

Durkheim and realism

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Abstract

This article examines Durkheim's relationship to realism. I argue that there is enough prima facie evidence of realist commitments in his work that our task should be to consider what kind of realist Durkheim was. I discuss, first of all, Durkheim's epistemics and follow that analysis with a discussion of metaphysical realism in his texts. The first part of the paper covers a wide range of his work; the second part focuses primarily on *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. In a final concluding section, I go on to consider how his epistemic arguments and his philosophical realism might work together to support important parts of his general sociology. Realism is not often brought to bear on Durkheim's work. When it has been, Durkheim has been identified as a naïve realist. These interpretations of Durkheim do not recognize the sophistication of contemporary realism, which does not reduce to naïve representationalism. This paper will sort out Durkheim's realist commitments in his texts, and in light of the variety of realisms consistent with “sophisticated” (that is, non-naïve) realism.

KEYWORDS

Durkheim, epistemics, kind-realism, philosophical realism, the sacred

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1 | INTRODUCTION

This article identifies those elements of Durkheim's work that are consistent with contemporary philosophical realism. The focus on realism will identify two difficulties in the secondary literature on Durkheim. These problems are primarily conceptual, but they have had implications for how Durkheim has been read. One difficulty is a persistent conflation between positivism and realism which leads to misleading interpretations of Durkheim's arguments as positivist. In this paper, realism and positivism are distinguished using Hacking's (1983, p. 42) criteria: "Positivists tend to be non-realists, not only because they restrict reality to the observable but also because they are against causes and are dubious about explanations". The second problem is a confusion about realism among anti-realists, such that realism is reduced to naïve representationalism. These difficulties prevent the recognition of the centrality of Durkheim's realist particulars in his writing. I will argue that there is substantial textual evidence that Durkheim drew on realist themes and arguments.

Indeed, there is enough *prima facie* evidence of realist commitments (and enough variety in philosophical realism) that our task here is to sort out what kind of realist Durkheim was. This evidence, presented in the article that follows, therefore establishes a different relation to his work than other interpretations which presume anti or non-realist theoretical priors under which realism has been ruled out as incorrect or implausible in principle. Here are two illustrations of this interpretive tendency.

The philosophical realism in play in this paper is different than the "social realism" discussed in relation to Durkheim's work by Jones (1999). Jones (1999, p. 5) dismisses Durkheim's realism as "an assortment of rhetorical strategies" rather than a set of epistemic and metaphysical commitments and claims. Jones is an anti-realist -- conventionalist or constructivist in his general arguments in this book and in his later treatment of *The Forms* (2005, p. 94–96). My view is that his anti-realism mistakenly conflates realism and naïve representationalism. Nor do I do draw as sharp a distinction between rhetoric and philosophy as does Jones. Rhetoric can support philosophical arguments.

A second illustration: In work subsequent to his influential intellectual biography of Durkheim (1973), Lukes (1982, pp. 11–13), in his Introduction to a new translation of *Rules of Sociological Method*, acknowledged Durkheim's commitment to realism but drew a line from Durkheim directly back to Descartes.¹ My view is that this argument neglects the mediating influence of Kant on Durkheim and results in a presentation of Durkheim, much like Jones' (2005) position, as a naïve realist.

These arguments do not recognize the sophistication of contemporary realism. Realism is not intrinsically naïve, in the senses in which Lukes and Jones dismiss realism. I will argue, in support of its "sophistication", that Durkheim's realism in fact is compatible with some limited degree of social constructivism up to an hypothetical upper limit beyond which realism is unstable because it has shaded off into anti-realist conventionalism. But his realism also allows a mild form of constructivism below which we would be forced into naïve representationalism and the direct apprehension of things (as in the arguments of Jones and Lukes). In my reconstruction, this is the philosophical space in which Durkheim was working. There is no "God's eye" view of the world in Durkheim, no assumption of direct representations or correspondences and therefore no naïve representationalism.

I should add that some contemporary critical realism takes a similar general form in denying that realism and constructivism are utterly incompatible. The view that "realism and moderate constructivism can and should be combined" (Elder-Vass, 2012, p. 13, my emphasis) is characteristic of this position. Some of the discussions that support this point of view (eg. Elder-Vass, 2012, 2021; Sayer, 2000) are not always as neatly organized around an explicit epistemology/ontology dualism as in Archer et al. (2016), which also allows some degree of constructivism. Nonetheless, there is a shared philosophical space here: Acknowledging a modest degree of constructivism does not render

philosophical realism incoherent, and it protects realism from a charge of naïve representationalism. The philosophical space I am attributing to Durkheim thus should look familiar to some extent, rather than strange.

However, we are still left with the task of sorting out Durkheim's realist commitments in detail, and in light of the variety of realisms consistent with this general understanding of 'sophisticated' (that is, non-naïve) realism. Realism is not homogenous. Since my analysis is organized around textual evidence for realist arguments in Durkheim's work, I introduce philosophical distinctions and arguments that matter for my presentation in the course of the discussion of this textual evidence.

