

Durkheim's French Neo-Kantian Social Thought: Epistemology, Sociology of Knowledge, and Morality in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*

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“To understand Kant, is to go beyond him.”
- Windelband
Praludien, Tubingen 1884, IV.

I. INTRODUCTION:

Anthony Giddens equates certain writings of Durkheim’s to “sociological Kantianism” (1978, pg. 91). In particular, a more recent commentator like Susan Stedman Jones believes that the young Durkheim of the *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1895) is a “positivist”, while the mature Durkheim of *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912) is an “idealist”. (2000, pg. 43) This paper’s focus is therefore on the more “idealist” Durkheim of the *Elementary Forms*. It is in the *Forms* that one is able to identify the emergence of Durkheim’s French Neo-Kantianism with most clarity, in terms of the development of a distinct Epistemology and Sociology of Knowledge is concerned. It should be noted, however, that a renowned scholar such as Alasdair MacIntyre finds that Durkheim’s overall legacy is his self-establishment as the true heir to Comte’s positivism in the French Social Sciences. MacIntyre believes that as time progressed in Durkheim’s academic career (with his founding of the first European University Sociology Department at Bordeaux in 1895), not only did Durkheim realize he was the true heir to Comte, but more importantly, other academics and colleagues surrounding him in his chosen burgeoning academic field acknowledged that he was too. (1986, pg. 87) Therefore, there are certain limits and boundaries to Durkheim’s “idealism” in the *Elementary Forms*, even with the high degree of Neo-Kantian thinking evident in the study. Nonetheless, I will establish in this paper that Durkheim was in fact a true Neo-Kantian, and that his Social Philosophy was greatly informed by other key figures in the history of French Neo-Kantianism. These figures include Charles

Renouvier, Emile Boutroux, and Octave Hamelin. Despite such early influences of Durkheim's, I will, in turn, present his Neo-Kantian Social Thought as distinct. His explicit arguments will be reconstructed and contrasted to the themes of four other prominent Neo-Kantian Social Thinkers: Simmel (Social Forms); Cassirer (Symbolic Forms); Lask (Substratum); and Kelsen (Purification of Concepts).

II. NEO-KANTIAN CONTEXT AND INTELLECTUAL BACKGROUND:

The Kantianism that Durkheim was exposed to in his formative years was one that was filtered through Renouvier. Charles Renouvier saw himself as providing “neo criticism” of Kant (1993, pg. 5) that did not extend the Kantian tradition but, rather, critically rewrote Kantian epistemic themes into an intelligible body of knowledge applicable to the social world¹. Following Renouvier’s lead, Terry Godlove finds that “Durkheim transplanted these Kantian conceptions [of the first *Critique*] from their native first person context into the third person “human” sciences, including those concerned with the interpretation of religion.” (1989, pg. 4) Likewise, Barry Schwartz situates such a radical transplantation by commenting that, “more than a century after the appearance of the *Critique*, rationalism met its first sociology challenge” with Durkheim’s intelligible body of knowledge (1981, pg. 38). Moreover, Schwartz stresses that the French Sociology of Knowledge that Durkheim pioneered at the turn of the twentieth century was developed out a confrontation with Kantian idealism (ibid., pg., 12), and was a sort of repudiation of “the autonomy of the mind by showing how the most fundamental categories of understanding correlate with the divisions of society” in “an attempt to save empiricism by standing Kant on his head” (ibid., ibid.) Further, in neglecting orthodox Neo-Kantianism and rather following in the Renouvierian French tradition of a new critical rewriting of Kantian Theoretical Philosophy...

“Kant’s crucial mistake, says Durkheim, was his assumption that time and space are homogenous categories. They are always classified in terms of the organization and recurrent activities of the group. This correspondence betrays their social origin. Although Durkheim shares with Kant the conviction that the mind is a positive organizer of experience, he maintains that its ordering categories are socially produced. Because he locates the sources of Kant’s a priori in society rather than the individual,

¹ To even more of an extreme, commentator Nielsen writes that, “Renouvier is hardly a Kantian epigone. His system represents a genuine philosophical synthesis of its own, despite its partially Kantian lineage.” (1999b, pg. 41)

Durkheim's "synthesis" of rationalism and empiricism turns out to be no compromise at all. Durkheim's theory of knowledge would make Locke himself blush." (1981, pg. 2-3)

Ken Morrison and Steven Lukes, amongst others, have documented that after graduating with his Ph.D. in Philosophy from the Ecole Normale in Paris, Durkheim spent the 1885-1886 academic year on a fellowship studying Empiricism in Marburg and Leipzig. In addition, he analyzed the relation of Ethics to the broader study of Social Science in Berlin under Wilhelm Wundt. In the latter studies he learnt that "The true object of morality is to make man feel that he is not the whole, but part of the whole – and how insignificant he is by reference to the plurality of contexts which surround him." (1972a, pg. 92; 1995, pg. 120; 2000b, pg. 2; 1972b, pg. 33; 1972c, pg. 85) Both Morrison and Lukes argue that such courses of study (especially the Empiricism) made more sense to the 28 year-old Durkheim than his studies in traditional French Neo-Kantianism with his dissertation advisor Boutroux (who had actually, in turn, studied with the orthodox German Neo-Kantian Helmholtz in Heidelberg a decade prior to Durkheim's graduate studies) at the ENS from 1879-1885. By 'making sense', at least these two commentators' refer that Durkheim found the German courses of study more relevant and applicable to the presentation and advancement of Sociology as a rigorous subject matter embracing the precision of the scientific method and centered upon practical and objective social research.

