I SHALL DETAIL Durkheim’s account of the self as a reflection of society, whereby the theological underpinnings, discussed earlier, recede into the background. Durkheim, the founder of the first school of sociological thought, shares with the romantics a critique of modernity. Yet, he differs from Kierkegaard, for instance, by rejecting the equation of individuality with authenticity. He falls just shy of losing the self in history.

Moving further away from Rousseau, Durkheim seems to mark an obvious break with Kierkegaard. We need to see to what extent, if any, Durkheim’s account of the self can complement Kierkegaard’s. I begin with Durkheim’s sociological approach to the self.

**Sociologist**

Durkheim speaks of two ways in which humans are bound together in a society. On the one hand, mechanical solidarity, he tells us, is where we engage in similar activities, for example, in primitive societies. Organic solidarity, on the other hand, is said to develop by a spontaneous consensus toward a greater division of labour, for example, in industrial societies. When society has farmers, blacksmiths, doctors, and so forth, each depends upon the other. The increasing division of labour, however, has lead to what Durkheim sees as a breakdown of the social fabric of society, where the nature of work in industrial society is often monotonous and uniform.

He notes that the division of labour in modern industrial societies can become too specialized, resulting in an erosion of social solidarity. The person is reduced “to the role of a machine.” Durkheim did not think the problems of modernity—for example, alienation—endemic to our predicament, as Kierkegaard suggested, but the result of a transitional period in human history.

Durkheim uses an analogy to illustrate the division of labour: Just as a body has a heart, lungs, and so on, so too is society composed of different parts with specific functions. Consider Durkheim’s language in this passage:

Assuredly murder is always an evil but nothing proves that it is the greatest evil. What does one human being the less matter to society? Or one cell fewer in the organism?
What is valuable is so for society. For Durkheim, since society becomes the sole end of what counts as good, he writes: "In reality the duties of the individual to himself are duties to society." ⁶

What we do for a living—that is, how we have been organized—affects what we think. Durkheim writes:

It is a doubtless self-evident truth that there is nothing in social life that is not in the consciousness of individuals...Most of our states of consciousness...would have occurred completely differently among people grouped together in a different way. ⁶

So, our actions are to a large extent determined by society:

Here it is indeed rather the form of the whole that determines that of the parts. Society does not find ready-made in individual consciousness the bases on which it rests; it makes them for itself. ⁷

In fact, as Durkheim puts the situation: "It is not realized that there can be no sociology unless societies exist, and that societies cannot exist if there are only individuals." ⁸ Durkheim posits a "force," which he refers to as a "thing" or entity, equatable with society. ⁷ He does not want to give it ontological status, but does say it—society—is "real." ⁹

According to Durkheim, when people live together in a group certain patterns of behaviour emerge. These modes of behaviour become customs and eventually laws. "Then the habits as they grow in strength, are transformed into rules of conduct. The past determines the future." ¹¹ How our group socializes us will determine, in large part, who we are to become. Durkheim writes, "Insofar as he belongs to society, the individual transcends himself, both when he thinks and when he acts." ¹²

According to Durkheim, the direction of the evolution of society is nevertheless toward increasing power of the social body. ¹³ For example, according to him, punishments were once private vendettas but are now carried out by law. For Durkheim, law reflects a collective consciousness that maintains a social solidarity. ¹¹ Societies teach us how to respond in given situations, and without this education, each circumstance becomes an upheaval. ¹³ For Durkheim, humans only exist in societies (although these take various forms). As he puts it, "If to repeat the classic definition, man is a reasonable animal, it is because he is a sociable animal, or at least infinitely more sociable than the other animals." ¹⁷

Durkheim interprets many psychological problems as lack of those things—such as morality—that bind people together. He remarks, for example, that desire is insatiable (goaded on by the imagination), and requires social prohibitions. ¹⁸ Durkheim says:

It is everlastingly repeated that it is man's nature to be eternally dissatisfied, constantly to advance, without relief or rest, toward an indefinite goal. The longing for infinity is daily represented as a mark of moral distinction,
whereas it can only appear within unregulated consciences which elevate to a rule the lack of rule from which they suffer.  

In short, our first duty at the present time is to fashion a morality for ourselves. Such a task cannot be improvised in the silence of study...What reflection can and must do is to prescribe the goal that must be attained. That is what we have striven to accomplish.  

The loss of older forms of social relations had not been adequately replaced. (Durkheim suggested, for example, that corporations should not be merely economic units but social ones.)  

The only thing the sociologist has in common with the world in which she grew up is the desire to be scientific. Nevertheless, in the eighteenth century, when it was popular to see society as a digression from nature, Durkheim viewed society as "the highest expression of nature." Society, far from being unnatural, marks the conditions for the fruition of human nature. On the sociological model, the self finds its ground in a web of social relations. Let us next look at how social relations hold the self in place by considering religion as Durkheim does.

**RELIGION**

Since the primitive religions are, according to Durkheim, marked by the simplest organizational structure, if we can understand how this structure fashions individuals, we can extrapolate these ideas into more complex social structures. As far as Durkheim is concerned all religions are the same: they all fulfil the same function. He tells us, "Religion is something eminently social." Durkheim is interested in how different social structures, for example, allow various possibilities of thinking (that is, how various religions hold us together in different ways).

