

Emile Durkheim

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Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) was one of the founders of sociology and the author of several of that discipline's classic texts. One is *The Division of Labor in Society* (Durkheim 1893(1902)/1984), which contrasts two forms of social solidarity: the 'mechanical solidarity' of pre-industrial societies, with a strongly unifying, religiously-based common consciousness, and the 'organic solidarity' of advanced, organized socially-differentiated societies integrated by functional interdependencies. A second is *Suicide* (Durkheim 1897/1951), which focuses on the distinctively modern social pathologies indicated by current high suicide rates whose social causes are the breakdown of restraining social norms ('anomie'), in both the economic and sexual spheres, and social isolation ('egoism') (see SUICIDE). A third is *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Durkheim 1912/1995), which, through a study of totemism, proposes sociological explanations of the causes and consequences of religious beliefs and ritual practices and an interpretation of these in social terms ('I see in divinity,' he wrote, 'only society transfigured and conceived symbolically' (Durkheim 1906/1953: 52)). These works, together with his lectures on moral education (Durkheim 1925/1961) (see MORAL EDUCATION) and on professional ethics and civic morals (Durkheim 1950/1957) (see PROFESSIONAL ETHICS), were pioneering contributions to the sociology of morality, as was much of the work of the 'Durkheimian' scholars grouped around the *Année sociologique*, the remarkable journal of monographs and reviews whose twelve volumes he edited from 1898-1912.

As one of them, Georges Davy, observed, morality was 'the center and end of his work' (Davy 1920: 71). For another, Célestin Bouglé, his key idea, amply expressed in his later writings, was to view values as 'objective because *imperative*, and *imperative* because *collective*' (Bouglé 1922/ 1926: 17). His aim throughout was to develop a scientific study of morality that would 'treat the phenomena of the moral life as natural phenomena' (Durkheim 1925/1961: 5) and deal with 'moral reality as it appears to observation, whether in the present or in the past, just as physics or physiology deal with the facts they study,' (Durkheim 1920/1979: 92), but he died as he was writing the introduction to the book, to be entitled *La Morale*, that was to recast his whole theory. Apart from an early survey of the science of morality in Germany (Durkheim 1887/1993), he published only two short papers directly about morality (1906/1953 and 1911/1953), both delivered to philosophical audiences. Thus he never recast or even synthesized his work on morality. His developing views must therefore be gleaned from a consideration of these various texts.

He never ceased to aim at pursuing the '*science des faits moraux*,' but his conception of both the method of the science and the nature of moral facts changed over time. He held that the task was to study 'the facts of moral life' objectively, using scientific methods (as

set out in his *The Rules of Sociological Method* (Durkheim 1895(1901)/1982) that demand observable evidence (and thus 'external' indicators of internal states), clear definitions and classificatory social typologies enabling one to distinguish the normal from the pathological. Yet his practice (if not his methodological pronouncements) clearly moved from the evident 'positivism' of his earlier work to a more interpretative or hermeneutic mode of analysis, as his interests shifted towards the sociology of religion and from the study of constraining and obligatory moral rules or norms to that of ideals and values, and beliefs underlying them.

The Nature of Morality

His initial conception of the moral domain, in *The Division* and *The Rules* focuses on moral constraints (see DUTY AND OBLIGATION). On this early view, morality consists in 'a system of rules of action that predetermine conduct...so many moulds with given structures, which serve to shape our behavior' (Durkheim 1925/1961: 24, 26). Morality is a kind of informal analogue to law. Moral rules are distinguished from legal rules, not by their content or form or by the nature of the behavior they regulate, but by the way sanctions are administered. Sanctions, he maintained, are consequences that relate to an action, not causally but by virtue of a pre-existing rule, whether negative (punishment and blame) or positive (honor and praise). Moral sanctions are *diffuse*, administered by anyone without distinction, whereas legal sanctions are *organized*, applied by specially authorized representatives charged with the task of enforcement. The law's sanctions, Durkheim claimed, provide the most visible external indicator of the successive states of mechanical solidarity in 'less advanced' and organic solidarity in 'more advanced' societies, as 'repressive' law gives way to 'restitutory' law.