One can also see how Wundt's moral theme of an anti-individualistic nature informs the later Durkheim's aggregate notion of the collectivity marking social reality. In such a social reality, he would develop a micro-notion of 'semi-autonomous' moral realities existing within the broader context of the initial social reality, that very social reality perpetuating the livelihood of the collectivity and its distinct individual and

collective representations connected as layering of webs. For Durkheim, mythical thought and moral beliefs express a reality different than individual reality. However, Durkheim had learned from Renouvier's Neo-Kantianism that 'the whole is greater than the sum of its parts'. Such studies in France may have only contributed to and raised the importance of Wundt's Ethical Theory in Germany, as far as him generating an intelligible body of anti-individualist Social Thought entailing these themes when he arrived back in France. Along with Morrison and Lukes, Durkheimian commentators Godlove and Schwartz find Durkheim's break with the Kantian tradition clearly visible by his first three major studies (*The Division of Labor in Society* [1892], the aforementioned *Rules* [1895], and *Suicide* [1897]), whereas Giddens and Stedman Jones argue that Durkheim extended French Neo-Kantianism by pursuing a groundbreaking Sociology of Knowledge in "Primitive Classification" (1903) and, of course, the monumentally ambitious *Elementary Forms*.

III. THE FORMS:

In the *Elementary Forms*, Durkheim immediately presents the thesis that “there are no religions that are false”. (1965, pg. 15) For Durkheim, justifications by religious followers can be negatively judged by the collective of a social group or society, but beyond these judgments, all religions at ground level express the conditions of the social reality that generates them. (ibid., ibid.) As far as a theory of knowledge is concerned, Durkheim is attempting to find the origins of the basic categories of the faculty of understanding in social experience itself. Back in his study “Primitive Classification” (co-authored by his nephew Marcel Mauss), he showed that the very notion of category or class does indeed derive from society, and that his Sociology of Knowledge is centered upon the idea that ‘the unity of this first logical system merely reproduces the unity of society’. Space is a concept for Durkheim (as it was for Hamelin); instead of it serving as a Kantian sensible intuition characterized by its receptivity, it has the discursivity of a traditional concept. This carrying forward of the late 19th century Neo-Kantian elimination of intuition results in Durkheim’s notion of the discursive concept of space being particular not to the individual; the concept of space is shared by the members of a social group and is derivative of the everyday life of the collective of society.

In arguing that our complex system of classification and knowledge stems from the fact that we do in fact live in such social groups, contingent is that group categories of thought precede the formations of intellectual categories. Durkheim believes that society, as a type of ‘substratum’, did not simply work as a model in which classificatory thought followed; it was actually its own divisions which served as divisions for the system of classification itself. (1985. pg. 135) The Neo-Kantian implication of such an

organizational truth is that the first logical categories had to be ones of a purely social nature. The first classes of ‘things’ were that of classes of individuals, into which such ‘things’ were integrated. It is exactly because individuals were indeed grouped, and thought of themselves in the form of groups, that in their ideas they grouped other things. Furthermore, because these two types of grouping occurred at such a foundational level of the substratum they emerged very early in society as indistinct from one another (ibid., ibid.) and as simply amalgamated, generalized social conditions for the possibility of experience of collective life and its representations. There is not typical Neo-Kantian circularity in this argument of Durkheim’s, in that he believes that discursive practices do not change because of collective representations. Commentators Godlove and Schwartz really emphasize the rupture of Durkheimian Sociology of Knowledge from the critical Kant’s Theoretical Philosophy simply because Durkheim thinks the essential categories of thought are constructed products of society and do not spring from individual minds.

If one looks at Durkheim as rewriting (or inverting) Kant in such a fashion, it is difficult to find some degree of validity in Giddens and Stedman Jones’ Neo-Kantian readings of his later Social Thought. As far as him generating a Theory of Knowledge in the *Elementary Forms*, these commentaries find that two aspects of a guiding thesis are here fore evident. First, returning to his thought in “Primitive Classification”, intellectual categories leading to complex systems of thought, such as science, logic, and philosophy, derive their classificatory framework from the fact that human beings tend to live in groups and thereby group their ideas. Second, once again, intellectual categories are derivatives of group categories. This second aspect contradicts Kant’s discussion of “apprehension” in the First *Critique*’s ‘Transcendental Deduction (A)’, where the

Kantian contention that internal mental categories are primary in the “apprehension” of the external world stems from. One must remember that for Kant, the ‘A-Deduction’ terminology of “apprehension” is reorganized and rearticulated into the theory of a ‘transcendental unity’ of “apperception” in the ‘B-Deduction’, and either way, Durkheim is superimposing Kantian terminology by rejecting this degree of epistemic universality found innate in the individual’s mind. He is rather opting for a pooling, sharing, or grouping of knowledge as a founding characteristic of the construction of social reality and the dominant collective that define and govern its phenomenal content. There is no noumena for Durkheim; the Kantian ‘thing-in-itself’ has to be knowable since all knowledge can be reduced to the social. In the observation of social facts, Durkheim’s believes such social facts have to be treated like things, in that we do not know *a priori* what ideas form their basis. The social scientist is encouraged to examine the various currents of social life and go back to their source as the vehicle of individual and collective representations in order to arrive at knowledge of their true origins. All facts of social reality are knowable for Durkheim, but he believes that certain facts can certainly exist without serving any purpose at all and can be useless in an attempt to construct a full explanation of social phenomena.

However, to argue for Giddens and Stedman Jones Neo-Kantian readings of Durkheim *Elementary Forms*, one cannot deny the very metaphysical and epistemic nature of the questions being asked by Durkheim throughout the study. Two that come to mind, through the pro-Neo-Kantian scholarship of Pickering, is “Who is God?” (1984, pg. 487) and ‘What is Reality?’. Pickering believes that Durkheim’s Thought in the *Elementary Forms* should be compared to Kant’s argument for the existence of God: we

must hypothesize God's existence, since without that the notion of morality can have no sense. As far as this Kantian theorem is concerned in Durkheim's thought, in place of God, he puts society. (ibid., ibid.; 1998, pg. 75) During the Enlightenment, the individual had emerged as a type or form of God to himself, and Pickering rephrases the 'Who is God?' question to read, 'What is there in the beginning?': 'Religion or Society?'. The aprioristic influence of Kant is undeniable through this reading of Durkheim.