Most of the discussion which follows is organized in two broad sections. Durkheim's epistemic arguments are introduced in the first section in order to show how they imply commitments consistent with realism. This discussion ranges across much, but certainly not all, of his work. In the second section, I examine one text in more detail, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* [hereafter *The Forms*]. I argue that Durkheim's explanation for the sacred in this text is metaphysical rather than empirical. In a final concluding section, I discuss the support that Durkheim's philosophical realism is meant to provide for his sociological developmentalism.

2 | REALIST EPISTEMICS

I begin with Durkheim's epistemology, but not because it is primary among his philosophical commitments, or because it is self-contained. On the contrary, his epistemics concede priority to ontology. Durkheim's epistemics imply ontological commitments that are realist. His epistemics, in other words, lead you straight to his metaphysics.

His most relevant realist commitment is to a form of essentialism that organizes much of his epistemology. There are two general contrasts at work when he invokes the importance of essence: between essence and accident and between essence and appearance.

Durkheim accepted the existence of essential properties generally but also denied that these properties must be physical or micro-structural. Social kinds that are instantiated or identified by their essential properties could be said, for Durkheim, to "carve nature at its joints", and the real kinds that result are a proper subset of the natural world. Nevertheless, social kinds are a distinctive subset. Their non-accidental essential properties are neither physical nor micro. The social world is indeed enfolded within the natural world, particularly in reference to biological life with which human life is continuous, but social kinds have distinctive conditions of instantiation that must be identified by specifying the necessary connections between essential structure and phenomenal appearance. Such is the latent structure of the world, including the social world.

This line of argument permits him to make this analogy between sociology and biology: The sociologist should be aware that "he is penetrating the unknown". "[H]e must feel himself in the presence of facts whose laws are as unsuspected as those of life before the era of biology..." (Durkheim, 1964b/1895, p. xlv. Author's Preface to the Second Edition).

These commitments, I believe, are the background to Durkheim's rendering of the method of concomitant variation, which is replete with reference to the "natures" of things. The method of concomitant variation was the most useful method for sociology because it displayed the "intrinsic" (1964b/1895, pp. 130–131) causal relationship rather than displaying the temporal coincidence of cause and effect (p. 127). Durkheim continued: "The manner in which a phenomena develops expresses its nature. For two developments to correspond to each other, there must also be a correspondence in the natures manifested by them" (1964b/1895, p. 131).

The break with empiricism and its treatment of inductive generalizations is further signalled through this argument: "When two phenomena vary directly with each other, this relationship must

be accepted even when, in certain cases, one of these phenomena should be present without the other. For it may be either that the cause has been prevented from producing its effect by the action of a contrary cause or that it is present but in a different form from the one previously observed” (1964b/1895, p. 131). In my view, this is enough to free Durkheim from the general charge of not living up to the standards of positivist and empiricist science (Durkheim as an inferior or failed positivist) because this is a rejection of both Hume and Mill – of resting an account of causal explanation only on contiguity and conjunction (Hume) or on nominal essences (Mill).

Rather, what Durkheim has done is introduce a distinction between two types of explanation. One type is an explanatory relation in which the terms of explanation can be imagined to exist apart. In these explanations, the explanans does not call the explanandum into existence or being. Contemporary empirical social science is aimed at these kinds of explanations. Typically, the terms of explanation are treated as variables and their relationship or association is treated as an external relationship.

There is, however, a second type of explanation that Durkheim acknowledged, which is not based in external associations. Such an explanation specifies those conditions that instantiate or identify some entity which might (or might not) figure in explanations of the first sort. But this type of explanation should not be modelled on the first type because the latter do not lay down instantiation or identification conditions. From inside the second type of explanation, the first type looks question-begging since the first type presupposes, but does not account for, the existence of the entities in question. In contrast, under the second type of explanation we cannot imagine the terms of explanation existing apart.²

2.1 | Essence and Accident

External characteristics of things were not accidental. If they were accidental, “[u]nder these conditions indeed, after science had pointed them out, it [science] could not possibly go farther; it could not penetrate the deeper layers of reality, since there would be no connection between surface and essence” [*le fond*] (1964b/1895, p. 43. Material in brackets added). This is a running theme in *The Rules of Sociological Method* and it permits Durkheim to elaborate: “...all sociological phenomena (as well as all biological phenomena) can assume different forms in different cases while still conserving their essential characteristics” (1964b/1895, p. 55).