Moving away from this exclusive focus on constraint, Durkheim offered a fuller analysis of morality in his lectures on moral education as combining the imperative and the desirable (see MORALITY, DEFINITION OF). There are 'three elements' of morality, the first two perennial, the third distinctively modern. These are the 'spirit of discipline' and 'attachment to social groups' and the progressive introduction in modern times of 'autonomy.' The first two elements are, however, he argued, never empirically separated: 'No act has ever been performed as a result of duty alone; it has always been necessary for it to appear in some respect as good;' and 'something of the nature of duty is found in the desirability of morality.' (Durkheim 1925/1961: 45, 36). As for autonomy, he viewed it as the freely willed and enlightened acceptance of moral rules and as the outcome of secularization and the advance of rationalism (see AUTONOMY).

Durkheim's constant, relentless insistence on the social character of morality was unwavering, but this can be understood in various distinct ways. One way is as an account of moral motivation. Moral behavior is, he thought *disinterested*: it is motivated by concerns other than an individual's narrow self-interest. Morality, he wrote, 'begins with disinterest,' with 'attachment to something other than ourselves' (Durkheim 1914/1973: 151). Secondly, it can be seen as an account of the origin of that motivation. Disinterestedness has, he thought, a social origin: we think and act morally in ways shaped by 'society.' Thus 'disinterestedness only makes sense when that to which we

subordinate ourselves has a higher moral value than we have as individuals. In the world of experience I know of only one being that possesses a richer and more complex reality than our own, and that is the collectivity.' Thus, when 'acts directed towards others or myself' have moral value, 'they are oriented towards a higher end...the morality which is recognized in them must derive from a higher source,' namely society, as a moral being, viewed as distinct from individuals (1906/1953: 52, 51).

In order to make sense of this account, we need to see that Durkheim came to view morality as located in what he called '*représentations collectives*' which he came to describe as a system of forces. He saw these as mental, moral forces which draw their causal influence from *représentations* or states of mind, collective moral sentiments as opposed to those that are organically based, personal, spontaneous, private and idiosyncratic. They are inculcated in individuals through socialization from infancy and periodically revived by means of 'festivities and public ceremonies, whether religious or secular, by oratory and preaching of all kinds, in the Church or in the schools, by dramatic representations, artistic displays—in a word, everything that brings men together and makes them communicate in the same intellectual and moral life.' (Durkheim 1911/1953: 92).

Durkheim's view was that the moral domain is a 'separate world of *sui generis représentations*,' endowing certain things and ways of acting with a 'sacred quality which effects a barrier of discontinuity between morality, on the one hand, and economic and industrial techniques, etc., on the other...' (Durkheim 1906/1953: 71) (see AUTONOMY OF ETHICS). But this mention of sacredness raises the question of morality's relation to religion. And indeed, Durkheim argued that for centuries they had been 'closely linked and even completely fused' and that there are always elements of morality in religion and of religion in morality' (Durkheim 1906/1953: 48). One difference was that in morality the element of sacredness is less central, another that dogmas and myths are absent and a third that the emphasis in morality is upon acts. On the other hand, Durkheim was to write, at the time of the Dreyfus Affair, of the secular religion of 'individualism' as 'the only system of beliefs which can ensure the moral unity of the country.' Against the anti-Dreyfusards, whose unquestioning trust in the Church and the Army he denounced as anachronistic and dangerous to the unity of the Republic, he thundered that to defend the rights of the individual was to defend the vital interests of society: that secular, post-Christian individualist morality, that renders the individual sacred and has as its 'primary dogma the autonomy of reason and as its primary rite the doctrine of free inquiry,' had 'penetrated our institutions and our mores' and 'blended with our whole life' (Durkheim 1898/1973: 50, 49, 46-7). Thus 'the human being is becoming the primary focus for the social conscience of European peoples and has acquired an incomparable value. It is society that has consecrated him' (Durkheim 1906/1953: 58) (see HUMAN RIGHTS AND RELIGION).

