

The Elementary Forms of Religious Life

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A New
Translation by



not become conscious relationships except in and through society. Even if, in a sense, they are immanent in the life of the individual, the individual had neither reason nor means to grasp them, think about them, make them explicit, and build them up into distinct notions. To orient his individual self in space and to know at what times to satisfy various physical needs, he had no need for a conceptual representation of time or space, once and for all. Many animals know how to find their way back to the paths leading to places familiar to them; they return there at the right time yet without their having any category at all; sensations are enough to guide them automatically. These would be sufficient for man as well if his movements had to satisfy individual needs alone. In order to recognize that one thing resembles others with which we are already acquainted, we need not arrange them in genera and species. The way in which similar images call one another forth and merge are enough to create the feeling of resemblance. The impression of *déjà vu*, of something already experienced, implies no classification. In order to differentiate between those things we must seek after and those we must flee, we have no need to join the effects of both to their causes with a logical link, if individual convenience alone is at stake. Purely empirical sequences, strong connections between concrete representations, are equally sure guides to the will. Not only does the animal have no others, but our own individual practice quite often presupposes nothing more. The wise man is one who has a very clear sense of what he must do but one that he would usually be unable to translate into a law.

It is otherwise with society. Society is possible only if the individuals and things that make it up are divided among different groups, which is to say genera,* and if those groups themselves are classified in relation to one another. Thus, society presupposes a conscious organization of itself that is nothing other than a classification. That organization of society is naturally passed on to the space it occupies. To forestall conflict, a definite portion of space must be assigned to each individual group. In other words, the space must be divided, differentiated, and oriented, and these divisions and orientations must be known to all. In addition, every call to a feast, hunt, or military expedition implies that dates are fixed and agreed upon and, therefore, that a common time is established that everyone conceives in the same way.

*Here and later in the paragraph (as well as twice previously in this chapter), Durkheim shifts to the word *classe*. Since the English term "class" can imply economic differentiation, which would move the argument out of its present context, I have used the term "genus" throughout. Nonetheless, what the economic sense of "class" would add or subtract should be kept in mind—for example, in the end of the la

Finally, the collaboration of several in pursuit of a common goal is possible only if there is agreement on the relation between that goal and the means that make its achievement possible—that is, if a single causal relation is accepted by all who are working together in the same enterprise. It is not surprising, then, that social time, social space, social genera [*classes*], and collective causality should be the basis of the corresponding categories, since it is in their social forms that they were first conceived with any degree of clarity by human consciousness.

To summarize, society is by no means the illogical or alogical, inconsistent, and changeable being that people too often like to imagine. Quite the contrary, the collective consciousness is the highest form of psychic life, for it is a consciousness of consciousnesses. Being outside and above individual and local contingencies, collective consciousness sees things only in their permanent and fundamental aspect,* which it crystallizes in ideas that can be communicated. At the same time as it sees from above, it sees far ahead; at every moment, it embraces all known reality; that is why it alone can furnish the intellect with frameworks that are applicable to the totality of beings and that enable us to build concepts about them. It does not create these frameworks artificially but finds them within itself, merely becoming conscious of them. They express ways of being that are met with at all levels of the real but that appear with full clarity only at the pinnacle, because the extreme complexity of the psychic life that unfolds there requires a more highly developed consciousness. Therefore, to attribute social origins to logical thought is not to denigrate it, diminish its worth, or reduce it to no more than a system of artificial combinations—but is, quite the contrary, to relate logical thought to a cause that naturally implies it. Assuredly, this is not to say that notions worked out in that way could be directly adequate to their objects. If society is something universal as compared to the individual, it is still an individuality, having its own form and idiosyncrasies; it is a particular subject and, consequently, one that particularizes what it thinks of. So even collective representations contain subjective elements, and if they are to become closer to things, they must be gradually refined. But crude as these representations might have been at first, it remains true that with them came the seed of a new mode of thinking, one to which the individual could never have lifted himself on his own. The way was open to stable, impersonal, ordered thought, which had only to develop its own special nature from then on.

*Note the similarity between this formulation about *conscience collective* as “a permanent and fundamental” aspect of society and a similar one about religion as a “fundamental and permanent” aspect of society.