Humean regularities, the status of which he is challenging in these passages about concomitant variation, are accidental regularities. There is a somewhat technical understanding of “accident” that I am drawing on here (set out in the literature I am using in terms of events rather than things or entities): An accident could have failed to hold without any violation of natural laws (Lange, 2009, p. 5). This understanding renders Humean regularities accidents. Moreover, accidental regularities of this sort are explained by contingent matters of fact (Kment, 2014, p. 13). This is an effective description of what Durkheim is denying, both when he introduces essence, as discussed above, and when he discusses concomitant variation. The connection between phenomenal presentation or appearance and essential structure is not a mere contingent matter of fact; instead, it is argued by Durkheim to be necessary. The necessary connection between “surface and essence” is no accident, so to speak.

In *Rules of Sociological Method* (1964b/1895, p. 54. Emphasis and material in brackets added), Durkheim identified the weakness of extant definitions used in sociological analysis by “...their premature attempt to grasp the essence of [social] phenomena.” This was not a fully classical or ancient conception of essence because Durkheim states elsewhere: “...whether they exist or not, science does not study essences or pure forms.” (1974b/1898, p. 9). Do not, he argues in another passage, *define* a thing according to a philosophical formula trying to express its essence (1964a/1893, p. 42. My

emphasis). Nevertheless, he has ruled in a concept of essence by virtue of implying that the essence of phenomena can be identified, but not prematurely. If one follows this methodological advice, one first establishes contact with things, and this is accomplished by defining the entity in terms of qualities external enough to be immediately perceived (1964b/1895, p. 42).

In his paper on the determination of moral facts, this argument was applied: To recognize and distinguish moral reality was to define it. The definition of moral facts was “initial” and “provisional” for it functioned”... “to permit us to agree upon the reality we are dealing with...” (1974a/1906, p. 41). Moral facts had to be recognizable by external and visible signs. Then, however, we move on: “We must discover the *intrinsic* differences between these moral rules and the other rules [“rules of technique”] through their apparent and exterior differences, for *at the beginning* that is all that is accessible to us” (1974a/1906, p. 42. Emphases and material in brackets added). If positivism can be distinguished from realism because, as Hacking (1983, p. 42) argues, “positivists tend to be non-realists, not only because they restrict reality to the observable but also because they are against causes and are dubious about explanations”, then Durkheim is clearly expressing realist particulars. His philosophical intuitions are realist.

2.2 | Essence and Appearance

Those intuitions are expressed in other passages relevant to the arguments of this article. “The division [of labor] being a derived and secondary phenomenon, as we have just seen, passes on the *surface* of social life...” (1964a/1893, p. 282, note 30. Emphasis and material in brackets added). In the same section of *The Division of Labor*, he also argued that “what is first in knowledge is last in reality”. He continued: “Precisely because co-operation is the most recent fact, it strikes sight first. If then, one clings to appearance, as does common sense, it is inevitable that one sees in it the primary fact of moral and social life” (1964a/1893, p. 280. Emphasis added). In this passage, Durkheim draws on the basic dualism that structures his epistemics, namely between manifest phenomenal presentation and latent essential structure, as well as a contrast between surface and depth. Here, though, he is putting these dualisms to different work: Appearances can be a source of epistemic error (“mere” appearance), particularly when these appearances are socially-constructed (“common sense”).

In another section in *The Rules*, Durkheim made a similar argument (in this instance invoking mundane experience and the metaphor of the gaze together) when he stated that social understandings “...products of everyday experience” are “like a *veil* drawn between the thing and ourselves, *concealing* them from us the more successfully as we think them more transparent” (1964b/1895, p. 15. Emphasis added). This is a clear challenge to the importance of the phenomenological natural attitude or Bourdieu's *habitus* in contemporary constructivist philosophy and sociology.

These passages illustrate the distance between Durkheim's realism and strong social constructivism. Much of Durkheim's discussion suggests that sociological science must penetrate the socially-constructed natural attitude (Tiryakian, 1978a, 1978b) in order to establish explanatory depth and necessary truth. The methodological advice that follows from taking these positions is to bracket the natural attitude to get to things themselves, which privileges Husserl's treatment of the natural attitude over Schutz's (Schutz, 1962), for example.

The same basic contrast between surface and depth is evident, in my view, in his study of religion (Rivière, 1999; Uricoechea, 1992, p. 136) when Durkheim states, “we must know how to go underneath the symbol to the reality which 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. The reasons with which the faithful justify them may be, and generally are,

erroneous; but the true reasons do not cease to exist, and it is the duty of science to discover them” (1965/1912, pp. 14–15).

The sacred plays a particular role in the treatment of religion which follows in *The Forms*. The sacred is “something added to and above the real”, and humans alone have this faculty of conceiving the ideal (1965/1912, p. 469, cf. pp. 260–261, p. 424). True, the sacred might thus be said to be mind-dependent. Nonetheless, the sacred is not simply ideational content. The sacred is an essential structure of the social. I therefore turn my attention to Durkheim's treatment of the sacred in the next section.

