Durkheim's Philosophy Lectures

In these lectures, given more than a decade before the publication of his groundbreaking book, *The Division of Labor in Society* (1893), Emile Durkheim, the founder of French sociology, sets out to introduce secondary school students to the field of philosophy. Moving easily back and forth between the history of philosophy and the contributions of philosophers in his own day, Durkheim takes up topics as diverse as philosophical psychology, logic, ethics, and metaphysics and seeks to articulate a unified philosophical position. Remarkably, the "social realism" that is so characteristic of his later work – where he insists, famously, that social facts cannot be reduced to psychological or economic ones and that such facts constrain human action in important ways – is totally absent in these early lectures. For this reason, they will be of special interest to students of the history of the social sciences, for they shed important light on the course of Durkheim's intellectual development. But because all members of the French elite would have been exposed to a *lycée* philosophy course similar in certain fundamental respects to the one Durkheim taught, the lectures actually offer something more: a window into the nineteenth-century French mind. Intellectual historians, historically minded philosophers, and scholars of French history will all find the lectures a valuable historical document. Insofar as they speak to the philosophical foundations of Durkheim's thought, they should also be of great interest to social theorists.

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Notes from the Lycée de Sens Course, 1883–1884

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Foreword

Another book by Emile Durkheim? Many readers will be surprised to find here a new work from one of the greatest minds in the history of sociology, the true founder of the discipline in France, both intellectually and institutionally, and undeniably, together with Max Weber, the most important continuous source of inspiration for the sociological discipline in the world. Some of the surprised readers may soon feel disappointed, however, when they realize that the present text is not another pioneering sociological work but an elementary course in philosophy. Moreover, it is not a text written by Durkheim himself but a compilation of notes taken in Durkheim's class in 1883–4, one that can reasonably be said to represent the teaching and thinking of Durkheim at a very early point of his career. But although the present text is not an original contribution to the philosophical or sociological literature of the nineteenth century as such, it is extremely helpful for an improved understanding of Durkheim's intellectual development and, above all, for an appreciation of the relationship between Durkheim's sociological project and the philosophy out of which it arose.

For some of the most influential stereotypical views of Durkheim's sociological project, the relationship between sociology and philosophy does not appear to be a problem worth studying. If one takes Durkheim to be an archpositivist, sociology means a complete rupture with philosophy. If one takes Durkheim to be a Kantian, one is certainly closer to his self-understanding but will still consider the philosophical problems as settled in Durkheim's view, just in need of further sociological concretization. Against both these views stands the interpretation that

Durkheim's sociology has itself to be seen as a philosophical project.* When, for example, late in his life Durkheim called pragmatism and sociology children of the same epoch, he intended to do more than note a mere temporal coincidence. Rather, he recognized that there was a new spirit at work both in parts of academic philosophy and in the newly emerging discipline of sociology. In both fields, similar efforts could be found to develop solutions for age-old problems through a new relationship to the methods of empirical science. And "empirical" here meant more than mere reflection on the consciousness of the researcher. Breaking with the older philosophy thus did not mean breaking with philosophy altogether. Sociology itself, therefore, could be seen as a philosophical project, not in the sense of remaining separate from empirical science but as part of a renewed philosophy based on and encompassing the empirical disciplines.

The philosophical lectures presented in this volume offer insight into an early stage of this project of transformation. They cover more than the areas that are familiar territory for Durkheim readers. It is no surprise that we find long passages on moral philosophy and epistemology, since these remained at the center of Durkheim's interests as a sociologist. But here we also find him talking about aesthetics – a conspicuous absence in his later writings – and on metaphysics and the philosophy of religion, which, despite the enormous interest Durkheim had for religion during all his life, reveals an attitude very different from everything he later contributed to this subject. Here Durkheim defends conventional arguments for God's existence and the immortality of the soul – arguments that run counter to what he later had to say on these topics.

There is no doubt that the comprehensiveness of Durkheim's course and maybe even some of its intellectual thrust are due to the institutional framework in which it took place. An adequate interpretation thus has to refer these lectures to the academic setting of late nineteenth-century French philosophical education.† But beyond that, the identification of the way in which Durkheim modified the given structure of such a course and adapted it to his own burgeoning project makes it possible to relate

* See Hans Joas, *Pragmatism and Social Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 55–78, 238.