The cosmologies offered by religions predate science and philosophy; they not only determined people's knowledge but also the form that knowledge would be elaborated in. Members of primitive religions, for example, often transmitted ideas by telling stories, sometimes expressed in totemism (which he also believes holds a cosmology).

Durkheim's strategy: "A whole cannot be defined except in relation to its part." The constituent parts of a religion are, according to him, the beliefs and rites (or opinions and actions, respectively). Religious beliefs often revolve around a dualism of sacred (real) and profane (worldly). Rites are rules of conduct that dictate how man should comport himself in the face of the sacred.

Durkheim declares religion to be a systematized and lived dream. He begins with the disenchanted world of Newtonian physics and assumes all metaphysical animation is a result of projection. He writes:

Then to explain how the idea of sacredness has been able to take form under these conditions, the majority of the theorists have been obliged
to admit that men have superimposed upon reality, such as it is given by observation, an unreal world, constructed entirely out of the fantastic images which agitate his mind during a dream, or else out of the frequently monstrous aberrations produced by the mythological imagination under the bewitching but deceiving influence of language.

Religion often involves a God that baptizes human nature. We are meant to be so-and-so. Durkheim explains:

Now it is these things that give man his own place among things; a man is a man only because he is civilized. So he could not escape the feeling that outside of him there are active causes from which he gets the characteristic attributes of his nature and which, as benevolent powers, assist him, protect him and assure him a privileged fate. And of course he must attribute to these powers a dignity corresponding to the great value of the good things he attributes to them.

The superimposition of fantasy upon a Cartesian reality aids in offering a ground for the self. According to Durkheim, religion binds people together, even if it does so by “fabric of errors” rooted in “delusion” and “psychological defects.” Durkheim reasons, “a man who did not think with concepts would not be a man because he would not be a social being.” Religious institutions organize ideological space for a group of people. Thus, people are bound together in their delirium:

Moreover, if we give the name delirious to every state in which the mind adds to the immediate data given by the senses and projects its own sentiments and feelings into things, then nearly every collective representation is in a sense delirious; religious beliefs are only one particular case of a very general law.

True to the positivist tradition, Durkheim contends, however, that science portrays the truth, and not just another worldview. (He muses on the fact that Comte thought the idea of “forces” in modern science would disappear because of their mystic origins.) There are, according to Durkheim, false perceptions of the world, shaped by religion, for instance, but also more basic sense impressions, which provide more or less objective data.

**Suicide**

In Durkheim’s doctoral dissertation, *The Division of Labour in Society*, he distinguishes mechanical solidarity from its organic counterpart. He was concerned early on about what happens when social bonds erode. Later on in his oeuvre he presented the case of suicide as an example of such erosion.

Durkheim’s study of suicide attempts an analysis of the fluctuation of suicide rates. In his investigation, he distinguishes mental illness from suicide
(because some age groups may be more prone to mental illness than to suicide). Durkheim writes, "The social suicide-rate therefore bears no definite relation to the tendency to insanity, nor, inductively considered, to the tendency to the various forms of neurasthenia." He suggests, for instance, that the low suicide rates of children and of the very old can be explained by their lack of the social desires the privations of which prompt suicide; they are more self-sufficient. In addition, he believes that men require others to a greater extent than women do, as the former are more complex beings. Durkheim also describes women as being closer to nature (which, to him, explains their lower suicide rates).

What defends us from self-destruction is being part of a society. Durkheim says:

What constitutes this society is the existence of a certain number of beliefs and practices common to all the faithful, traditional and thus obligatory. The more numerous and strong these collective states of mind are, the stronger the integration of the religious community, and also the greater its preservative value. The details of dogmas and rites are secondary. The essential thing is that they be capable of supporting a sufficiently intense collective life. And because the Protestant church has less consistency than the others it has less moderating effect upon suicide.

The common element in suicide, according to Durkheim, is the lack of social integration in society. He says, "Suicide varies inversely with the degree of integration of the social groups of which the individual forms a part."

Durkheim chronicles three types of suicide (egoistic, altruistic, and anomic):

Egoistic suicide results from man's no longer finding a basis for existence in life; altruistic suicide, because this basis for existence appears to man situated beyond life itself. The third sort of suicide, the existence of which has been shown, results from man's activities lacking regulation and his consequent sufferings. By virtue of its origin we shall assign this last variety the name of anomic suicide.

Egoistic suicide is defined by excessive individualism (we depend very little upon others). Altruistic suicide is when we kill ourselves out of, for example, a sense of honour. We kill ourselves to be a self. The individual is enveloped by the society such that his interest is assimilated into that of the group. In India, for example, there was a tradition of *sati*: women would burn themselves after their husbands died (sometimes by throwing themselves upon the funeral pyre in a desire to be burned with him). In Japan, part of the warrior tradition of the samurai demanded suicide as a last resort. The Japanese method, incidentally, became institutionalized during the feudal period (1190–1867). The word *seppuku* means "cutting the stomach," and the two Chinese characters it is derived from are pronounced *Hara-Kiri*. The act of what is sometimes referred
to as Hara-Kiri consisted of stabbing oneself in the stomach (sometimes with a beheading during, or just prior to, the act).

