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052165145X - Epistemology and Practice: Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*

Anne Warfield Rawls

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Epistemology and Practice

In this original and controversial book Professor Rawls argues that Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* is the crowning achievement of his sociological endeavour and that since its publication in English in 1915 it has been consistently misunderstood. Rather than a work on primitive religion or the sociology of knowledge, Rawls asserts that it is an attempt by Durkheim to establish a unique epistemological basis for the study of sociology and moral relations. By privileging social practice over beliefs and ideas, it avoids the dilemmas inherent in philosophical approaches to knowledge and morality that are based on individualism and the tendency to treat concepts as the limit of knowledge, both tendencies that dominate western thought. Based on detailed textual analysis of the primary text, this book will be an important and original contribution to contemporary debates on social theory and philosophy.

Anne Warfield Rawls is Associate Professor of Sociology at Bentley College, Waltham, Massachusetts. She has a background in both sociology and philosophy and has published extensively on social theory and social justice.

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Frontmatter

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

For Ty and Martin

Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>page ix</i>
Introduction	1
Durkheim's Epistemology: the Neglected Argument	7
Epistemological Crisis	8
Religion and Reason	11
Perception versus Emotion	15
Mis-Communication Between Disciplines	17
Order of Argument	22
1 Durkheim's Outline of the Argument in the Introductory Chapter	28
Section i: Consideration of Religion	33
Section ii: The Introduction of Epistemology	46
Concluding Paragraphs	68
2 Durkheim's Dualism: an Anti-Kantian Anti-Rationalist Position	72
Durkheim's First Distinction: "Double Man"	78
Second Distinction: "Two Layers of Knowledge"	90
The Social as Sacred versus the Individual as Profane	100
Sociology of Knowledge: Idealism versus Concrete Practices	101
Conclusion	105
3 Sacred and Profane: the First Classification	108
Durkheim's Conception of Religion	112
Animism versus Naturism	124
Totemism	135
Conclusion	137
4 Totemism and the Problem of Individualism	139
The Totem as the Origin of the Sacred	141
Totemic Classification as a Logical System	149
The Status of Individual and Sexual Totemism	152
Conclusion	161

viii	Epistemology and Practice	
5	The Origin of Moral Force	162
	Mana as the Origin of the Idea of Moral Force	164
	Logic and Collective Representations	177
	Personhood and Myths versus Rites	188
	Conclusion	192
6	The Primacy of Rites in the Origin of Causality	194
	Book III, Chapter One: The Negative Cult	196
	Book III, Chapter Two: The Positive Cult	202
7	Imitative Rites and the Category of Causality	212
	Book III, Chapter Three, Section i: Description of Imitative Rites	212
	Book III, Chapter Three, Section ii: The Principle Behind Imitative Ritual	213
8	The Category of Causality	230
	Book III, Chapter Three, Section iii	234
	Durkheim's Socio-Empirical Argument for Causality	258
9	Logic, Language and Science	262
	Section i: Practice/Real versus Belief/Ideal	266
	Section ii: Religion and Science	283
	Section iii: The Social Origins of Logic and Language	288
10	Durkheim's Conclusion Section iv: Logical Argument for the Categories	301
	The Six Categories of the Understanding	301
	Conclusion	316
	The Development of Two Conflicting Durkheims	321
	The Fallacy of Misplaced Abstraction	324
	The Sociological Dilemma	326
	Scientific Things versus Social Things	328
	Recognizable by Design	330
	Intelligibility as a Constraint on Practice	334
	<i>Bibliography</i>	339
	<i>Index</i>	345

Cambridge University Press

052165145X - Epistemology and Practice: Durkheim's The Elementary Forms of Religious Life

Anne Warfield Rawls

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Acknowledgments

The research comprising this book has been in the works for almost fifteen years and during that time has benefited from a great deal of support, advice and encouragement. The debt I owe is large and the number of people who were generous enough to lend their valuable time to the support of this project humbling.

That Durkheim was making an argument for an epistemology in the classical sense, and that he intended this argument to ground his entire sociology, first came to me as I was teaching a graduate seminar at Wayne State University in the early 1990s. Good ideas have often come to me in this way during public close readings of texts, and I think of the phenomenon as a dialogue in the best Socratic sense. To the students in that and subsequent seminars, in particular Gary David, Lynetta Mosby, Bonnie Wright, Derek Coates and Jennifer Dierickx, I owe a great deal.

Through this dialogue I was able to hear myself think in ways that are impossible for an individual alone. I hope those students understand the contribution they made to my thinking. I also hope that they learned from the exercise that the study of any single great text is at the same time a study of almost everything. The idea that one must sample a large number of great texts to get a broader view I think is wrong. Mastery is essential – but sampling tends toward superficiality. Great texts like true lovers do not reveal themselves easily. They require a deep commitment of time, openness, energy and even kindness. The prevalence of the tendency to skim, sample, classify and judge has had unfortunate consequences for the teaching of sociological theory. Any author of major significance holds that status precisely because they struggled with the most important dilemmas of their time. Classical texts don't reflect "dead men's ideas," as it has become popular to say, rather they reflect the birth pains and continuing trauma of the world we live in.

Many colleagues supported my efforts. In the early stages of writing I sent the first draft of a manuscript to Randy Collins and Norbert Wiley, both of whom took the time to make very extensive and helpful comments. They were particularly helpful in orienting me toward aspects

Cambridge University Press

052165145X - Epistemology and Practice: Durkheim's The Elementary Forms of Religious Life

Anne Warfield Rawls

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

x Acknowledgments

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During one of our phone conversations I confided to Harold that I was writing about the epistemological argument in Durkheim's *Elementary Forms*. Expressing great skepticism, as one would expect, he asked to see a copy of the manuscript. Much to my delight he considered what I had written to be in essential respects more empirical than theoretical, and proceeded to encourage me in various ways. Over the next few years Harold incorporated his own thinking on Durkheim into manuscripts that he was then working on, eventually deciding to subtitle the book which I edited with him "Working Out Durkheim's Aphorism."

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Cambridge University Press

052165145X - Epistemology and Practice: Durkheim's The Elementary Forms of Religious Life

Anne Warfield Rawls

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Acknowledgments

xi

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Cambridge University Press

052165145X - Epistemology and Practice: Durkheim's The Elementary Forms of Religious Life

Anne Warfield Rawls

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xii Acknowledgments

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Cambridge University Press

052165145X - Epistemology and Practice: Durkheim's The Elementary Forms of Religious Life

Anne Warfield Rawls

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Acknowledgments

xiii

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