3 | METAPHYSICAL REALISM AND THE SACRED

The organizing idea in this section is that Durkheim's explanation of the sacred is metaphysical rather than empirical: The sacred is not a contingent feature of the social, and thus not a simple empirical regularity. The sacred is rather an essential feature of the social. I first summarize how Durkheim presents the problem of explanation that arises in accounting for the sacred and then identify his proposed response to this problem. I go on to examine the Kantian background to *The Forms* and the ways in which that legacy was reworked by Durkheim. This includes a discussion of the ‘realist synthesis’ within which Durkheim recast elements of Kantian metaphysics in his explanation of the sacred.

When Durkheim states in *The Forms* that “what we want to do is to find a means of discerning the ever-present causes upon which the most essential forms of religious thought and practice depend” (1965/1912, p. 20), he is drawing on his philosophical realism, which will require its own methods in this context of explaining the importance of the sacred to society. The argument in *The Forms* is not an exercise in “comparative religion”, in which similarities and differences among “cases” are discussed. His argument does not present as a de facto empirical generalization about religion of the kind which we might associate with social science. Nor, therefore, is he strictly generalizing, as some have argued (Martelli, 1993; Rivière, 1999, p. 146), from a “single case” – primarily that of Australian aboriginal societies. Rather, Durkheim is looking to identify invariances across possible states of the world (“ever-present causes”).

That society is a part of nature is a theme that runs through Durkheim's work, as I noted in the previous section. The same notion is expressed in *The Forms*: “The social realm is a natural realm which differs from the others only by a greater degree of complexity” (1965/1912, p. 31). And it is this complexity that leads Durkheim to argue, in justifying the work to follow, which seeks to find the essential structure of “religion in general”, to argue that: “All is reduced [in less complex societies] to that which is indispensable, to that without which there could be no religion. But that which is indispensable is also that which is essential” (1965/1912, p. 18. Material in brackets added).³ This is the question that motivates *The Forms*: What is essential to religion, keeping in mind that Durkheim is clear that he is also, in answering this question, specifying the essential features of society in general (1965/1912, p. 22, p. 273).

His answer to this questions departs from the arguments he uses to “socialize” the Kantian categories, which is perhaps the best-known feature of *The Forms*. Durkheim does not derive or establish the nature of the sacred in the way he “socialized” the categories. Nancy Jay recognized this difference: “For Durkheim, the categories on which ‘all thought’ depends are *products* of religion, but the sacred/profane dichotomy is a *precondition* for religion...” (Jay, 1992, p. 135. Material in italics in the original. Material in single quotes is taken from *The Forms* by Jay). Her position suggests that Durkheim's argument in *The Forms* actually consists of two separate steps: the *first* step is accounting

for the sacred, *followed* by the argument for the religious origins of the categories. The sacred is not on the same footing as categories (such as causality, space, time) are understood in *The Forms* or in the philosophical traditions before Durkheim that he was engaging here (Schmaus, 1994, 2004). Durkheim's argument for the constitutive importance of the sacred to society and social life thus will not depend on the methodology that he uses to argue for the social character of the categories.

Social necessity might be invoked to account for the social origins of categories, as Anne Rawls does (2004, p. 49) by contrasting the “*mustness*”⁴ of collective religious experience and the contingency of individual religious experience. Durkheim “... identified a fundamental social need that lies beneath social practices and *dictates* that the categories *must*, and therefore will be generated. Durkheim explains this underlying *necessity*...He argues that all peoples must have some occasions for assembling so as to produce *social force*” (2004: 38–39. First, second and third emphasis added). There is good reason, however, to consider the methodological problems that would arise here, if we do not do what Jay suggested above: treat the sacred differently than the categories.

The difficulty is that we risk begging the question of the *social* origins of the categories if we do not account independently for the relationship of the sacred to the social. The argument for the social origins of the categories should not at the same time be used to account for this relationship since the sacred is the precondition for proper categories, but is not itself, a proper category.

Put differently, “social” should not be an undefined primitive.⁵ Separate and independent interpretation of the sacred is required. Social necessity should not account for the sacred, for that could be worryingly circular: The sacred accounts for the social, *social* necessity cannot account for the sacred, on pain of circularity.⁶ If social necessity does not constitute the sacred, the question is, what kind of necessity can? In my view, it is metaphysical necessity.

The sacred is an essential structure of the social, even if phenomenal presentation can vary from milieu to milieu. The sacred is treated by Durkheim as a deep structure of the social, invariant across counterfactual conditions or possible states of the world, however the common noun, “society”, is individuated into *societies*, conventionally demarcated by proper names/nouns. The sacred is not a contingent feature of the social, and thus not a simple empirical regularity. The sacred is rather an essential, constitutive feature of the social, wherever there are human societies, and humankind is everywhere socially-organized.

The necessity of the sacred to the social is not, in Durkheim's argument, conceptual or logical or physical necessity. Since, on this reconstruction of his argument, there is no possible state of the world that contains social things in which society is not essentially structured by the sacred, the sacred seems to be metaphysically necessary.