An anomic suicide is the result of the lack of regulation. Anomy can refer to lack of control in the economy, on the domestic level, and so on.50 A social disintegration may ensue, for example, in the crease between two social orders. This disintegration may lead certain individuals to feel alienated, and result in an increase in suicide rates. The cause of increased suicide is not considered to be decline of the family, but, more generally, social disintegration. Durkheim writes:

But we have shown that, while religion, the family and the nation are preservatives against egoistic suicide, and the cause of this does not lie in the special sort of sentiments encouraged by each. Rather, they all owe this virtue to the general fact that they are societies and they possess it only in so far as they are well integrated societies; that is, without excess in one direction or the other.51

The greater cohesion in a society the fewer suicides (given the qualification that excessive cohesion can lead to altruistic suicides).

Durkheim allows that there may be individual anomalies to his theory (such as personal tragedy). Individual suicides, however, still bear a "collective mark."52 Durkheim states, "The private experiences usually thought to be the proximate causes of suicide have only the influence borrowed from the victim's moral predisposition, itself an echo of the moral state of society."53 He goes on, "The productive cause of the phenomenon naturally escapes the observer of individuals only; for it lies outside individuals. To discover it, we must raise his point of view above individual suicides and perceive what gives them unity."54

Durkheim posits two generic types of suicides: ones having to do with exaggerated socialization and identification (altruism), and ones where there is a marked alienation (egoism and anomism). He also grants that some suicides may be a result of a pull in both directions.55 The solution, more generally, is (the correct amount of) solidarity. Durkheim writes:

[He] will no longer find the only aim of his conduct in himself, and, understanding that he is the instrument of a purpose greater than himself, he will see that he is not without significance. Life will resume meaning in his eyes, because it will recover its natural aim and orientation.56

Yet, Durkheim is not optimistic about our ability to return to the past as that would conflict with free thought. That is to say, if social integration is to occur, it must be sought in a new type of organization, not merely in mimicking, for example, a feudal past.57

At any rate, altruistic suicide is easily distinguishable from the other varieties. It is not clear, however, what the difference between egoistic and anomic suicide is (since they both involve a lack of social integration).58 Durkheim has already
admitted that they spring from the same root (and that a case could be marked a mixture of both). 59 R. Moris, who studied the social forces behind urban suicide, raises the concern over the difference of these types of suicide, which he sees as consequent to the frustration of the need for social solidarity. (These drives have to be assumed to exist prior to society in the basic sense that they are not the result of socialization.)

On Durkheim’s model, the self’s nature is composed of a few basic needs; primarily, a representation of a world is required. We are from our particular points of view mirrors of society. We interpret our selves (and our experiences) as forming a narrative that chronicles what we have “been through” (and hope for).

We see a unique strain of Romanticism in Durkheim’s thought. Unlike Kierkegaard, he is not necessarily led to an ascetic ethic. He rather conforms to the typical romantic evaluation of the temporal world; it is good. Nor does he wish to base his knowledge of human nature on personal introspection; he wants to be scientific (i.e., obtain results based on statistical studies that yield predictions). Unlike the romantics, however, he emphasizes society over the individual. All he requires, so it seems, is that social integration is sufficient for selfhood. Unlike Kierkegaard, he places the fruition of the self in a social setting, not in relation to God.

Yet, being cognizant of Durkheim’s social agenda is important for understanding the commonality between himself and Kierkegaard. Durkheim, recall, restricts social configurations to those who allow a moderate amount of integration (as to avoid the extremes of excessive integration or individualism). For example, he felt concern over how industrial transformation had uprooted man from an otherwise meaningful network of social relations. Unsavoury social settings are taken to be so precisely because they conflict with Durkheim’s idea of what a self is. He has, at the very least, like Kierkegaard, a metaphysical conception of the self, and an accompanying social critique.

Durkheim, it is important to note, preferred a social configuration with the qualities that he felt would allow us to come to fruition as full human beings. He was hostile, in theory and practice, to social circumstances that promoted excessive individualism typical of the nineteenth-century industrial world. Though he did not require the abandonment of industrial society (the way some romantics did), he did want to attempt to heal the wounds caused by social transformation, and attempt to fill in the potholes of meaninglessness typical of the new world (and reflected in some of its literature). The romantic dilemma, thus considered, seems to cause a cleavage, to put it bluntly, between being alone (Kierkegaard) and being with others (the sociologists).

As mentioned earlier, Durkheim seems to mark an obvious break with Kierkegaard. We needed to investigate, however, to what extent, if any, Durkheim’s account of the self complements Kierkegaard’s. In this chapter we saw that Durkheim may help us to fill in and expand Kierkegaard’s account. D. W. Winnicott, a counsellor of the maladjusted, allows us to reconcile the dilemma, bringing together Kierkegaard and the sociologists. The next chapter focuses on his perspective.
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