Introduction

Emile Durkheim's *Les Formes Elementaires de la Vie Religieuse: Le Systeme Totemique en Australie*, published in French in 1912, the first of Durkheim's major works to be translated into English in 1915, as *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*,[1] offers a theory of mutual intelligibility achieved through orders of practice, a position that his earlier writings on social order assumed, but did not explain, and as such is the crowning achievement of Durkheim's sociology.[2] The book, generally treated either as a work on primitive religion, or a sociology of knowledge, and elaborately and consistently misunderstood since the beginning, constitutes, in fact, Durkheim's attempt to set his earlier works on a firm epistemological footing. This he achieves by elaborating a theory of practice, as the basis for mutual intelligibility, which would establish a unique epistemological basis for sociology and the study of moral relations.

The Elementary Forms presents a careful and thorough historical and comparative argument for the empirical origin of six basic ideas, or categories of the understanding, identified by the philosophical debate as essential to epistemological validity (time, space, classification, force,

[1] There was an abridged translation of *Sociology and The Social Sciences* in 1905, but *The Division of Labor*, *Rules*, and *Suicide* were not translated until 1933, 1938 and 1951 respectively.

[2] The 1915 translation, by Ward Swain, was published by the Free Press. A new translation by Karen Fields, with the title *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, was published in 1995, also by the Free Press. There is also an abridged translation by Carol Cosman, published by Oxford University Press in 2001, with the title *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. The latter is a translation of the 1991 French edition of the text and all page references are to that edition. All references to Durkheim's text in this book will include page references to the original French edition as well as to the 1915 and 1995 complete English translations. In each citation an asterisk will precede the date of the text from which the quotation was taken. In one or two cases, page numbers for the 2001 translation will also be given. I began working with the 1915 translation in 1990. New translations and editions are appearing faster than I can keep up with them. A practice of numbering paragraphs and sections in social theoretical works, as is done for major philosophical works, would simplify the citation process.

causality and totality).[3] This argument, which treats religious practice as the foundation of social life, speaks to the current context of conflict between religion and what is generally referred to as secular culture in an era of globalization. The ascendency of the secular in the west, following the bloodbaths of the Protestant Reformation, reduced the scope of religion in public life. This has left many people feeling that the major public institutions lack a moral base. The resulting erosion of trust has fostered an increasing tendency to turn to traditional religious institutions as a way of rebuilding a sense of "community." Recent studies which show that religious participation makes people feel more secure and promotes a general sense of well-being should footnote Durkheim, who argued that religion would always be necessary, not only to foster feelings of well-being, but also to ground essential ideas arising from those feelings.[4]

[3] That Durkheim's argument focuses on only six categories (time, space, classification, force, cause, and totality) which he makes empirical arguments for the origin of in *The Elementary Forms* has been missed. Commentators on the epistemology apparently do not grasp the exclusivity of the list and it is represented in different ways by different commentators, often with an "etc." This may be due in part to references which Durkheim himself makes in several places to categories in the work of Aristotle and other philosophers. The first reference in *The Elementary Forms*, for instance (Durkheim, ([1912:12–13]*1915: 21–2; 1995:8–9)) is to Aristotle's list of categories and includes "personality" and "number" which do not appear as categories in Durkheim's argument (although he does make an argument for the origin of personality). Number appears again in ([1912:12–13]*1915:21–2; 1995:8–9) and personality again in ([1912:26–8]*1915:31–2; 1995:17–18). These instances all appear in the introduction where Durkheim is making reference to Aristotle's list of categories and to the general philosophical problem with regard to categories. These are not the six categories which he argues for the empirical validity of in the body of the text, however. One result of this misunderstanding is that one of the most important of the six categories, classification, is generally treated as a survey of classification practices and not as a category in its own right. One reviewer commented "The question that nags me most is why Durkheim's analysis of classification has promoted so much research while his analysis of the categories (space, totality, time, force, causality, etc.) has promoted so little." I think the question answers itself. Just as this reviewer did not recognize classification as one of the categories (a list to which they also added an "etc.") the general sociological public have also not recognized Durkheim's studies of classification as having anything to do with his epistemology. Therefore, while the epistemology has been almost totally ignored, the part of it which focused on classification, because it has been misinterpreted as a survey of symbolic systems, has received a great deal of attention.