3.1 | The Metaphysics of the Sacred

This result – my conclusion that Durkheim's treatment of the sacred is ultimately metaphysical -- suggests that the explanation for the sacred is meant to be a particular type of explanation which is not based in external empirical associations. The contrast is rather clear: Contemporary empirical social science is built on these kinds of *de facto* explanations, aimed at turning associations into empirical generalizations. In these explanations, the explanans does not call the explanandum into existence or being.

As I noted in the first section, however, there is a second type of explanation which is not based in external associations. This type of explanation specifies conditions that instantiate or identify ontological entities. These are metaphysical explanations. *Metaphysical* explanations of identifying and instantiating conditions establish essential truths about entities. They cash out the explanatory

implications of essences (Kment, 2014, pp. 146–182). Durkheim's argument for the existence and importance of the sacred more closely resembles this second type of explanation.

In order to further explore the metaphysics of the sacred according to Durkheim, I note initially that Durkheim's starting point in his presentation of the sacred in *The Forms* was an indispensability claim. He argues, as noted earlier, “that which is indispensable is also that which is essential.” Such a claim has a place in ordinary language. “Indispensability”, however, also has a more technical meaning in Kantian metaphysics, particularly in relation to the method of the transcendental deduction within transcendental idealism.⁷ Note, too, that Durkheim's query as presented earlier in this section: What is it “without which there could be no religion”, is structurally similar to Kant's motivating question in establishing the metaphysical importance of the categories: How is experience possible, which could be rewritten, without loss of information, in a grammatical form similar to Durkheim's question with “experience” replacing “religion” as predicate. Conversely, “what is it without which there would be no religion” could be restated and capture the heart of Kant's question by substituting experience for religion.

3.2 | A Kantian Connection

This similarity suggests that we should consider how Durkheim reworked elements of the Kantian intellectual legacy in his treatment of the sacred. Within Kantian transcendental idealism, transcendental arguments are purchased at a price. In making his transcendental argument about the categories of experience, upon which the possibility of experience rested, Kant implied that we resign ourselves to the fact that we can never be acquainted directly with things-in-themselves. Kant went on to identify the danger of degenerate transcendental arguments that arise when epistemic and ontological conditions of possibility are confused and that yield transcendental paralogisms. (For further discussion, see Allison, 1983, p. 12, pp. 14–34; Guyer, 1987, pp. 280–282; Wood, 2004, pp. 86–8). The paralogisms are found in Kant (1933/1781–87).

Durkheim, however, is not working fully inside the idealist synthesis – transcendental idealism -- which is the background to Kantian metaphysics. The problem of transcendental paralogisms is mooted. Thus, Durkheim appears to have denied, or at least weakened the force of, the Kantian limit. This is a different solution to the Humean problem of scepticism that motivated Kant. It rests on what I term a realist synthesis rather than the Kantian idealist synthesis. Durkheim's arguments, both about “method” and about the sacred, do not admit synthetic a priori conclusions or propositions, as they should in transcendental idealism; instead, they admit of necessary a posteriori conclusions.

In contemporary philosophy, this is a characteristic *realist* argument with prominent versions in critical realism (Bhaskar, 2008/1975) and in semantics and metaphysics (Kripke, 1972, 1980), which respectively emphasize natural necessity and metaphysical (modal) necessity in their specifications of the nature of necessary a posteriori propositions. On my reconstruction of Durkheim's arguments, this realist literature helps to identify where and how Durkheim has reconfigured Kantian metaphysics. This is the interpretive key to understanding Durkheim's (metaphysical) explanation for the sacred.

In explaining the sacred, Durkheim is not doing empiricist science; he is doing metaphysics, and he is doing so with realist fundamentals. Durkheim draws on the method of transcendental deduction, but not from within the idealist synthesis of transcendental idealism; instead he works generally from within a realist synthesis, which is conceptually similar to Bhaskar's (2008/1975) “transcendental realism”.⁸ Moreover, Durkheim's treatment of the sacred formally resembles Kripke's treatment of a “rigid designator”. In the remainder of this section, I therefore provide below further elaboration about the realist synthesis and Kripke's derivation of rigid designation, and the implications for Durkheim's arguments regarding the sacred.

3.3 | The Realist Synthesis

Kant took the dualism of synthetic/analytic on the one hand, and a posteriori/a priori on the other, and reworked them to create the synthetic a priori, which underpinned his method of transcendental deduction within transcendental idealism. The latter is the method associated with synthetic a priori propositions.⁹ Kripke, on the other hand, reworks different dualisms. He takes the concept of necessity which ordinarily is associated with the analytic side of the synthetic/analytic dualism, and is often contrasted with contingency, and transforms how it is used by combining it with the a posteriori, which is typically understood as comprising contingently true or false empirical statements and is distinguished from the a priori.