Durkheim, of course, answers such a revised fundamental question by declaring that society becomes before all (it is the Kantian *a priori*), and that all religion (no matter how primitive or advanced the religion is) is nonetheless derived from society. However, one can find a Kantian method of inquiry employed by the thought that in the beginning of society religion was the 'matrix' of all that is social and that in the absence of God, man thinks of himself as a self-legitimizing being (2000. pg. 69). Kant, as the closing philosophical figure to the Enlightenment and its articulation of progress, has been appropriated here in Durkheim's Social Thought; there still is a 'matrix' involved, the mapping now, however, is no longer of cognition but of society. In terms of thinking of society as God once again brings up the undeniable Renouvierian influence in Durkheim's French Social Neo-Kantianism, for both Renouvier and Boutroux believed that that they were pioneering a Neo-Kantian 'science of morality'. This Neo-Kantian 'beefing up' of philosophy by way of the scientific method all goes back to 'Preface B' of the First *Critique*, with the Kantian intention in the rewrite made clear: Metaphysics needs to be grounded in the precision and "secure path of science" to achieve the stature in society it deserves (2003, pg. 17).

a. SOCIAL REALITY:

As far as the other philosophical question at hand in the *Elementary Forms*, that of, 'What is reality?', Durkheim believes that reality is nothing more than a system of symbols. (2004, pg. 181) Earlier in his career of scholarship, a younger Durkheim proposed that that no religion whatsoever could ever be regarded merely as fantasy and that every religion that has ever existed has found its fundamental basis in social 'reality'. He acknowledges that these religions have done very little in terms of providing an explanation of 'reality', admitting that they do not express the 'things' of the physical world as they are, *per se*. However, it is his belief that they "interpret, in a symbolic form, social needs and collective interests. They represent the various connections maintained by society with the individuals who go to make it up as well as the things forming part of its substance." (1972, pg. 50) This is a very Neo-Kantian style of analysis, being that Durkheim acknowledges that there is a 'substrate' in the form of society and its social conditions, and (departing from the Laskian substratum) that society is in part comprised of 'pre-conceptualized' content. This is so because Durkheimian individuals are already bringing their own individual representations to a collective notion of social reality. In its construction process full of the generation of collective representations, each Durkheimian individual has already very early made sense of the world by attaching and ascribing certain meaning to abstract symbols. The Neo-Kantian circularity in this argument is that society as *a priori* has already informed the individuals' individual representations and their normative interpretation of a certain segment of social reality's economy of symbols. Interpreting society as the Kantian 'manifold' would be wrong; Durkheim finds that society as a collective totality contains

'pre-formed' segments, and as a collective structure it has already been impregnated with conceptual content. The pre-conceptualized content was inserted earlier rather than later in the multiple, continuous phases (time is reorganized in Durkheim's French Neo-Kantianism as a discursive concept, of course) which constitute the making of the totality of society and both its individual and collective representations. Take for instance, the example employed by Durkheim to convey meaning in the symbolic structures of social reality:

The soldier who dies for his flag, dies for his country; but in fact it is the flag which is in the forefront of his mind. It sometimes happens that this even directly determines action. Whether a flag remains in the hands of the enemy or not hardly determines the fate of the country, yet the soldier is prepared to risk death to regain it. He loses sight of the fact that the flag is only a symbol, and that it has no value in itself, but merely recalls the reality that it represents; it is treated as if it were this reality itself." (1972, pg. 256; 1973, pg. 183)

Such a soldier who is willing to risk death for his country's flag has had the image of a flag in his mind throughout his entire life. It has only been since the start of his career in the military that the meaning he attaches to this actual symbol that existed in reality all along has shifted to gain greater importance. It is representative not simply of the reality he lives amongst, but the function or role he has in that particular social reality (he feels the need to embody the honor, dignity, loyalty, and character of a soldier). The relativism is further perpetuated by the fact that it is his exteriorly-ascribed function to risk death for that socially-generated symbol, one which is really only an abstract entity outside of war. The meaning of the symbol and the reality it represents are two separate aspects in Durkheim's example. The symbol of the flag has existed well before the soldier was even born, being that his nation is presumed to be centuries old. It is only after the fact that he attaches a certain meaning to that abstract symbol (the flag means more to him after enduring military training). A further abstraction takes place when the reality it [the symbol] represents is altered whenever his country decides to go to war

with another nation. The nation they go to war with, as its own closed-society, has its own way of life full of distinct practices, customs, groupings, and institutions all needed to be characterized by a completely different set of individual and collective representations. The symbol as abstract entity is the universal in all realities (all countries needed a flag); the social realities and ways of life that this one symbol represents varies greatly from nation-to-nation, as many countries are founded upon different value-systems and ideologies. Furthermore, there is no standard time-frame for when meaning should be ascribed to the symbol of the nation by each of its members who risk death for it (individuals enter the armed forces at different ages). All these variances in ascriptions of meaning are founded upon nothing more than an abstract entity (the symbol) and a full range of human emotions. Accordingly, in a social reality of a closed-society there alone are mutual exchanges of symbols communicating meaning and value as well as representations characterizing certain more abstract realities. This all makes for a substrate constantly shedding layers of generalized forms. In turn, represented is the decay in the consistency of the social substrate by way of the relativism the symbolic sphere perpetuates itself on.