But this last sentence raises a persistent difficulty in grasping and applying Durkheim's sociology of morals: the fact that 'society' had shifting meanings. It referred variously to the family, the classroom, 'professional groups,' 'religious society,' the nation, even humanity as a whole (and never social class). Yet he never focused on conflicts that can

arise among these various sources of social identity, nor does he seem ever to have doubted his 'methodological nationalism'—the assumption that, despite these multiple sources of the moral life, modern morality is always shaped within the framework of the nation state. A related, crippling difficulty is his assumption that this moral life is rendered coherent within any given such society, at a given stage of its development, though he speculated that it (in particular France's Republican moral code) incorporated foreshadowings of an emergent transnational and potentially universal or (as we say today) global morality.

We will never know whether the projected book on *La Morale* would have confronted these difficulties. The book's introduction does draw an interesting distinction between *morale* and *moeurs*: between values and norms 'in their purity and impersonality', on the one hand, and 'everyday practice,' which can only express ideal morality 'imperfectly,' on the other. Durkheim remarks that how the science of morality is to confront this subject matter 'will have to be discussed' (Durkheim 1920/1979: 92). Unfortunately, it never was. For what the distinction between *morale* and *moeurs* raises is, of course, the question of the grounds of moral judgment. When should we follow the prevailing mores or *moeurs* and when not, and why?

Practical Judgment

From the very beginning, Durkheim believed that his science of morality had practical implications. As he wrote in the Preface to the first edition of *The Division of Labor*, 'We would esteem our research not worth the labor of a single hour if its interest were merely speculative.' (Durkheim 1893(1902)/1984: xxvi). On the other hand, he sought objectivity by presuming to practice the science of morality in an entirely free spirit, unencumbered by what he called *prénotions* deriving, for instance, from moral or political positions. One could then arrive at solutions to practical problems, not for judging *between* societies (for that would assume a universal moral idea), but to enable us 'to modify what exists and to control it' and also 'to evaluate moral opinion and, where necessary, to rectify it' (Durkheim 1906/1953: 60). The point was to naturalize morality, thereby rendering 'ethical theory' in the usual sense a waste of time: thus preaching against the real character of morality was pointless.

His idea was that only one set of practical moral judgments is rationally possible in face of a fully scientific understanding of the present and foreseeable future. It is, he argued, 'never possible to desire a morality other than that required by the social conditions of a given time.' We cannot, he thought, choose a criterion by an act of decision; we can only observe it and derive it from the facts. The state of society will provide 'an objective standard to which our evaluations must always be brought back' (Durkheim 1906/1953: 38, 61). For example, he argued in *The Division of Labor* that the old ideal of humanist morality, the moral ideal of the cultivated man, was increasingly anachronistic and must give way in view of the increasing specialization of social functions.

Perhaps the best way to make sense of this picture of the science of morals and its practical implications is to realize that Durkheim was strongly wedded to a diagnostic

model of the relation between the sociologist and his object of study. Hence, for instance, his characterization of socialism as a ‘cry of grief, sometimes of anger uttered by men who fell most keenly our collective malaise’ (Durkheim 1928/1958: 7)—a symptom of a pathological state of society for which sociology can provide the basis for prescribing suitable remedies. (see Durkheim 1893(1902)/1984 new preface and 1950/1957). The role of the science of morality lay in ‘helping contemporaries to become aware of themselves, their needs and their sentiments’ (Durkheim 1906/1953: 64) by identifying the current conditions of social health and the causes of and remedies for social pathologies. Science alone could determine the existing state of moral health of society, which, however, is nowhere wholly attained but indicates an ideal towards which it is evolving: we can thus anticipate what would constitute progress towards it and what remedies such progress demands.

Clearly, this picture of the relation between science and practical judgment sets severe limits to the scope of the latter and thus to the possibilities of social critique. But Durkheim evaded these, to some degree, in two ways. First, noting how far the nascent science of morality was from being a guide to conduct, he came to allow for the need to engage in case-by-case judgment, guided only by the present state of knowledge. Second, he allowed that, when so judging, one could, in a complex and changing social world, identify those tendencies that are required by the conditions of collective existence from those that are *anachronistic* (as, for instance, the traditionalist morality of the anti-Dreyfusards) and also identify the *emergent* morals of the future (as exemplified by moral innovators such as Socrates and Jesus).

Further Implications

Finally, three further implications of Durkheim’s view of morality deserve mention: for philosophy, for his conception of human nature and for his view of the relation between law and morality.