[4] For instance in a recent editorial by George Will, in *The Boston Globe*, he reports that scientists have discovered that there is a biological need for people to connect and that this may manifest in religious participation. He writes that "The scientific fact, if such it is, that religious expression is natural to personhood, does not vindicate any religion's truth claims. A naturalistic hypothesis is that the emotions of religious experience have neurobiological origins: The brain evolved that way to serve individual and group survival." The only real difference between this argument and Durkheim is that having stressed the importance of social connectedness throughout his article, Will, and the scientists he cites, want to locate the origin of everything that has to do with social connectedness in the individual. This, as Durkheim points out, will not work. To be sure there are

However, Durkheim's argument made some very important distinctions between forms of religious practice in modern and traditional life that the current discussion proceeds in ignorance of. It is the *function of religious practice* in establishing essential shared sentiments and ideas that Durkheim argues is a necessary foundation for social life, not religious beliefs. For Durkheim this means that much of what is currently considered secular has, in fact, taken over and fulfills the functions of religious practice. If religious practice is closely tied to belief then it will necessarily be at odds with a national, not to speak of an international set of social relations, which must be based on something like what Norbert Elias called civility: a set of civil practices that operate to create social unity in the absence of shared beliefs. Durkheim argued in *The Division of Labor* (Book III Chapter Two), that a sense of unity and well-being based on shared belief, while it is comforting to group members, ultimately threatens the security and solidarity of an advanced division of labor because it leads inevitably to exclusive groupings within the larger collective. What is needed in a modern context is solidarity based on shared practice not shared belief.

In arguing that religion played an essential role in establishing a shared knowledge base, Durkheim was rejecting existing approaches to the problem of knowledge, replacing explanations that began with the individual with his own socially based argument that knowledge is created by the shared experience of enacted practices. His argument privileges enacted social practice over beliefs and ideas, an innovation that avoids dilemmas inherent in philosophical approaches to knowledge and morality that are based on individualism, and the privileging of beliefs and ideas over practices; both dominant tendencies in western thought (Rawls 2001).

The problem of intelligibility, whether acknowledged or not, lies at the center of any social theory. Persons cannot cooperate to maintain a social order unless they can communicate. Therefore, the two problems, of order and intelligibility, are not separable. A Durkheim whose earlier work was favored, and who was interpreted as not having addressed the

limitations that can be placed at the doorstep of the individual: the inability to transfer ideas into the heads of others, a natural inclination for survival that would prevent social connections from forming. The solution to these problems comes from social relations. Religious practices that work by creating an emotional response in the person solve these problems. Of course human biology has to cooperate, but as Will also reports, scientists are saying that social relationships alter the "hardwiring" of the brain, and the biology of the human body. So, it is obvious even within his own article that human beings are being shaped by social relations and that biology is made that way to serve the needs of society. This was Durkheim's argument, much criticized at the time. The explanation cannot be found in the individual if the changes come from society. (George Will, *The Boston Globe* September 22, 2003, A11).

problem of intelligibility, assuming instead a naively positivist approach to knowledge, has seemed increasingly irrelevant to contemporary sociology since at least the 1950s when it began to become apparent that intelligibility was, if anything, the more important of the two questions. Then, interpreted by Jeffrey Alexander and others as a proponent of the sociology of knowledge in the 1980s, an interpretation that favored the later work, Durkheim was resuscitated as a precursor of the postmodern critique. This interpretation, however, while engendering a renewed interest in *The Elementary Forms*, continued a trend that had begun before the 1920s of treating the early and later work as fundamentally different.