For Kant, as was the case for Leibniz, 'apperception' is the reflexive awareness of representations, but Durkheim's construction of social reality is a purely collective notion. This implies that there is one single coherent, yet extremely complex social 'reality' that is realized and constructed in multiple phases (providing for the aforementioned variances in the ascription of the meaning of symbols) over the course of a continuous progression of time. Once again, even time is a concept [of social nature] for Durkheim, since it finds the 'rhythm of social life' as its basis (pg. 1973, pg. 215). He

finds that the conceptual content is already evident in the early phases of social progression (religion being the most primitive of all social phenomena), more than a Kelsenian insertion being administered during some later point. It [the conceptual content] has always been with us and is contingent in the narratives of society and its categories of totality. Therefore, as a distinct Neo-Kantian, Durkheim is arguing for pre-conceptualized segments or fragments of reality that are subject to an arduous epistemic ‘retrieval’ by the individual subject, rather than an insertion of conceptual content early in the reality constructing process in order to relay meaning to the collectivity. He actually labels the study of the substratum as ‘Morphology’ in his Neo-Kantian informed Sociology, and grounds it beneath the Normative Sphere encompassing ‘Institutions’ and the aforementioned Symbolic Sphere comprised of ‘Collective Representations’. (1985, pg. 16) There is definitely a Neo-Kantian presence felt in Durkheim’s argument that there is pre-conceptualization in the fragmentary construction of social reality and its grounding substrate, rather than the slipping in of conceptual content late in a construction process of the symbolic sphere. However, he is opposing what another Neo-Kantian philosopher (Kelsen) is doing, by inserting (or at least acknowledging) the conceptual content [Durkheim: religion; Kelsen: law] so early in the construction of social reality and its substrate framework that is supposed to ascribe a more aggregate sense of meaning and purpose.

Both Kelsen and Durkheim are extremely interested in the “purification” of concepts, but the “purification” of the concepts of society and its ‘bedrock’ of religions works differently in practice than a pure theory of something as socially exterior and normative as law and jurisprudence. Durkheim departs from Kelsen’s Pure Theory of

Law methodology and its *Grundnorm* in that he is not working top-down in the manner that his individual cannot start with a direct accessing of the ‘*Grundnorm*’ of society, a universalizable collective representation to work down from, one that he would be able to make sense of in its lower hierarchies of further constructed collective and individual representations. That is just plain wrong for Durkheim. The problem with Kelsen’s notion of ‘purity’ for Durkheim is that social reality is entirely a collective entity and this makes a ‘*Grundnorm*’ of society inapplicable to the Durkheimian individual subject. Whereas the Kelsenian jurist would use such a notion as a guide to coherently administer jurisprudence, Durkheim’s social reality is impregnated with a barrage of individual and collective representation, on top of what is a multitude of symbols, each which have the capacity to be whimsically interpreted by certain individual in different ways.

Although Durkheim’s most pure notion of society as substratum is already impregnated with such developed conceptual content, Durkheim finds that it is this very attempt at connection-making in the symbolic sphere paired with the actual composition of the individual subject’s interests and proclivities that provide for a high degree of real-ness. This is all in terms of experiencing one single, coherent, and intelligible social reality. In the *Forms*, Durkheim embodies this degree of real-ness accessible in its social construction and workings even further by proposing the idea that “Religions are the primitive way in which societies becomes conscious of themselves and their history”, and that they are to the social order what sensations are to the individual. (1972a, pg. 250) He imagines a skeptic who argues that there is a fundamental and primary “distortion” of the ‘things’ represented in social reality by these religions, a “distortion” of the same magnitude as in the case of the “distortion” in the processes in the imagery of the

religion-adherer. This discussion employing the notion of “distortion” is once again extremely Neo-Kantian, this time even bearing more of a resemblance to Kelsen’s methodology than Lask’s, with his chief aim of the discussion to touch upon a theme entailing a further advancement in the “purification” of concepts. This advancement surfaces in Durkheim’s study as social “contagion”.

A significant theory of Durkheim’s in this Neo-Kantian light is that in the *a priori* of society, there exists an inevitable degree of social “contagion”. This social “contagion” must be ‘purified’ to identify the true conceptual contents that society is perpetuated on, but society is already a collective notion for Durkheim; in his Neo-Kantianism all individual and collective representations are identified as conceptual. Further, he believes that in order to even ‘think’ conceptually (being that society is the *a priori*), one must “isolate” certain social conditions and ‘constraints’ (1973, pg. 214) of the substratum (remember that in the *Rules* Durkheim finds that even the moral beliefs of the individual tend to “constrain” the appearance and identification of ‘social facts’ as generalized ‘things’ in reality). The consequence of such presuppositions held is that Durkheim’s notion of social “contagion” can never be fully flushed out and conceptual purity of the structures and categories of totality will always be unattainable. Why? Because individuals are complex, and the social reality they live amongst is even more complicated. Think about all of the possible groupings, customs, and practices initiated by even the most primitive of societies. Furthermore, when the division of labor process becomes more specialized and societies become further advanced, ‘social facts’ as ‘things’ can really become less intelligible (a multitude of symbols only adding to the haze) and the “purification” of concepts starts to become out of sight. Once again,

simply focusing on the social irrationalism and “contagion” that the individual can generate in ‘reality’ and its economy of symbols, Durkheim writes in the *Forms* that,

“...it is a well-known law that the sentiments aroused in us by something spontaneously attach themselves to the symbol which represents it. For us, black is a sign of mourning; it also suggests sad feelings and ideas. This transference of sentiments comes simply from the fact that the idea of a thing and the idea of its symbol are closely linked in our minds; the result is that the emotions provoked by the one extend contagiously to the other. But this contagion, which always takes place in some degree, is much more extensive and marked when the symbol is of something simple, definite and easy to represent, while the thing itself, owing to its dimensions, the number of its parts and the complexity of their arrangement, is difficult to conceive of. For we are unable to treat an abstract entity, which we can represent with difficulty, and in a confused manner, as the source of strong sentiments which we feel.” (1972, pg. 256)

Social ‘reality’ is no doubt complex, and the individuals which partially comprise its collective framework (representations tend to take on a life of their own) have always been acknowledged by Durkheim to be erratic and unpredictable. None of the former is good news for any type of traditional Neo-Kantian “purification” of concepts process, especially one done while entangled in the interconnectedness of the social realm full of these emotion-filled individuals. Such presuppositions held entailing a decline in subjectivity that had already been irrational to begin with is, in part, what makes Durkheim a distinct Social Theorist of cultural modernity. The relativism that transpired over the course of nearly a century-and-a-half after the publication of Kant’s *First Critique* penetrates its deepest point in Durkheim’s new cultural relativism. He counters the claim by the aforementioned skeptic with a relativistic rejoinder: such “distortions” in the processes of the religious-observers’ imagery are of the same type as when sensations distort the physical ‘things’ they are supposed to convey to the individual subject.