The realist synthesis is organized by this argument about the existence of necessary a posteriori truths, rather than the Kantian combination of the synthetic and the a priori. Kripke's argument is my main focus here because it eventually yields the notion of a rigid designator. He argues that there are empirical phenomena that have certain qualities necessarily. That is to say that some empirically-oriented propositions are necessarily true even if they are not a priori -- even if their empirical content is only known a posteriori. The necessity in question is not logical necessity. In a Kripkean framework, the necessity in play is metaphysical (modal) necessity. In Bhaskar's (2008/1975) critical realism, the necessity in play is natural necessity. This is a relevant difference but I do not dwell on it here.

The upshot is that there can be true propositions that are epistemically contingent but metaphysically necessary. The identification of the necessity of the truth of such propositions therefore may involve scientific investigation but the products of such an investigation are not Humean-type inductive inferences or de facto generalizations based on external associations or generalizations that, according to the two dominant traditions in current empirical analysis, are established either by frequentism and thus governed by the laws of large numbers, or by Bayesianism and thus conditioned on personal probabilities.

Kripke used his reconfiguration of philosophical dualisms to introduce the concept of the rigid designator. A rigid designator is defined in terms of essential properties and in terms of modal necessity. Essential properties are unlike accidental properties in much the same way I distinguished them in the previous section. Consider the implications of possible states of the world for objects with essential properties: If an object has essential properties, then they should be present in all possible states of the world in which this object exists. Accidental properties of some objects *O* are such that there can be possible worlds in which they are not present – present in some worlds but not in others in which *O* is present. This is the background to Kripke's definition of a rigid designator. Some *x* is a rigid designator if in every possible world, *x* designates the same object (Kripke, 1972, p. 48).

Initially this was a semantic argument applied to the philosophical status of proper names. Kripke, however, moved on to consider the implications of rigid designation for natural kind terms which, he argued, have distinctive semantic and metaphysical structures.

3.4 | Kinds, Induction, Projectability

Based on the discussion thus far, it is therefore not a stretch to propose that for Durkheim society was a *natural kind* term. Indeed, in his discussion of Durkheim's philosophy of science, Schmaus (1994) makes this claim, I believe plausibly, although his argument is not as heavily invested in Kripke's treatment of natural kinds and rigid designation as is this article, nor does Schmaus discuss Durkheim's treatment of the sacred. However, Schmaus's position is consistent with our earlier argument that,

for Durkheim, the social world was a proper subset of the natural world even if the social world (the “social”) is not identified by physical properties – that is, even if its identifying conditions are neither micro-structural nor physical. If we align Schmaus's reading of Durkheim on the question of kinds and Kripke's treatment of natural kinds, we then would say that the sacred was the rigid designator of the social – an essential structure or “elementary form”.

Schmaus's interpretation of Durkheim on the issue of kinds is very plausible. Yet Durkheim's relation to the larger philosophical literature on *kinds* is still somewhat ambiguous, perhaps unavoidably so. Contemporary discussion of kinds and kind-realism obviously occurs against very different scientific and philosophical backgrounds than Durkheim's, and under very different conditions of academic specialization. Contemporary arguments have worked through problems that Durkheim either did not recognize or address, and perhaps could not have, given the state of knowledge in his time.

Nonetheless, Durkheim's arguments are compatible with a form of kind-realism and this is enough for the purposes of this article. Durkheim is a realist on kinds. He is not a non-realist, nor anti-realist. In particular, he is not a strong social constructivist on kinds. For the sake of completeness, however, and to avoid premature closure on these issues, I briefly discuss some aspects of this larger contemporary literature on kinds, drawing comparisons to Durkheim where appropriate. Without embarking on a full review, this discussion contrasts natural, historical, and social kinds.¹⁰

In the literature on kinds, the advantage of kind-terms is that they support inductive inferences, thus dissolving Humean dilemmas about induction.¹¹ Natural kind terms are *projectable*. “Projectability” here is understood as “projections from examined to (past, present and future) unexamined cases”, and projectability is the epistemic marker of *natural* kinds (Massimi, 2014, p. 416).

In current scientific realism, it is usually causal relations that underpin this epistemic role of natural kinds. Khalidi, for example, also stresses “the projectibility [sic] of natural kinds, their role in inductive inferences and their explanatory and predictive value” (2013, p. 80). He argues that causality “holds together” natural kinds. Epistemics and metaphysics are thus joined this way: Projectability is the “epistemic marker for the metaphysical relation of causation” (80). However, causation is understood by Khalidi in interventionist terms (Khalidi, 2013, p. 97. On these models of causal relations, see; Lewis, 1973; Morgan & Winship, 2015; Woodward, 2003), in contrast to generative models of causal relations.

