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978-0-521-17542-5 - Durkheim's Philosophy Lectures: Notes from the Lycee de Sens Course, 1883-1884

Edited by Neil Gross and Robert Alun Jones

Frontmatter

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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historians, historically minded philosophers, and scholars of French history will all find the lectures a valuable historical document.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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Durkheim's Philosophy Lectures

*Notes from the Lycée de Sens Course,
1883–1884*

Edited and translated by

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Contents

Foreword	<i>page</i> xi
Translators' Note	xv
Acknowledgments	xvii
Introduction	1
Part I. Preliminary Matters	
1. The Object and Method of Philosophy	33
2. The Object and Method of Philosophy (Conclusion)	36
3. Science and Philosophy	41
4. The Divisions of Philosophy	45
Part II. Psychology	
5. The Object and Method of Psychology	51
6. Faculties of the Soul	57
7. On Pleasure and Pain	60
8. The Inclinations	63
9. The Emotions and Passions	67
10. Theory of Knowledge	72
11. External Perception and Its Conditions. The Senses	73

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-17542-5 - Durkheim's Philosophy Lectures: Notes from the Lycee de Sens Course, 1883-1884

Edited by Neil Gross and Robert Alun Jones

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

vi

CONTENTS

12. External Perception. The Origin of the Idea of Externality	77
13. External Perception. On the Objectivity of the Idea of Externality. (1) Does the External World Exist?	80
14. External Perception. On the Objectivity of the Idea of Externality. (2) On the Nature of the External World	82
15. Consciousness. On the Conditions of Consciousness	86
16. Consciousness. On the Origin of the Idea of the Self	89
17. Consciousness. On the Nature of the Self	92
18. Reason. The Definition of Reason	95
19. Reason. The Material of Reason. (1) Principles of Reason	98
20. Reason. The Material of Reason. (2) Rational or First Ideas	101
21. Reason. Empiricism	106
22. Reason. Evolutionism. The Theory of Heredity	110
23. Reason. On the Objectivity of Rational Principles	115
24. Faculties of Conception. On the Association of Ideas	119
25. Faculties of Conception. Memory	122
26. Faculties of Conception. Imagination	125
27. Faculties of Conception. Sleep. Dreams. Madness	129
28. Complex Operations of the Mind. Attention. Comparison. Abstraction	132
29. Complex Operations of the Mind. Generalization. Judgment. Reasoning	134
30. The Object and Method of Aesthetics	138
31. What Is Beauty?	142
32. Prettiness and the Sublime. Art	145
33. On Activity in General. Instinct	148

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-17542-5 - Durkheim's Philosophy Lectures: Notes from the Lycee de Sens Course, 1883-1884

Edited by Neil Gross and Robert Alun Jones

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

CONTENTS

vii

34. Habit	151
35. On the Will and on Freedom	156
36. On Freedom (Continued). Psychological Determinism	159
37. On Freedom (Conclusion). Scientific Determinism. Theological Fatalism	162

Part III. Logic

38. Introduction. On Logic	169
39. On Truth. On Certainty	172
40. On Certainty (Conclusion)	175
41. On False Certainty or Error	178
42. Skepticism	181
43. Ideas. Terms. Judgments. Propositions	185
44. Definition	188
45. On the Syllogism	190
46. On Induction	198
47. Fallacies	202
48. On Method	205
49. Method in the Mathematical Sciences	207
50. The Methodology of the Physical Sciences	209
51. Method in the Natural Sciences	213
52. Method in the Moral Sciences	215
53. Method in the Historical Sciences	218
54. Language	221

Part IV. Ethics

55. Definition and Divisions of Ethics	229
56. On Moral Responsibility	230

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-17542-5 - Durkheim's Philosophy Lectures: Notes from the Lycee de Sens Course, 1883-1884

Edited by Neil Gross and Robert Alun Jones

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

viii

CONTENTS

57. On Moral Law. The History of Utilitarianism	232
58. Critique of Utilitarianism. The Morality of Sentiment	236
59. The Morality of Kant	240
60. The Moral Law	243
61. On Duty and the Good. On Virtue. Rights	245
62A. Division of Practical Ethics	249
62B. Individual Morality	250
63. Domestic Ethics	254
64. Civic Ethics	258
65. General Duties of Social Life	263
66. General Duties of Social Life. (1) The Duty of Justice	265
67. General Duties of Social Life. (2) Charity	270
68. Summary of Ethics	272

Part V. Metaphysics

69. Metaphysics. Preliminary Considerations	277
70. On the Soul and Its Existence	279
71. On the Spirituality of the Soul (Conclusion). On Materialism	281
72. The Relationship between the Soul and the Body	284
73. On the Immortality of the Soul	288
74. On God. Metaphysical Proofs of His Existence	292
75. Critique of Metaphysical Proofs of the Existence of God	296
76. Explanation and Critique of the Physicotheological Proof	299
77. Critique of the Physicotheological Proof (Conclusion). Moral Proofs of the Existence of God	303
78. The Nature and Attributes of God	306

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-17542-5 - Durkheim's Philosophy Lectures: Notes from the Lycee de Sens Course, 1883-1884

Edited by Neil Gross and Robert Alun Jones

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

CONTENTS

ix

79. The Relationship between God and the World. Dualism, Pantheism, and Creation	309
80. The Relationship between God and the World (Conclusion). Providence, Evil, Optimism, and Pessimism	311
Appendix: Biographical Glossary	315
<i>Index</i>	333

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-17542-5 - Durkheim's Philosophy Lectures: Notes from the Lycee de Sens Course, 1883-1884

Edited by Neil Gross and Robert Alun Jones

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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

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Edited by Neil Gross and Robert Alun Jones

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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).

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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.

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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)

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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