Furthermore, he finds that,

“Sound, colour, and temperature do not exist in the world any more than gods, demons or spirits do. By the fact alone that the representation presupposes a subject who thinks – (in one case, an individual, in the other, a collective subject) – the nature of the subject is a factor in the representation and distorts the thing represented. The individual, in picturing by means of sensation the relations he has with the world about him, puts into these images something that is not there, some qualities that come from himself. Society does the same in picturing its structure by means of religion.” (1972a, pg. 250)

The former is Durkheim's articulation of the necessity for both individual and collective representations and a complex social reality which has the capacity to generate and absorb the realities each are intended to capture and picture. Because humans (the Durkheimian individual) are filled with the very emotions spoken about, the 'distortion' in both the relaying and reception of meaning in those abstractions of reality (the individual and the collective representations) occurs entirely amongst the verisimilitudes of modern subjectivity. Even though Durkheim has theorized about a high degree of chaos occurring amongst the social reality of 'things', the fundamental 'distortion' in collectively pictured realities (representations) are in fact the products of individuals' performance in and interpretations of simple functionary roles. This sense of functioning is intended for presentation within the context of certain social customs and practices basic or foundational to any typical source of a Durkheimian substrate. When the simplicity of the social practice or custom (in this case, of a religious nature) is overlooked or misinterpreted by the individual is when there is the birth of new types of representations (individual and collective). In such a capacity, these representations tend to complicate social reality for the collective rather than clarify it.

b. REPRESENTATIONS: INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE:

The perpetuation of the notion of the symbolic² is only further advanced in the *Elementary Forms* (1985, beginning on pg. 121), where a complex construction of social ‘reality’ is proposed that incorporates Durkheim’s concept of ‘representation’ which, as we have seen throughout the former section, had always lay contingent in such conceptualization. ‘Representations’ relate to the concrete, everyday world of experience, one that is based on physical objects, physical necessities, human nature, and psychological drives. Evident from the former passages cited above, Durkheim, as early as 1898 (in *Lecons de sociologie*, and “Individual and Collective Representations” from *Revue de Metaphysique et de Morale*) developed his notion of ‘representation’ with the dual capacity for there to be both individual and collective ones. He believes that society does not depend upon the nature of the individual personality and in the latter publication theorizes that,

“Society has for its substratum the mass of associated individuals. The system of which they form by uniting it together, and which varies according to their geographical disposition and the nature and number of their channels of communication, is the base from which social life is raised. The representations which form the network of social life arise from the relations between the individuals thus combined or the secondary groups that are between the individuals and the total society. If there is nothing extraordinary in the fact that individual representations, produced by action and reaction between neural elements, there is nothing surprising in the fact that collective representations, produced by the action and reaction between individual minds that form the society, do not derive directly from the latter and consequently surpass them. The conception of the relationship which unites the substratum and the social life is at every point analogous to that which undeniably exists between the physiological substratum and the psychic life of individuals”. (1953, pg. 24-25)

Even though Durkheim believes that it is through a type of aggregate substratum that collective life is connected to the rest of the world, he finds that this rest of the world not purely absorbed in it. Collective representations are exterior to individual minds to

² The symbolic and their relation to the mythical were lively topics to other Neo-Kantians as well, in particular, Cassirer (as evident in his publications *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* and *Myth, Symbol, and Culture*). As much as Cassirer wants to ground culture in reality, he acknowledges that you cannot do away with the mythical.

the degree that they do not derive from them but are associated with them. (1953, pg. 26)

He theorizes about a dual sense of dependence and distinction, and that simply since it is the collective substratum then generates reality's social phenomena, such phenomena must bear the marks of this origin of theirs. (1953, pg. 30) However, in terms of a purely collective social consciousness, it may be initially structured on the nature of the substratum (i.e., the amount of social elements and conditions in a closed system, and the structure in which they are grouped and distributed), but once a preliminary set of representations have been generated by such a substratum, the representations, in part, become autonomous "realities" each with "their own way of life". These semi-autonomous "realities" engage in a type of 'free play' where they have the power and freedom to attract and repel each other and to move towards various syntheses of a more Neo-Kantian 'self-regulative' manner. Durkheim finds that since such syntheses are determined by the natural affinities of the 'mini-realities' and not by the conditions for the possibility of their experience [i.e., the social matrix which marked their origin], a new set of representations are born out of these 'self-regulative' syntheses. These newest 'representations' reflect even less of the initial substratum and its social structure, and much more of the 'quasi-spontaneously' formed collective representations that, in turn, were generated by such substratum's social conditions. (1953, pg. 31)

Where his nephew Mauss theorizes about a 'gift' economy of customs, Durkheim conceives of a social reality of symbols, one that is that is multi-layered and loosely interdependent rather than purely causal. This social reality's more exterior layers of broadly-construed, self-regulative 'representations' tend to take on a life (or form) of their own as 'mini-realities'. Nonetheless, there is still a high degree of

interconnectedness, comprehensiveness, and Kantian universality to each such ‘mini-reality’ acknowledged by Durkheim in the *Forms*, where he believes that, “religion, far from ignoring society and making an abstraction of it, is in its image; it reflects all its aspects, even the most vulgar and the most repulsive.” (1973, pg. 193-194)