In this scientific realist understanding of causal relations, the explanans does not call the explanandum into existence; these are not relations of instantiation or identification. Rather, the terms of explanation exist apart. However, as I argued in the previous section, this is not the model of explanation that Durkheim develops, either in *The Forms* or in his methodological text, *Rules of Sociological Method*. Hence, no strong relation should be drawn between Durkheim's work and the scientific realist treatment of natural kinds.

Historical kinds, according to Millikan (2019, 1999), have a different structure than natural kinds, but nonetheless contribute to successful induction, despite the differences. Historical kinds are “domains over which predicates are non-accidentally projectable: there are good reasons in nature why one member of an historical kind is like another, hence why inductions are successful over the kind” (Millikan, 1999, 2019). However, historical kinds need not ground exceptionless generalizations: copying processes are not perfect and historical environments may not be steady. There may also be some irreducible vagueness in the boundaries of kinds (1999, p. 56). Moreover, “historical kinds typically evolve as they move forward in time and, unlike most individuals, they may branch” (Millikan, 2019, p. 23). Historical kinds are not eternal and fixed in time.

Millikan's arguments about historical kinds, however, are explicitly non-Kantian. “Very unlike Kant, then, we must begin with a rough understanding of what the world is like *prior* to cognition” (Millikan, 2019, p. 3. Emphasis in original). This makes a difference for our purposes. Durkheim may

have substantially modified Kant by invoking a transcendental argument (and not simply, therefore, by socializing the categories) within what I called a realist synthesis, thereby finessing Kant's transcendental idealism. Nonetheless, there are still debts to Kant: Durkheim's ontology is not as fully naturalized as Millikan's.

Finally, the notion of a *social kind* is also not as strong as that of a natural kind. For example, the things social kinds refer to are mind- or belief-dependent – they are not independent of human activity (Epstein, 2015, p. 47). Nonetheless, social kinds have a grammatical structure similar to natural kind terms (Epstein, p. 47) and they have uses in induction (Mason, 2016). And, following Epstein, social kinds have fixed instantiation or membership conditions: “The conditions under which something is a member of a social kind are the same across all times and possibilities” ... which does not mean that social kinds are not put in place by local contexts in the actual world” (Epstein, 2015, p. 48). In my view, these are all questions or issues with which Durkheim was dealing.

4 | SOCIOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENTALISM AND DURKHEIM'S PHILOSOPHICAL SOCIOLOGY: FINAL NOTE

In this final section, I draw together these two pieces of my presentation – Durkheim's epistemics and his social ontology – in light of some of the sociological questions that Durkheim generally addressed in his work. I show how these pieces are expected to work together to support important aspects of his sociology.

Durkheim's philosophical treatment of the sacred complements his sociological developmentalism. In developmental terms, Durkheim distinguished the “primal horde” from various types of segmented societies. The former term acted loosely like the “state of nature”, characteristic of some arguments in early modern and modern political philosophy. The “primal horde” is an analytical device that contrasts with all forms of social organization and that initializes his discussion of societies' various forms. Societies are distinguished by their degree of complexity, understood primarily in terms of differentiation. Yet whatever differences in terms of complexity and differentiation, all human social organizations are of a kind. They share essential characteristics. This is the position that underpins Durkheim's arguments in the opening pages of *The Forms*.

The essential properties of society are more available for observation in societies before complex differentiation emerged. These properties are easier to identify under conditions of low social segmentation. Since all human social organization is of a kind, and characteristic of humans at the species-level (humankind), whatever the degree of differentiation, the essential structures that can be identified at less complex levels must be present in more complex societies, even if in distinctive institutional forms.

The connection between Durkheim's epistemics, as elaborated in the first section of the article, and his justification for his treatment of the sacred, as presented in the second section, thus emerges: More institutionally-elaborated social forms may obscure deeper structures, making these deeper structures more difficult to access (cf. Gordon, 2010, p. 400, n44). Hence Durkheim's turn to low socially segmented societies where social overlays are less likely to obscure the identification of essential structures in his investigation of the sacred. His epistemics and his metaphysics thus were meant to support his sociological developmentalism.

This treatment of Durkheim's philosophical realism invites a range of questions not addressed in this article. In conclusion, I note several that bear on his sociological developmentalism. As the son and grandson of rabbis, living in a catholic society challenged by post-Revolutionary republican civil religion, in an intellectual milieu fascinated by the exoticness of the Muslim world, Durkheim might

have been expected to pursue his search for the elementary forms of religious life through the investigation of monotheisms. Yet it is weakly-differentiated societies that were privileged epistemically in his investigations. We know his justification for this privileging, but it was and is a provocative move.

One question that arises is the dissonance between the epistemic privilege accorded to these societies and the human hierarchy in which these societies were located, in (self-evidently to Durkheim) inferior positions (eg. Durkheim, 1973/1925, p. 184 ff.) The issue here is whether, in following through with the full implications of epistemic privilege, we destabilize important elements of his developmentalism. In other words, his philosophical realism may challenge his developmentalism. One virtue of this focus on his philosophical realism is in fact that it provides critical purchase on aspects of his sociology.