He believed that sociology could solve ‘a problem in philosophy,’ which was nothing less than that of understanding ‘how value judgments are possible’ (Durkheim 1911/1953: 80). Where do value, including moral, judgments come from, how are they related to experience while transcending it, and how can one explain their appearance of objectivity? Deploying his favorite method of argument by elimination, he here criticized utilitarianism (of which doctrine he was a lifelong opponent on various grounds) for failing to account for the content of actual moral judgments and philosophical idealism for failing to account for the diversity of moralities. Instead he proposed ‘society’ as the solution: value judgments, including moral judgments, arise out of social experience, are socially determined, and it is from ‘society’ that they receive their transcendence and objectivity. But what, he went on to ask, accounts for the specificity or ‘autonomy’ of morals? He held that morality forms ‘a distinct sphere of social life,’ that the term or its equivalents are found in all human languages and that it connotes ‘phenomena that are distinguished from all other human phenomena by clearly defined and uniform characteristics’ (1920/1979: 89) (see AUTONOMY OF ETHICS).

In a late text, he took up the old, Pascalian theme of the duality of human nature, maintaining that 'at the very heart of our inner life' there is a kind of 'double center of gravity': 'our individuality—and, more particularly, our body in which it is based' and 'everything in us that expresses something other than ourselves.' He linked the former with 'sensations and the sensual appetites' and the latter with 'the intellectual and moral life:' thus morality attaches us to what is beyond ourselves, whereas the appetites are purely egoistic. But he deepened and extended this view, in a manner reminiscent of the later Freud, suggesting that this duality is antagonistic and 'painful,' since 'society cannot be formed or maintained without our being required to make perpetual and costly sacrifices,' doing 'violence to certain of our strongest inclinations.' Indeed, he wrote, it is wholly improbable that there will ever be an era in which man is required to resist himself to a lesser degree, an era in which he can live a life that is easier and less full of tension.' The evidence, he thought, 'compels us to expect our effort in the struggle between the two beings within us to increase with the growth of civilization' (1914/1973: 151, 152, 162, 163) (see FREUD, SIGMUND).

Should the law enforce morality? In a famous debate with the English jurist Lord Devlin over the decriminalization of homosexuality, the legal philosopher H. L. A. Hart attributed to Durkheim what he called 'the disintegration thesis' (Hart 1967): the view that social disintegration ensues when no common morality is observed and that the loosening of moral bonds is often the first stage of such disintegration. Hence Hart attributes to Durkheim Devlin's view that conduct commonly considered immoral by public opinion should therefore be criminalized—a view he counters on several grounds (see CRIMINAL LAW). First, he claims that plural moralities in modern, large-scale societies can be mutually tolerant. Second, he questions whether what counts as 'social disintegration' can be rendered empirically ascertainable—as distinct from the 'classical' thesis that vice be punished and virtue rewarded and the 'conservative' thesis that the majority in any society has the right to enforce its morality by law. And third, he argues that, even if the disintegration thesis can be rendered empirical, testing it would show either moral permissiveness or moral pluralism to be compatible with social integration.

Hart, however, gives a misleading caricature of Durkheim's views, which are more complex and interesting than he suggests. Durkheim's view was rather that the legal enforcement of morals provides a kind of prophylactic against social disintegration, but only in the context of a wide range of other integrative factors; and, though he thought that the law should generally enforce the mores (and so was against the liberalization of divorce laws), he conceived of integration and disintegration as applying more specifically to the effects of core moral norms distinctive of modernizing, ever more heterogeneous societies: norms that embody respect for the individual, sacralizing the human person as such. In the absence of their enforcement through the criminal law, he feared a sort of moral unraveling. Hence his defense of Dreyfus's rights as sacred. In today's society we could cite racism and torture as violating such core humane norms and suggest that in the debate between Hart and Devlin Durkheim's view might well have led him to side with Hart against Devlin.

Cross References: AUTONOMY; AUTONOMY OF ETHICS; CRIMINAL LAW; DUTY AND OBLIGATION; FREUD, SIGMUND; HUMAN RIGHTS AND RELIGION; MORAL EDUCATION; MORALITY, DEFINITION OF; SUICIDE; TORTURE.

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