It is important, then, that enacted practices, which are the keystone of Durkheim's epistemology, offer a focus on the mutual achievement of intelligibility through practice in a way that supports the arguments of his earlier work, and thus reveals his overall position as having a unity of vision with unexpected relevance to contemporary debates over the centrality of interaction and moral issues to social thought.

Durkheim, who is generally thought of as a macro theorist of social order, and a champion of the status quo, was in fact focused on the problem of intelligibility and the limits that the need for moral reciprocity at the level of local enacted practices impose on social forms as a prerequisite for the achievement of intelligibility. Taking seriously the argument that enacted practices constitute the foundation of intelligibility and social order entails that orders of practice, or interaction orders, come before and underlie institutional orders and their corresponding accounts (Rawls 1987). Durkheim had argued in *The Division of Labour* ([1893]1933) that orders of practice replace shared belief as the foundation of solidarity in an advanced division of labour (Rawls 2003). Maintaining a commitment to such orders is thereby a moral imperative in a context of globalization.

Durkheim's position is, in fact, aligned with contemporary interactionist arguments that are usually considered to have departed significantly from classical social theory. Yet, not only was Durkheim engaged in making a distinction in 1912, similar to the one made by Goffman and Garfinkel, between orders of practice and institutions, and articulating the moral commitments required (in Durkheim's case between prospective practices and retrospective accounts), but, he had already outlined the argument in Book III of *The Division of Labor in Society* in 1893 (Rawls 2003). The distinction, however, would not begin to be taken seriously until C. Wright Mills distinguished between following rules and acting in ways that are accountable to rules in "Situated Action and Vocabularies of Motive," in 1940, and it would not achieve any widespread impact until Harold Garfinkel introduced "institutional contexts of accountability" as a way of understanding the relationship between prospective orders of

local practice and the way institutional contexts orient practices toward accounts in *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, in 1967.

While the details of Durkheim's marriage of epistemology and enacted practice are worked out only in *The Elementary Forms*, the argument as it appears there is a logical extension of ideas presented in earlier publications in which Durkheim argued for the importance of science and methods, social facts, the distinction between mechanical and organic solidarity, and the development of classifications through religious practice. *The Elementary Forms* was intended once and for all to clarify these arguments, setting them on a strong and unique epistemological foundation which placed social practices rather than the individual and their beliefs and ideas at the center.

Allusions by Durkheim to what would later become his epistemology appear in, and are central to, the arguments of *The Division of Labor in Society* ([1893]1933). *The Rules of the Sociological Method* ([1895]1982) and *Suicide* (1895). In *The Division of Labor* Durkheim used many examples drawn from Australian aboriginal religious practices to illustrate his point that solidarity, in what he called a mechanical grouping, depends on the mutual enactment of practices designed to align the emotional lives of members of the group, producing what he referred to there as "collective effervescence." He also argued in that text (Book III Chapter One) that beliefs are only secondary and retrospective phenomena, arising from the attempts of participants to explain the feelings generated in them by their mutual enactment of shared practices. His point is that these explanations are not designed to represent their underlying causes and purposes and, therefore, necessarily distort knowledge of social relations, the same argument that he would make later in *The Elementary Forms*.

Because of this distortion shared beliefs appear to be essential to social solidarity. However, they are in fact not essential. It is the enactment of shared practices that is essential and, therefore, attempts to fix social problems by strengthening beliefs (as for instance by strengthening traditional religious communities – or through a general philosophy – as Comte had proposed, a problem that Durkheim takes up in Book III Chapter One of *The Division of Labor*) when beliefs no longer support the necessary practices, are misguided. This should become clearer, Durkheim argues, as the role of shared practices increases with the advance of the division of labor, and practices come to overshadow shared beliefs (see Rawls 2003 for an extended discussion).

