study of morality is similar to the aim of traditional philosophical ethics of duty. Nevertheless, Durkheim’s alternative image of moral fact creates a specific space for the sociological moralist and allows for a specific kind of appropriate intervention into moral debate.

The issue of the proper role of the sociologist in such discussions is examined in greater length in Filloux’s chapter on inequality. Filloux begins with a crucial quotation from Durkheim’s preface to the first edition of *The Division of Labor.* ‘the fact that we propose above all to study reality does not mean that we should abandon the attempt to improve it; indeed, we would consider that our research was not worth a single hour’s effort if it had no more than speculative interest’ (quoted in Filloux, infra: 211). This overtly raises the question of what sort of attempt to improve reality Durkheim had in mind, and of the role he envisioned for his new science. As Filloux shows, the nature of the reforming mission Durkheim accepts is closely connected to his actual claims about the nature of modern society and the basic premises of his approach to it, Filloux identifies
three crucial elements to this approach: structural functionalism, the hypothesis of the consolidation of the collective consciousness by stages, and the idea of the necessity of the ‘cult of man’. Durkheim’s conception of social development itself implies some form of socialism. The problem this creates for Durkheim is this: what form of socialism is consistent with individualism, or, as Durkheim thought of it, the cult of man? The notion of individualism as a moral force is itself conceived in a religious manner by Durkheim: individualism is a ‘cult’.

By recognizing the necessity of these various collective forces for evolutionary developments, sociology reveals the necessity of a future society that is simultaneously individualistic, socialist and democratic. The means of reconciling the apparent conflicts between these forces or tendencies is the principal of merit, which Durkheim borrows from Comte and Saint-Simon. The principal is a means of reconciling the demand for justice and individualism. The sociologist can say what the ‘normal solution’ in modern society is to the problem of reconciling individualism and justice, meaning that the sociologist can explain what ‘just’ social stratification is. The solution to this question requires the solution of two other questions. The first is the problem of matching talents to roles in society. The second is the problem of paying people in conformity with the social value of the work they perform. Durkheim’s solution to the latter problem is equal opportunity and competition, which is designed to avoid distortions and mismatches, particularly the lack of recognition of merit and social value. The problem with this general solution is in defining social value itself. Durkheim’s solution to this problem is to argue that collective opinion itself contains an obscure feeling of the worth of various services, and that mismatches between these collective opinions and social reality were the primary source of the sense of injustice, Capitalists got more than they merited by public opinion, and workers got less. Yet public opinion is nevertheless an imperfect guide.

There are ‘survivals’, such as the respect for the upper classes and the respect for wealth.

The sociologist can usefully intervene here by helping to advance public opinion toward a better-defined meritocratic conception, an intervention made possible precisely because of the obscurity of collective feelings, and the sociologist can also persuade public opinion of the inevitability and necessity of meritocracy. This image of the role of the sociologist in moral discussion is in fact close to the moral science conception of Durkheim’s German predecessors: the problem of moral science is to grasp historical development, to side with the achievably progressive elements in public opinion, and to focus and strengthen public opinion by more clearly defining principles. Filloux adds that the problem of change and the tendency for conceptions of moral worth to become stabilized, the same phenomena that produce survivals, mean that there is a continuing role for the sociologist in revising conceptions of merit. There is also a continuing tension between the need for more or less fixed ideals and opinions and the
demand for precision in distribution of benefits that the cult of the individual ordains.

Durkheim was excessively optimistic about the solubility of the problems of justifying social stratification. He relied too heavily on the traditional utilitarian bugaboo of inheritance as an explanation of actual injustice in distribution. He did not recognize the extent to which meritocratic values themselves might be problematic and the source of conflict. Filloux argues that the spirit of Durkheim’s approach to these problems remains valuable. But his chapter shows how difficult it is to apply this reasoning in practice. The familiar conflicts and paradoxes of policy science are evident in Durkheim’s approach to these questions as well.