The epistemic privilege extended to these societies is a philosophical move that “ramifies”¹² in ways which question his taken-for-granted moral judgement about those societies. Within Durkheim's philosophical realism it should be difficult to stop with epistemic privilege, particularly if, as I argued in the first part of this article, Durkheim's epistemics leads directly to his metaphysics and social ontology. Then the epistemic privilege he granted these societies (which in many cases are continuous with today's Indigenous societies) should extend to their ontological status as well. And then it becomes more difficult to defend the position that these societies were or are morally inferior, a position which is revealed as a modernist conceit that unhappily has not been removed from our contemporary histories. It is difficult to square epistemic privilege and ontological recognition with inferiority.

Another question is the potential gap between Durkheim's realist intuitions and his arguments for the sacred. One might subscribe to some version of the former without identifying the sacred as the essential structure of religion and society. The distinction between essence and appearance, for example, that organizes much of his epistemics and ontology, is clearly not a dualism that is his alone. It is a distinction that also plays an important role, for example, in Marxist social philosophy (eg. Geras, 1986/1969). The contrast is rather clear: in classical Marxist metaphysics, Durkheim might be said to have inverted the relationship between base and superstructure. In this instance, the connection between his ontological distinctions and his identification of substantive characteristic properties of human society is clearly, and appropriately, fallible. There is also a strong suggestion here that there are other theoretical priors in play (implicitly present but not specified) that influence how this epistemic-ontological dualism of appearance/reality might be cashed out in different substantive ways.

Another question is the apparent lability of the sacred implied in Durkheim's discussion, not least the tension between the universalist claims of modern monotheisms, and the locally-grounded practices of those societies lower on Durkheim's moral hierarchy, which he draws on to identify the essential importance of the sacred. Indeed, in view of my comments above about the ramifications of epistemic privilege, more attention might be paid to how Durkheim's arguments might actually subvert modern understandings of religion. This examination of realist themes and arguments in his texts therefore may ultimately undermine his sociological developmentalism rather than provide support, and that is a result worth noting in conclusion.¹³

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ENDNOTES

¹ In a later edition (2014), Lukes' Introduction is much revised. It is generally far less critical, but also does not engage realist themes as he did in the earlier Introduction. Durkheim's realism is dismissed by Lukes in the first version of this Introduction (which I am citing in the text) as an embarrassment and an obvious mistake; then in the second edition, Durkheim's realism is not discussed.

- ² In recognizing this difference between these two types of explanation, I also am drawing on Mancias' (2006, p. 181) note on externalism, as well as an argument in Thompson (2007, p. 24, pp. 31–32), which implies a related distinction between types of explanation.
- ³ See also the discussion in Maryanski (2018, pp. 120–123) which shows that this theme is foreshadowed in 1899 in one of Durkheim's contributions to *L'année sociologique*.
- ⁴ This is a turn of phrase I draw from Schick (1997). Schick used it to summarize a Humean position on necessity and causation: “we find no *mustness* in nature” (Schick, 1997, p. 30, emphasis in original).
- ⁵ Mason (2016, p. 847, n3), drawing on the work of Haslanger (2012), asks whether a noncircular explanation of what makes entities or phenomena social can be given.
- ⁶ Durkheim recognized a version of this problem in earlier work on religion (Durkheim, 1899) and discussion in Lukes (1985/1973, p. 240).
- ⁷ On indispensability claims and constitutive arguments about existence as characteristic features of transcendental deductions, see Taylor (1979). More generally, also see Guyer (1992) and Förster (1989).
- ⁸ On degrees of transcendentalism in transcendental arguments, see D'Oro (2019).
- ⁹ For surveys of the literature on the Kantian transcendental deduction, see Förster (1989), Wood (2004), Guyer (1992).
- ¹⁰ I do not discuss the related literature on “homeostatic property clusters” which has emerged in the philosophy of biology. See Boyd (1999); Wilson (2005, pp. 56–59, 1999); Bird (2018). This literature is relevant to a broader treatment of Durkheim than is possible here. Durkheim recognizes our status as one of many evolved, finite biological creatures; the phylogenetic transition to humankind is not a rupture; it is continuous. Maryanski (2018) takes up some of the implications of this dimension of Durkheim's work.
- ¹¹ For further discussion of the force of Humean scepticism about induction, see Howson (2000, chap. 6).
- ¹² I have read Durkheim positively, not negatively; in other words, I have generally taken Gane's advice: “There is nothing to be gained by oversimplifying Durkheim's arguments in order to demolish them” (Gane, 1988, p. vii).
- ¹³ I am drawing here on the discussion of the “ramification” of concepts in Gordon (2010, pp. 3–6).

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