The epistemology of *The Elementary Forms* also extends Durkheim's earlier arguments regarding the empirical status and scientific validity of what he called "social facts" in the *Rules of the Sociological Method* ([1895]1982) and *Suicide* ([1897]1951). The emphasis on social facts,

generally interpreted as naively positivist, changes its character when it is understood that for Durkheim the recognizability and validity of social facts are produced only in and through participation in social practices. The argument can then be seen to involve processes of mutual social construction to an extent that is very contemporary. Garfinkel's references to "Durkheim's Aphorism" are intended to underscore the importance of inspecting "social facts" for their dependence on the situated occasions of their construction, in and through the mutual enactment of practices, in particular social scenes (Garfinkel 2002). This is a form of analysis that Durkheim outlines, but did not and, given the limitations of the empirical materials available at the time, could not complete.

Durkheim also touches on the epistemological argument in three other works. The essay on *Primitive Classification* ([1901]1963 co-authored with Marcel Mauss) outlined the parameters for the origins of the category of *classification*, but did not attempt to distinguish the social logic of the concept (the sociology of knowledge) from its genesis in enacted practice (the epistemology). The lectures on Pragmatism (1913–14), published in English as *Pragmatism and Sociology* (1983), worked out the classical epistemological problem in some detail and critically evaluated the pragmatist[5] solution to the problem which was emerging in Durkheim's day. But, Durkheim's own epistemology is not elaborated in that work.

The essay "The Dualism of Human Nature and its Social Conditions," published in 1914, two years after *The Elementary Forms*, clarified Durkheim's position that human reason arose as a result of participation in social practice, contrasting reason with what Durkheim considered to be a preexisting animal or biological nature of the human being.[6] The essay bears similarities to Rousseau's argument, in the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* ([1757]1999), that reason developed only after humans became social, and elaborates a theme concerning the primacy

[5] The Pragmatist position is also sometimes referred to as social constructivist and as such it was also criticized by Durkheim. The difference between Pragmatist constructivism and Durkheim's position is that it begins from the perspective of the individual and constructs outward. Even forms of constructivism that began with concepts institutionalized through language would conflict with Durkheim's practice-based constructivism. This same conflict exists today between different forms of interactionist constructionism. Symbolic Interactionists sometimes take the Pragmatist position, while others, more closely following Goffman and Garfinkel take a solidly social view consistent with Durkheim. For Durkheim both the individual and social are ultimately constructed through enacted social practices. But, it is the assembled group doing the constructing through shared practices, not the individual.

[6] The argument of this essay has sometimes been confused with an earlier article, "Individual and Collective Representations," written in 1898, in which Durkheim criticized the radical empiricism of William James. This confusion has resulted in a long history of misinterpretation in the secondary literature (see Rawls 1997 for an elaboration).

of the social condition that is evident in Durkheim's earlier lectures on Rousseau (published in English along with his Latin thesis in a volume entitled *Montesquieu and Rousseau*, in 1960). Durkheim's emphasis on the social ultimately constitutes an important critique of the Enlightenment focus on the individual and in this regard his position is similar to Marx.[7]

0.1.0 Durkheim's Epistemology: the Neglected Argument

Although Durkheim's work has been the subject of extensive criticism and commentary, and hundreds of books on Durkheim, and on *The Elementary Forms*, in particular, have been written, somehow in the process, the original epistemological argument made by Durkheim in *The Elementary Forms* has been almost completely neglected. Most often his sociology of knowledge is treated as if it were intended to be an epistemology. It was not. When the epistemology is mentioned, the argument is generally misunderstood, summarily dismissed, and Durkheim's position characterized as naive or contradictory. Some commentators even claim that Durkheim ignored epistemology altogether.[8]

Authors typically dismiss Durkheim as merely another Kantian, Cartesian rationalist, empiricist, or pragmatist, often combining one or more of these labels, ignoring the incompatibility between them. In spite of the obvious contradiction in attributing multiple conflicting positions to one thinker in a single work, these attributions all seem to be fairly generally accepted, often by the same scholar, and sometimes in the same sentence. The fact that scholars continue to rely on secondary source traditions regarding Durkheim's text contributes to the persistence of this problem (see Rawls 1997a for an extended discussion). The neglect of the text in this regard, the reliance on secondary sources, and the almost universal resort to philosophical positions criticized by Durkheim, in attempting to explain his argument, is somewhat puzzling, as the epistemological argument is not a minor theme of Durkheim's text.