In the final chapter, Hans Joas reconsiders Durkheim’s intellectual development in terms of another aspect of Durkheim as a moralist and as a sociologist of morals, namely his repeated return to the problem of the emergence of new moralities or moral creativity. Joas points out that the received image of Durkheim’s intellectual development, in which Durkheim turns from his ‘positivistic’ early writings to ‘idealist’ later writings, depends on a neglect of Durkheim’s earliest writings. These can best be understood, Joas argues, as the beginnings of a life-long attempt to answer the question of how a new morality can emerge. This approach his its roots in German Durkheim scholarship, in the work of René König, and also in the facts of the contextual relationship between Durkheim and the German moral scientists by whom Durkheim was influenced. His early essay on moral science in Germany is a major document for establishing this influence and shows that Durkheim intended to supersede, rather than take sides in, the conflict between Kantianism and utilitarianism. It is these moralists, as we have seen already, who provide the kernel of the idea of autonomous moral facts.

Durkheim’s ultimate solution to the problem of creating new moralities is to be found in his final writings on religion. Joas suggests that his theory of religion is itself a solution of sorts to the problem, broached in The Division of Labor in Society, of the institutionalization of a morality of cooperation. His writings on education, Joas suggests, were always directed to this end. They are linked by the problem of finding an equivalent in education for the force of religion as a reinforcer of morality. The solution, Joas suggests, is in the idea that morality is formed in emotionalized collective states in which actors are attracted by ideals and lifted beyond themselves. The theory of religion is designed to show how the moments of collective effervescence transform or create social structures and interpersonal bonds. Yet these are also moments of moral creativity, moments in which new moral facts emerge. In his late lectures on pragmatism, this approach is extended, and defended against the competing claims of the pragmatists.

Durkheim’s own account thus creates apparently insurmountable obstacles to a significant role for the sociologically inspired moralist. Sociology can aid in the clean-up work—clarify obscure moral facts or collective sentiments—and suggest institutional frameworks within which habitualized moralities can
develop, as noted in Müller’s chapter. But the creative work seems to be outside its scope. Moral facts cannot simply be invented by moralists, sociologically informed or otherwise. And moral progress cannot consist wholly in better defining moral terms and focussing moral reflection. So the relevance of science to the creation of new moralities is necessarily limited, and perhaps the contribution of sociology is necessarily trivial.

One way of overcoming these limitations would be to find a role for sociology in connection with moral creativity itself. Joas suggests that Durkheim did envision such a role for moral reasoning and the intervention of the scientifically inspired moralist in these contexts. In his final writings, he stressed that it was precisely the currents that permeate society that become the subject of debate and reflection, and that, with the help of the moralist, are the stuff from which new moral facts are created and crystallized in moments of collective effervescence. The scientifically inspired moralist has a specific role here in calling traditional morality into question and in emphasizing the conflicts within present morality. This form of moral reflection is a precondition for creative moral transformation, and this provides a role for the moralist in moral creation.

THE ROLE OF THE SCIENTIFIC MORALIST: DURKHEIM’S LEGACY

These essays have served to reconnect two elements of Durkheim that traditional sociological interpretations have generally sought to separate or to reinterpret by construing him reductively as an ideologist, particularly an ideologist for ‘conservatism’. We can see instead a much more complex, but also coherent, picture—of Durkheim as a successor to the German moral scientists and a major moralist in his own right. Durkheim’s analysis of the religious character of social institutions was a major advance on the moral commentary of his time. He pushed the problem of understanding the moral force back to a more basic, primal level, and in doing so gave a critique of, and solution to, the fundamental problems that were left by the moral scientists he recognized in his early essays as his predecessors.

Their central problem was that of the force of moral ideals. Durkheim’s answer to this problem was that moral ideals of the sort they had considered under the headings of duty in the Kantian sense, or collective desirability in the utilitarian sense, were in fact more radically autonomous than they had appreciated. They were, Durkheim claimed, fundamentally religious or akin to religion, This kinship, given Durkheim’s own analysis of the character of religion as the concealed worship of society, meant that the traditional model of scientific moralism was itself misguided. The role of the moralist was limited and defined by the facts that could be discovered by the sociologist.