Moreover, the factors that have brought about this development seem to be no different in kind from those that brought it forth originally. If logical thought tends more and more to jettison the subjective and personal elements that were launched with it, the reason is not that extrasocial factors have entered in but far more that a new kind of social life gradually developed: international life, whose effect even then was to universalize religious beliefs. As that international life broadens, so does the collective horizon; society no longer appears as the whole, par excellence, and becomes part of a whole that is more vast, with frontiers that are indefinite and capable of rolling back indefinitely. As a result, things can no longer fit within the social frames where they were originally classified; they must be organized with principles of their own; logical organization thus differentiates itself from social organization and becomes autonomous. This, it seems, is how the bond that at first joined thought to defined collective entities becomes more and more detached and how, consequently, it becomes ever more impersonal and universalizes.* Thought that is truly and peculiarly human is not a primitive given, therefore, but a product of history; it is an ideal limit to which we come ever closer but in all probability will never attain.

Thus, the sort of antimony that has so often been accepted, between science on one hand and religion and morality on the other, is far from the case. In reality, these different modes of human activity derive from one and the same source. This Kant well understood, and therefore he considered speculative reason and practical reason to be two different aspects of the same faculty. According to him, what joins them is that both are oriented toward the universal. To think rationally is to think according to the laws that are self-evident to all reasonable beings; to act morally is to act according to maxims that can be extended without contradiction to all wills. In other words, both science and morality imply that the individual is capable of lifting himself above his own point of view and participating in an impersonal life. And, indeed, herein we undoubtedly have a trait that is common to all the higher forms of thought and action. But what Kantianism does not explain is where the sort of contradiction that man thus embodies comes from. Why must he do violence to himself in order to transcend his individual nature; and inversely, why must impersonal law weaken as it becomes incarnate in individuals? Will it be said that there are two antagonistic worlds in which we participate equally: the world of matter and sense, on the one hand, and on the other, that of pure and impersonal reason? But that is to repeat the ques-

*This sentence was omitted from the Soviet translation of this book.

tion in terms that are barely different: for the point precisely is to know why we must* lead those two lives concurrently. Since the two worlds seem to contradict one another, why do they not remain separate from one another, and what makes it necessary for them to interpenetrate, despite their antagonism? The hypothesis of the Fall, with all its attendant difficulties, is the only explanation of that singular necessity that has ever been offered—and it need not be recited here.

On the other hand, the mystery dissolves once we have acknowledged that impersonal reason is but collective thought by another name. Collective thought is possible only through the coming together of individuals; hence it presupposes the individuals, and they in turn presuppose it, because they cannot sustain themselves except by coming together. The realm of impersonal aims and truths cannot be realized except through the collaboration of individual wills and sensibilities;† the reasons they participate and the reasons they collaborate are the same. In short, there is something impersonal in us because there is something social in us, and since social life embraces both representations and practices, that impersonality extends quite naturally to ideas as well as to actions.

Some will be astonished, perhaps, to see me connecting the highest forms of the human mind with society. The cause seems quite humble as compared to the value we attribute to the effect. So great is the distance between the world of the senses and appetites on the one hand, and the world of reason and morality on the other, that it seems the second could have been added to the first only by an act of creation. But to attribute to society this dominant role in the origin of our nature is not to deny that creation. Society does indeed have at its disposal a creative power that no observable being can match. Every creation, unless it is a mystical procedure that escapes science and intellect, is in fact the product of a synthesis. If the syntheses of particular representations that occur within each individual consciousness are already, in and of themselves, productive of novelties, how much more effective must societies be—these vast syntheses of entire consciousnesses! A society is the most powerful collection of physical and moral forces that we can observe in nature. Such riches of various materials, so highly concentrated, are to be found nowhere else. It is not surprising, then, that a higher life develops out of them, a life that acts on the elements from which it is made, thereby raising them to a higher form of life and transforming them.

*The second edition says *Il nous fait* instead of *il nous faut*, surely a typographical error.

Thus, it seems the vocation of sociology is to open a new way to the science of man. Until now, we stood before these alternatives: either to explain the higher and specific faculties of man by relating them to lower forms of being—reason to sense, mind to matter—which amounted to denying their specificity; or to connect them with some reality above experience that we postulated but whose existence no observation can establish. What placed the mind in that difficulty is that the individual was taken to be *finis naturae*.* It seemed there was nothing beyond him, at least nothing that science might discover. But a new way of explaining man becomes possible as soon as we recognize that above the individual there is society, and that society is a system of active forces—not a nominal being, and not a creation of the mind. To preserve man's distinctive attributes, it is no longer necessary to place them outside experience. Before drawing that extreme conclusion, at any rate, it is best to find out whether that which is in the individual but surpasses him may not come to him from that supra-individual, yet concretely experienced, reality that is society. To be sure, it cannot be said at this moment how far these explanations can be extended and if they can lay every problem to rest. Equally, however, it is impossible to mark in advance a limit beyond which they cannot go. What must be done is to try out the hypothesis and test it against the facts as methodically as possible. This is what I have tried to do.

*The culmination of nature