† See the introduction by Neil Gross and the important contributions of John D. Brooks III, above all his book *The Eclectic Legacy: Academic Philosophy and the Human Sciences in Nineteenth-Century France* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1998).

Durkheim's sociology more closely to the history of French philosophy preceding his own work. This task not only includes a reconstruction of intellectual influences and of the conditions with regard to which the sociological project had to be legitimated, it also has to draw the precise contours of the philosophical currents out of which the very idea of establishing sociology as a philosophical project could emerge.

A possible starting point for such an attempt that would also lead to a better understanding of the relationship between Durkheim and another philosophical-sociological project of the same epoch is the history of "French Philosophy in the Nineteenth Century" sketched by George Herbert Mead.‡ This text, mostly ignored by sociologists and philosophers alike, traces the history of French thinking after the great revolution and discusses de Bonald and de Maistre, Royer-Collard and Cousin, Comte, Renouvier, Boutroux, and Poincaré, leading up to the thinker Mead obviously considered a main rival of his own project: Henri Bergson. A reader of this text today cannot help feeling that a last chapter is missing, a chapter on Durkheim. But as in the case of the mutual ignorance of Max Weber and Emile Durkheim, there is not a word in Mead's text devoted to Durkheim. Still, we find here an independent contemporary reconstruction of the intellectual field from which Durkheim's work clearly arose.

The publication of Durkheim's early philosophical lectures gives the scientific community rich additional material to reconstruct this field in a fruitful way. The two stereotypes mentioned above – Durkheim as a Comtean and as a Kantian – are certainly more difficult to defend after reading these lectures. Durkheim clearly distances himself from Comte in this early work and is also, again and again, sharply critical of Kant. Although he may not really be attacking Kant but an image of Kant prevalent in France at the time (and although some might even defend Comte against any simplistic picture),§ it becomes clear that a fully contextualized reconstruction of Durkheim's development can be reached only if we see him not merely as conversing with great minds of the past but as fully embedded in the intellectual world of his contemporaries. Bridging the divide between philosophy and sociology

‡ George Herbert Mead, "French Philosophy in the Nineteenth Century," in *Movements of Thought in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1936), 418–510.

§ Johan Heilbron, *The Rise of Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), 195–254.

is the other major precondition for such an adequate contextualization, because the different disciplines tend to reconstruct their history as if leading figures had mostly drawn their inspiration from within one or the other. The fuller contextualization of Durkheim's work made possible by the present publication may finally reward us with a new impulse to reevaluate the relationship between philosophy and sociology in our time.

– Hans Joas
(Berlin/Chicago)

Translators' Note

As explained in the introduction, the French manuscript of which the following text is a translation consists of notes taken by André Lalande, then a sixteen-year-old student of Emile Durkheim, in 1883–4. In all likelihood, these notes were never seen by Durkheim, and they could hardly have been edited by him. Our assumption in translating them into English, therefore, has been that while the notes *are* reflective of the various philosophical positions Durkheim intended to advance, these positions are expressed in the text in a manner and with a sensibility that is probably more Lalande's than Durkheim's own. Were the notes written in Durkheim's hand, of course, a more literal translation would be appropriate; but as this is not the case, we have felt free to take a more liberal approach, focusing less on the actual words Lalande used to record Durkheim's arguments than on what we take Durkheim to have meant. In the interests of rendering the text more readable in English, we have not hesitated to reorder phrases or sentences as necessary, rely on synonyms or cognate terms whose English meanings were more suitable, or drop altogether short passages from the text that seemed to interfere with Durkheim's rhetorical thrust. As for Lalande's occasional marginal comments in the manuscript, we retained only those that seemed to shed light on Durkheim's intended meanings. Only rarely, in these comments, did Lalande cite specific texts to which Durkheim referred – as is befitting of lecture notes – and we made no effort to track down the hundreds of citations he did not give. Instead, we opted to include a short biographical glossary that, while falling far short of a comprehensive set of citations, may help familiarize readers with the many thinkers whose ideas Durkheim discusses. Finally, we note that, though we did privilege

the intentional over the literal, we tried to preserve as much as possible not only of Durkheim's style of argumentation but of his style as a *lycée* lecturer. Our hope is that the English translation thus retains something of the charm and authenticity of the original.

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