While it is true that the epistemological argument in its entirety appears only in *The Elementary Forms* and not in Durkheim's other works, *there* it is the major preoccupation of the work and is laid out systematically over its entire course. The whole book, each discussion of religion, philosophy, anthropology, or aboriginal society, is a careful empirical elaboration

[7] Durkheim's position is also similar to Marx in arguing that social inequality perpetuated by shared beliefs constitutes a fundamental contradiction of industrial capitalism. See Book III of the *Division of Labour* and Rawls 2003 for an extended discussion.

[8] For instance, Nisbet maintains that Durkheim ignored the epistemological question altogether. Although Giddens rejects the argument that there are two different Durkheims, he says that Durkheim is a Kantian who argued for the social origins of the elementary forms of reason, a misunderstanding of both Durkheim and Kant.

of Durkheim's epistemological claims. The examples are so specifically tied to the epistemological argument that Durkheim even differentiates between the sorts of totemic rites in terms of their correspondence to the development of different categories of the understanding, and not in terms of their similarities and differences in more conventional structural or conceptual terms. That is, different rites generate different sorts of socio-empirical experiences and therefore give rise to different categories. Rites of sacrifice and oblation, for instance, generate the general category of force, while imitative rites generate the general category of causality. Thus, certain rights lay the foundation for the development of other rights/ideas, and the organization of the book by types of right reflects the correspondance between certain rights and certain categories. This organization of the discussion of religious ritual in terms that are dictated by epistemological concerns has most likely been confusing to scholars who did not recognize the epistemological focus of Durkheim's argument.

The epistemological argument is essential to an understanding of Durkheim's overall position. In fact, it isn't too much to say that sociology itself cannot properly be understood without Durkheim's epistemology. Durkheim intended the epistemology to lay a foundation for valid sociological argument. Understanding *The Rules of the Sociological Method*, for instance, in the absence of Durkheim's epistemology, leads to the curious result that Durkheim, and the discipline that he is said to have founded, appear to be positivist, when Durkheim provided the proof that it was not. The argument that social facts have an "objective" reality that is witnessable in its details does not mean that Durkheim was a positivist if those social facts are mutually constructed through enacted practices. The distinction between practices and concepts allows Durkheim to argue that practices which are publically enacted can be seen and heard, whereas concepts and ideas cannot. The discipline, including social theory proper, in continuing to privilege concepts over practices has developed in a direction which Durkheim would have repudiated for its epistemological contradictions.

0.2.0 Epistemological Crisis

When Durkheim initially articulated his epistemology, questions of epistemological validity and scientific knowledge were hotly debated. At the end of the nineteenth century an epistemological crisis of major proportions had been reached. It looked as if all claims to knowledge were hopelessly relative; that no knowledge was valid. Philosophers had arrived at this dilemma after more than a century of debate over the arguments of David Hume and Immanuel Kant. Epistemology had, from its beginnings

in Greek philosophy, struggled with a separation between thought and reality, occasioned by essential differences between the two: thought consisting of concepts, which are general and continuous; reality consisting of flux and change. Proponents of the newly developing sciences in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries wanted to establish an empirical basis for key scientific concepts. In the 1690s it seemed as if John Locke had succeeded in establishing this possibility through a careful analysis of what he called simple ideas. But, by 1735 Hume had introduced convincing proofs that key ideas, like causality, on which, he argued, all statements of fact depend, have no basis in individual perception.