Representations can therefore be interpreted as ‘self-sustaining’ systems of reality, who found their initial codification in the very substrate of society and its groups, institutions, customs, and practices. Religion, being the model of representation for the most primitive societies, has endured posterity and proven to be a social phenomenon of reiterative magnitude that characterizes how complex and chaotic the mythical component of social reality can be for Durkheim.

c. SYMBOLS AND REPRESENTATIONS:

As far as 'reality' being defined by Durkheim as simply a 'system of symbols', one of his presuppositions is that there are no unknowable symbols of any kind. He writes in the *Forms* that "one must know how to go underneath the symbol to the reality it represents and which gives it meaning. The most barbarous and the most fantastic rites and the strangest myths translate some human need, some aspect of life, either individual or social." (1965, pg. 14) Even the young Durkheim believed that divinity was nothing more than the symbolic expression of "transfigured" society and that the archetypically Neo-Kantian circularity of his argument entailed that the role of religion in such a society was "transfiguring" in itself. (1999b, pg. 206)

In terms of Durkheim's overarching project in the *Elementary Forms*, one must acknowledge that he is attempting to perform a Neo-Kantian 'retrieval' of conceptual content and meaning by returning to the sources and foundations of society (the categories of totality). In his Neo-Kantian 'isolation' of the social conditions for the possibility of religious experience, he administers what I would like to call a 'hermeneutics of retrieval'³ by proposing that "the first systems of representation with which men have pictured to themselves the world and themselves were of religious origin". (1965, pg. 21) Stedman Jones finds that if reality is simply a system of symbols, and all symbols are knowable, then representations, accordingly, are simply 'ways of seeing' the already knowable. (2001, pg. 66) That is, they are forms of the very consciousness which stem from the activity of the understanding in association with the data we receive through our senses. Collective representations, therefore, are the 'shared'

³ This may be similar in spirit, possibility, to Paul Ricoeur's notion of a 'hermeneutics of recovery' in his narrative approach to the phenomenological account of selfhood.

ways of seeing that are central to a culture or a society. (ibid., ibid.) But how can one isolate certain social conditions attached to such a fundamentally ‘shared’ way of seeing and experiencing reality?

If the collective aspects of these representations are so integral to the constitution of a culture’s value, knowledge, and human capital, then the ‘isolation’ of social conditions in the Neo-Kantian ‘retrieval/purification’ process of the conceptual content of the categories of totality becomes nearly impossible. One realizes that a figure like Kelsen would find such a task not feasible with the Neo-Kantian “purification” techniques at his disposal. The attempt at “isolating” social phenomena is representative of Durkheim doing things quite differently than Kelsen, as far as his place in the trajectory of Neo-Kantianism is concerned, especially since there is not even a noumena acknowledged for Durkheim! This all goes back to the early Durkheim of the *Rules*, who believes that sociology should comprise the study of ‘social facts’, his equating ‘social facts’ to ‘things’, and his explanatory gesture that by the term ‘social’ he means anything that can be described as a ‘human event’. (1985, pg. 64) Representations, therefore, are central conceptual content to any type of sociological explanation in Durkheim’s Thought. In a social reality composed of symbols, all symbols are visible and identifiable, but this does not mean that there is clarity across the board in terms of the sense-making of the ‘social facts’ as ‘things’ (i.e., ‘human events’) they and their representations tend to characterize and picture themselves upon.

In Durkheim’s methodology, ‘identifying’ ‘social facts’ is one aspect of sociological explanation, causality (explaining how or why these social phenomena have arisen in the first place) is a totally different task of the Philosopher of Social Science.

(1999a, pg. 131) Throughout his career of scholarship, Durkheim held stipulated that when ‘one undertakes to explain a social phenomenon, one must study separately the efficient cause which produces it and the function it fulfills’. Durkheim conception of ‘Social Morphology’ as the study of the composition, characteristics, generalizations, and boundaries of the substratum rests upon the fact that ‘Social Morphology’ is more than simply descriptive analysis. Indeed, it is also intended to serve as explanation. (1985, pg. 25) For instance, Durkheim proposes that his study of the substratum must ask why a certain area is more populated than other areas and why certain points in space are designed or organized as more urban than rural (and he even asks, in a Neo-Kantian fashion, what are the conditions that either bring about or constrain the emergence of major urban spaces and their livelihood [ibid., ibid.] comprised of sets of individual and collective representations). He refers to these questions as representative of the subject matter comprising the study of the “substratum of collective life”, and that “parallel” to this form of substratum there is individualistic psychic “life itself”. (ibid., ibid.) In terms of the projects employed in the *Elementary Forms* (for instance, attempting to identify the most primitive of all religions), it is most helpfully to concentrate fully on what type and kinds of representations exist or emerge (individual or collective), and what role each variant serves in Durkheim’s Epistemology and Sociology of Knowledge.

Building upon a notion of factuality (or even a Laskian Fact/Value distinction), general properties of human nature mean absolutely nothing to notions of the collective for Durkheim, to which collective representations are intended to characterize. Accordingly, he believes that it is only the most specialized and complex forms of human nature that can come to characterize collective facts. What would in time come to be

Lask's Fact/Value distinction is collapsed by Durkheim as early as the *Rules* when he argues that a social fact can exist without serving any purpose at all. Nonetheless he does not deny that there is meaning encoded and pictured in all representations, and this once again brings about the strong anti-individualist nature of Durkheim's Social Philosophy and its representations. Kant uses the term 'representation' throughout the First *Critique* in a particular way; the significance of the way Durkheim uses it implies, of course, that it does not indicate the private, the subjective, or an illusion. All representations refer to content; even though individuals are deemed highly complex because, in part, of the broad array of symbols they generate and employ in their practice of everyday life, it is certainly evident that the collective facts which inform collective representations are deemed by Durkheim to be much more advanced and complicated than such singular meanings that emotion-filled individuals attach to their symbols used in the practice of everyday life.