Many of Durkheim’s specific predictions proved wrong, but one proved right: that of the continuing and overwhelming importance of what he called the cult of man. The difficulties that modern societies continue to experience in the moral
realm result, in large part, from the continued power of this cult and the conflict between, on the one hand, the principle of individual sovereignty, respect and dignity, and, on the other hand, other moral trends, notably those that arise from a desire for solidarity. In grasping this central moral fact Durkheim distinguished himself from his contemporaries in sociology, such as Weber, who considered the principle of individuality to be deeply threatened by tendencies in modern society. Weber, indeed, considered individuality to have already begun to be destroyed by the force of bureaucratic impersonalism and the domination of large organizations. One need scarcely add that the collapse of Communism, which Weberians, Marxists and communitarians alike would not, on their own premises, have foreseen, is fully consistent with Durkheim’s basic intuition.

The Durkheim we see in this volume is closer to the whole man than the Durkheim of the specifically sociological writings. He is a quite different and in some ways more radically alien Durkheim than the Durkheim of normative functionalism. But he also presents a more interesting and fundamental challenge to present-day thought. Durkheim believed that the sociologist—and the moralist—are obliged to respect the facts of the moral world just as the engineer is obliged to respect those of the physical world. This respect, which is crucial to Durkheim’s achievement, means that major tendencies in modern society, such as individualism, cannot be simply denounced in favor of something more desirable, such as solidarity or community. This is a trap fallen into not only by moralists of Durkheim’s time, but by sociologists of every generation since. The continuing relevance of Durkheim as a moralist and as a sociologist of morals is assured by the continued temptation, succumbed to routinely by sociological social critics, to foreshorten our picture of moral life—to see moral feelings that are deeply rooted as mere intellectual errors or deviations from human nature that could easily be corrected by a bit of propaganda and a government program encouraging the right organizational initiatives. Durkheim’s point against these critics would be that the facts of collective morality that they decry are rooted deeply in circumstances, or, as Durkheim says, in conditions of existence, or in the religious constitution and roots of social institutions and collective opinions that cannot be eliminated without being replaced by new facts or a new morality of its own kind—not merely a morality of rationalized opinion, but a morality with the character of binding collective fact.

NOTE

1 The main element of the contextual background of Durkheim’s innovation is perhaps to be found in a work, Der Zweck im Recht ([1877] 1913), by Durkheim’s influential predecessor, the philosopher of law Rudolph von Ihering, whose thought Durkheim was exposed to in his formative German sojourn. Ihering, mentioned in several chapters in this volume, saw the law and political institutions generally (which both he and Durkheim saw as providing the essential forms within
which economic life proceeded) as the product of successive collective solutions to conflicts of social interest. This step prefigured Durkheim, as did his emphasis on fests and the explanation of moral sentiment. For Ihering, the law was fundamentally a product of social conflicts that arose under previous regimes of law. But the law itself had an evolutionary tendency toward the extension of rights to new groups and toward the greater achievement of utilitarian goals within societies. Ihering, an admirer of Bentham, made an important step away from utilitarianism by arguing that society itself in some sense provided goals or goods —‘interests’ in his language—that had a kind of autonomous moral force that counterbalanced against the purely individual interests envisioned by utilitarianism.

Durkheim’s sociology may be seen as a radicalization of this idea. Where Ihering had conceived of the conflicts of interest mediated by the law as central and the moral regulation of these interests as incidental but essential, Durkheim conceived of the moral character of public institutions as central. But although Ihering stressed the historical variability of ‘interests,’ he did so against the background of a general view of human nature that itself provided the motor for historical evolution in morals and the law, and explained, in conjunction with the facts of circumstances, historical variability in morals and the law. Durkheim rejected this well-established model of historical change and this solution to the problem of the diversity of morals.

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INTRODUCTION

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