The implication of Hume's argument was that empirically valid knowledge was not possible. When in 1754, Kant found a way of addressing Hume's dilemma, arguing that certain key ideas, referred to by Kant as "the categories of the understanding," exist a priori in the human mind, philosophers flocked to embrace Kant's solution to Hume's dilemma. But the solution came at a price. After Kant, epistemology had to deal with a further separation between thought and reality created by the faculty of human understanding: because the categories of the understanding were considered by Kant to be a priori, natural reality would always be perceived in terms of human categories of thought, and never in itself. In the case of both Hume and Kant, then, human ways of perceiving and thinking were thought to add something to reality which was not there in the original. As a consequence, it seemed impossible for human knowledge to stand in the sort of empirically valid relationship with reality that was required by science.

Durkheim had, throughout his career, been a proponent of science. He believed that many social problems were exacerbated by unscientific "solutions."[9] His task, as he saw it, was to establish valid empirical grounds for the study of social relations, and in particular those social relations that were properly moral relations, which determined the possibility of rational, stable and equitable social life. For this he needed to ground his studies on an epistemology that would establish social and moral relations as possible subjects of valid empirical study. Durkheim situated his argument within the context of the epistemological debate between empiricism (including Pragmatism) and what he called apriorism: that is, between Hume and James on the one hand, and Kant on the other.[10]

[9] In particular Durkheim criticized socialism for advocating broadscale social reforms on the basis of unfounded assumptions about the relationship between shared beliefs and social solidarity in an advanced division of labor context. See *The Division of Labour* ([1893]1933) Book III and Rawls 2003. See also Durkheim ([1895–6]1958).

[10] William James had become popular in France around the turn of the century and had been invited to Paris to lecture. Thus, Durkheim was confronted in his own intellectual circle with James as a compelling proponent of empiricism.

Durkheim also extended his consideration to empiricist and a priorist explanations of the origin of religious ideas, and in particular, the origin of the sacred.

Durkheim's epistemological argument, articulated in the central chapters of *The Elementary Forms*, locates the origin of the fundamental categories of human thought, or reason, not in individual perception, as Hume had argued, nor as a transcendent and innate aspect of the mind, as Kant had argued, but rather, in the shared emotional experience of those ritually produced moral forces created by the enactment of concrete practices in the midst of an assembled group. This constituted a radical departure from the existing alternatives and promised to address the inherent dilemmas in novel ways.

Durkheim felt that he had established an epistemological foundation for sociology that would allow it to address the great and pressing questions of moral philosophy that were increasingly being abandoned in his day.[11] He felt that modern society was heading toward a moral abyss, because of a failure to achieve justice. In the past, he felt, sufficient moral guidance had always come from society. However, due to the degree of religious and cultural pluralism in modern society, religious and cultural institutions based on shared belief could no longer provide the moral guidance needed for society as a whole. Therefore, that guidance would have to come from broadly based secular institutions. These he argued were failing to deliver sufficient justice to support personhood and intelligibility in a modern context. Durkheim felt that a scientific study of society would reveal how society had been able to produce moral feelings in the past, and also explain the current period of moral mediocrity. For this he needed to establish a valid, empirically based, science of society. His aim, in this regard, is no different in *The Elementary Forms* than it had been in the earlier *Rules of the Sociological Method*, the opinions of various critics notwithstanding.

During the course of the twentieth century, due to a growing consensus that an argument for empirical validity could not be made, philosophers increasingly abandoned the classical form of the epistemological question, which required empirical validity, in favor of a neo-Kantian, and finally a Pragmatist, or social constructivist, approach to knowledge as

[11] The reasons for the abandonment of moral philosophy were the same as those for the abandonment of epistemology. Moral philosophy depends on arguments from "reason" and with the abandonment of epistemology, "reason" had given way to Intuitionism, a school of moral philosophy that was in many ways the counterpart of Pragmatism in epistemology. Hume and Kant had each ventured into epistemology only in order to establish a basis for their moral philosophies; Hume basing his argument on the passions because he could not establish reason, and Kant basing his argument on reason, because he thought he could. When Kant's epistemology fell, Intuitionism, like Pragmatism, reigned.