d. THE 'THING-IN-ITSELF':

Stedman Jones finds that it is precisely to underscore the reality of representations that he rejects their identification with things-in-themselves (2001, pg. 6). Instead of rendering this a complete rejection of Kant's original Thought, one can rather interpret Durkheim as an extender of French Neo-Kantianism. This is because it was his early hero Renouvier who was one of the first and most prominent figures in the History of 19th Century French philosophy to deny the unknowable nature of the 'thing-in-itself'. The French Neo-Kantian social constructivism of Durkheim differs from a German Neo-Kantian figure such as Lask in that there is not a 'real' substratum mirroring the 'real' thing-in-itself (i.e., you cannot look directly at it). Instead, Durkheim's constructivism finds that society as substratum can never be truly out of sight, and because of such clear visibility it can be objectively studied to the point where its facts become intelligible to the social scientist.

In only one instance has Durkheim hinted that there may be a 'second' substratum, a type of "organic substratum [that serves] as the basis of all psychic life." (1985, pg. 31) This was introduced by Durkheim in the context of a purely hypothetical example used to counter Antonis Labriola's "Essays on the Materialist Conception of History" in an 1897 edition of *Revue philosophique*. Regardless of its actual presence, the purpose of a second, organic substratum, in theory, is to generate the very framework for 'psychic life'⁴ which Durkheim believes to be within the boundaries of sociology's

⁴ Simmel, another one of the prominent Neo-Kantian Social Theorists, focused much of his analysis on 'psychic life' (especially the 'psychic life' of a 'social space' he calls "the metropolis"), and even though Durkheim had a tremendous amount of respect for his method of analysis, he saw himself critiquing this very method in his Social Inquiry of "Sociology and its Scientific Field" (1900). His general problem with Simmel's Neo-Kantian Social Thought revolves about his fundamental question of, "what are the meanings of the expression of "social forms" and "forms of association in general"? If one wanted to speak only of the manner in which individuals are placed in contact with one another in association, of the dimensions of

subject matter. Thinking like a Neo-Kantian, once this conceptual framework has been set up to the point where one knows what the actual boundaries of the particular science's subject matters are, then the social phenomena can be studied objectively by the social researcher to the point where they are identified as intelligible facts of this particular discipline, a discipline which happens to ground itself in social reality more than another other prior to it (Durkheim famously wrote that "individualistic sociology is only applying the old principles of materialist metaphysics to social life." [1953, pg. 29])

association, of its density—in a word, of its external and morphological aspect—the notion would be definite; but it would be too restricted to constitute, by itself alone, the subject matter of a science. For it would be equivalent to reducing sociology to the exclusive investigation of the substratum on which social life rests. As a matter of fact, however, our author attributes to the term "social forms" a much more extended significance. By it he understands not only the modes of grouping, the static condition of association, but also the most general forms of social relations. The term refers to the largest forms of relations of every kind that mesh in society and to the nature of phenomena with which we are presented as being directly pertinent to sociology". (1960, pg. 357-358)

e. SPACE AS A CONCEPT: THE OVERALL SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS:

The French Neo-Kantian deniability of the ‘thing-in-itself’ goes hand-in-hand with the shifting of space from a sensory intuition characterized by its receptivity (in Kant’s ‘Transcendental Aesthetic’) to a discursive concept in Durkheim’s Epistemology and Sociology of Knowledge. Where Durkheim picked up from his French Neo-Kantian hero Renouvier the deniability that the ‘thing-in-itself’ is completely unknowable, he borrowed from his French Neo-Kantian colleague at Bordeaux Hamelin that space truly is a discursive concept and not merely a sensible intuition. In the First *Critique*, Kant refers to space and time as “organs of perception”, and from this point of view, it is not a stretch for Durkheim to posit that the first framework for understanding the world and classifying other things is the model of spatial relationship. Understanding the concept of direction, for instance, depends upon spatial relationships and upon this depends the understanding of the outside world. Durkheim’s conception of the substratum is of the central Spencerian ‘organ’ to which society depends upon in its livelihood. It is supposed to serve as the conditions for the possibility of social experience, as far as the generation and perpetuation of a layering of multiplicities (i.e., sheets of ‘mini-realities’) that become intelligible to certain sets of individuals. Such a collective notion of subjectivity (or possibly an inchoate, early 20th Century notion of intersubjectivity) is further articulated by Durkheim in his writing that:

“Social life has various manifestations, the nature of which we shall indicate presently. All of them, however, have this in common: They emanate from a group, simple or complex; the group is their substratum. Obviously, the study of sociology is the study of the social substratum.... The composition of society consists in certain combinations of people and things which by necessity are connected in space. The explanatory analysis of this substratum, however, should not be confused with that of the social life which builds on it. The way in which society emerges fully formed is one thing; the manner in which it acts is another. These are realities of two kinds....Man modifies the social substratum in a thousand ways, and the resultant differences have great sociological significance because of both the causes which they depend and the effects that they produce...The social stratum must, above all, be determined in its external form. This external form is chiefly defined by (1) the size of its territory; (2) the space which the society

occupies, that is, its peripheral or central position in regards to “continents,” and the way it is enclosed by other societies, and so on; and (3) the form of its frontiers... Yet the substratum of collective life is not the only thing of a social character that exists in nature; the life that flows from it or sustained by it necessarily has the same character and belongs to the in the province of the same science. Besides the social ways of being, there are social modes of doing”. (1960, pg. 360)

From the former it is obviously evident that space has to be held as an archetypical Neo-Kantian concept in Durkheim’s Thought and not a traditional Kantian intuition. The distinctness of Durkheim’s Neo-Kantianism, however, comes in his justification and reasoning following the re-positing that the concept of space is not a general abstraction but rather has its origins in relation to the social group from which the individual perception of space develops. The construction of a collective sense of spatial orientation in Durkheim’s social reality cannot be overlooked. There were strong anti-individualist themes of Durkheim’s Social Thought from the very beginning of his academic career (think: the ‘collective conscience’ of *The Division of Labor of Society*), and here too these themes (the ‘collective conscience’ resurfaced as ‘collective consciousness’ [1985, pg. 131]) re-emerge and shine in his belief that it is impossible to conceptualize the world spatially unless there is some sort of commonly ‘shared’ standard in terms of which spatial relations can be judged. This reinforces Stedman Jones interpretation of collective representations as ‘shared ways’ of seeing. There are further implications of such a notion of ‘sharing’ in the Durkheimian construction of orientation.

Durkheim theorizes about the need for a center point of space for the collective, in which all other spaces are able to radiate from. As far as a social group or primitive tribe’s social camp in the *Forms* is concerned, its social organization would serve as the ‘common’ standard and this social organization of the camp provided carries over to the usage of the concept of space as a model for the mental organization of space. It is here, in this mental organization mirrored and modeled from the social organization of the

camp, that we find the ‘focal’ point of spatial direction for the collective of such a primitive tribe, social group, or society in the *Elementary Forms*. This is ‘high-modernity’ in terms of cultural theorizing, since pivotal figures in 20th century French Structuralism ranging from Levi-Strauss to Bourdieu run with passages from the *Elementary Forms* documenting this particular spatial outlook that stretches and transposes Kant’s original framework in the ‘Transcendental Aesthetic’ to its very functional and conceivable limits...

“As Hamelin has shown, space is not the vague and indetermined medium which Kant imagined; if purely and absolutely homogenous, it would be of no use, and could not be grasped by the mind. Spatial representation consists essentially in a primary co-ordination of the data of sensuous experience. But this co-ordination would be impossible if the parts of space were qualitatively equivalent and if they were interchangeable. To dispose things spatially there must be a possibility of placing them differently, of putting some at the right, others at the left, these above, those below, at the north of or at the south of, east or west of, etc., etc., just as to dispose states of consciousness temporally there must be a possibility of localizing them at determinate dates. That is to say that space could not be what it is if it were not, like time, divided and differentiated. But whence come these divisions which are so essential? By themselves there are neither right nor left, up nor down, north nor south, etc. All these distinctions evidently come from the fact that different sympathetic values have been attributed to various regions. Since all the men of a single civilization represent space in the same way, it is clearly necessary that these sympathetic values, and the distinctions which depend upon them, should be equally universal, and that almost necessarily implies that they be of social origin”. (1965, pg. 23-24)

A segmented account of social space results in a fragmentation in the administration of social customs and practices of the primitive society. Where the Neo-Kantian Frenchman Bachelard develops a *Poetics of Space*, aesthetic narratives mean little to Durkheim on this matter and he is more concerned about the implications and the social conditions for the possibility of the production of space. He differs from Lefebvre’s social account of the *Production of Space* in the fact that he is still a Neo-Kantian, and is therefore attempting to map social space the same way the Kant of the *Critique* attempts to map cognition or take an inventory of the mind. In such a mapping, if social space can be relativized and differentiated like other products of the collective substrate (i.e., representations and symbols), fertile spaces can be identified, which

provides the social conditions for the possibility of the substrate to enlarge. Once Durkheim's entire social system has been fully relativized, all its things (facts, symbols, representations) tend to take on a life of their own. The point is that there is in fact 'life' prolonged and further generated to the point that Durkheim's substrate (which has the primary function is his system to provide the conditions for the possibility to study this social life) becomes a Neo-Kantian entity that will self-sustain itself to spawn countless generations of social realities.

IV. CONCLUSION:

French Neo-Kantianism is much different than German Neo-Kantianism in that, in part, the French cannot do away with Comte's bequeathing of Positivist Philosophy to the Social Sciences. However, if one had to Germanize the movement, a French Neo-Kantian Social Thinker such as Durkheim would be much more in line with the more humanities and arts-centered Continental Philosophy coming out of the Southwestern (Baden) School and its broad array of scholars employed by the Universities of Heidelberg and Freiburg at the turn of the 20th century. The Marburg School, with its mathematics and science-orientated, more Analytic approach to Neo-Kantianism may characterize certain French Neo-Kantian Philosophers of Science, but Durkheim as Theorist of social space belongs within the broader context of Social Philosophy in the Continental Tradition. His Neo-Kantian arguments are convincing, but more importantly, they are distinct. This, in turn, secures his legacy as one of the major Social Philosophers in the History of Western Thought, and that trumps the description of him as a representative intellectual figure of any nation, movement, school, or methodology.

In this paper I have established Durkheim's significant place in the trajectory of Neo-Kantianism by analyzing and reconstructing his explicit arguments in the *Forms* (and amongst other places) that find themselves centered upon five interconnected and interdependent themes: (1) reality; (2) representations; (3) symbols; (4) the 'thing-in-itself; and (5) space. By contrasting his notion of a social substratum to the Neo-Kantianism substrate of Lask, I have shown that primitive social phenomena such as religion are much more grounded in the 'bedrock' of the substrate than the normative conception of law. By considering Durkheim's attempt at a 'purification' of concepts

and social conditions in light of Kelsen's pure theory of law, I have only added to his distinctness as a French Neo-Kantian. This is because I identified his belief that the social substrate is already constructed of pre-conceptualized segments, and this, in turn, further feeds the belief that a Kelsenian insertion of conceptual content later in the construction of the societal categories of the faculty of understanding is both irrelevant and unattainable in Durkheimian Thought (being that it does not work from the top-down). I have only added to Durkheim's distinctness as a Neo-Kantian Social Thinker by presenting, analyzing, and reconstructing his explicit arguments entailing notions of "distortion" and social "contagion", which I find are the leading themes that have historically-secured his prominent place in the movement's trajectory.

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