

The Elementary Forms of
RELIGIOUS LIFE

EMILE DURKHEIM
//

*Translated and with an Introduction by
Karen E. Fields*



THE FREE PRESS

NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY TOKYO SINGAPORE

GN470
.D813
1995
C.2
RR4

INTRODUCTION

I

I propose in this book to study the simplest and most primitive religion that is known at present, to discover its principles and attempt an explanation of it. A religious system is said to be the most primitive that is available for observation when it meets the two following conditions: First, it must be found in societies the simplicity of whose organization is nowhere exceeded; ¹ second, it must be explainable without the introduction of any element from a predecessor religion.

I will make every effort to describe the organization of this system with all the care and precision that an ethnographer or a historian would bring to the task. But my task will not stop at description. Sociology sets itself different problems from those of history or ethnography. It does not seek to become acquainted with bygone forms of civilization for the sole purpose of being acquainted with and reconstructing them. Instead, like any positive science, ^{*} its purpose above all is to explain a present reality that is near to us and thus capable of affecting our ideas and actions. That reality is man. More especially, it is present-day man, for there is none other that we have a greater interest in knowing well. Therefore, my study of a very archaic religion will not be for the sheer pleasure of recounting the bizarre and the eccentric. I have made a very archaic religion the subject of my research because it seems better suited than any other to help us comprehend the religious nature of man, that is, to reveal a fundamental and permanent aspect of humanity.

This proposition is bound to provoke strong objections. It may be thought strange that, to arrive at an understanding of present-day humanity, we should have to turn away from it so as to travel back to the beginning of history. In the matter at hand, that procedure seems especially unorthodox. Religions are held to be of unequal value and standing; it is commonly said that not all contain the same measure of truth. Thus it would seem that the higher forms of religious thought cannot be compared with the lower with-

^{*} Here, knowledge (*science*) acquired by means of systematic observation. This use of the term *positive* is indebted to Auguste Comte (1798-1857) who postulated a human evolution from the theological to metaphysical to positive epochs. The complexities of the term *positive* in general, and in Comte's use of it, are examined by André Lalande, *Dictionnaire technique de la philosophie*, Paris, F. Alcan, 1923, pp. 595-600.

¹ I will call those societies and the men of those societies primitive in the same sense. This term certainly lacks precision, but it is hard to avoid; if care is taken to specify its meaning, however, it can safely be used.

out bringing the higher forms down to the lower level. To grant that the crude cults of Australian tribes might help us understand Christianity, for example, is to assume—is it not?—that Christianity proceeds from the same mentality, in other words, that it is made up of the same superstitions and rests on the same errors. The theoretical importance sometimes accorded to primitive religions could therefore be taken as evidence of a systematic irreligion that invalidated the results of research by prejudging them.

I need not go into the question here whether scholars can be found who were guilty of this and who have made history and the ethnography of religion a means of making war against religion. In any event, such could not possibly be a sociologist's point of view. Indeed, it is a fundamental postulate of sociology that a human institution cannot rest upon error and falsehood. If it did, it could not endure. If it had not been grounded in the nature of things, in those very things it would have met resistance that it could not have overcome. Therefore, when I approach the study of primitive religions, it is with the certainty that they are grounded in and express the real. In the course of the analyses and discussions that follow, we will see this principle coming up again and again. What I criticize in the schools I part company with is precisely that they have failed to recognize it. No doubt, when all we do is consider the formulas literally, these religious beliefs and practices appear disconcerting, and our inclination might be to write them off to some sort of inborn aberration. But we must know how to reach beneath the symbol to grasp the reality it represents and that gives the symbol its true meaning. The most bizarre or barbarous rites and the strangest myths translate some human need and some aspect of life, whether social or individual. The reasons the faithful settle for in justifying those rites and myths may be mistaken, and most often are; but the true reasons exist nonetheless, and it is the business of science to uncover them.

Fundamentally, then, there are no religions that are false. All are true after their own fashion: All fulfill given conditions of human existence, though in different ways. Granted, it is not impossible to rank them hierarchically. Some can be said to be superior to others, in the sense that they bring higher mental faculties into play, that they are richer in ideas and feelings, that they contain proportionately more concepts than sensations and images, and that they are more elaborately systematized. But the greater complexity and higher ideal content, however real, are not sufficient to place the corresponding religions into separate genera. All are equally religious, just as all living beings are equally living beings, from the humblest plastid to man. If I address myself to primitive religions, then, it is not with any ulterior motive of disparaging religion in general: These religions are to be respected no less

than the others. They fulfill the same needs, play the same role, and proceed from the same causes; therefore, they can serve just as well to elucidate the nature of religious life and, it follows, to solve the problem I wish to treat.

Still, why give them a kind of priority? Why choose them in preference to others as the subject of my study? This choice is solely for reasons of method.

First of all, we cannot arrive at an understanding of the most modern religions without tracing historically the manner in which they have gradually taken shape. Indeed, history is the only method of explanatory analysis that can be applied to them. History alone enables us to break down an institution into its component parts, because it shows those parts to us as they are born in time, one after the other. Second, by situating each part of the institution within the totality of circumstances in which it was born, history puts into our hands the only tools we have for identifying the causes that have brought it into being. Thus, whenever we set out to explain something human at a specific moment in time—be it a religious belief, a moral rule, a legal principle, an aesthetic technique, or an economic system—we must begin by going back to its simplest and most primitive form. We must seek to account for the features that define it at that period of its existence and then show how it has gradually developed, gained in complexity, and become what it is at the moment under consideration.

It is easy to see how important the determination of the initial starting point is for this series of progressive explanations. A cartesian principle had it that the first link takes precedence in the chain of scientific truths. To be sure, it is out of the question to base the science of religions on a notion elaborated in the cartesian manner—that is, a logical concept, pure possibility constructed solely by force of intellect. What we must find is a concrete reality that historical and ethnographic observation alone can reveal to us. But if that primary conception must be arrived at by other methods, the fact remains that it is destined to have an important influence on all the subsequent propositions that science establishes. Biological evolution was conceived altogether differently from the moment the existence of unicellular organisms was discovered. Likewise, the particulars of religious facts are explained differently if naturism is placed at the beginning of religious evolution than if animism, or some other form, is placed there. Indeed, even the most specialized scholars must choose a hypothesis and take their inspiration from it if they want to try to account for the facts they analyze—unless they mean to confine themselves to a task of pure erudition. Willy-nilly, the questions they ask take the following form: What has caused naturism or animism to take on such and such a particular aspect here or there, and to be enriched or impoverished in such and such a way? Since taking a position on the initial problem is un-

avoidable, and since the solution given will affect the science as a whole, the problem is best confronted at the outset. This is what I propose to do.

Besides, apart from those indirect consequences, the study of primitive religions in itself has immediate interest of the first importance.

If it is useful to know what a given religion consists of; it is far more important to examine what religion is in general. This is a problem that has always intrigued philosophers, and not without reason: It is of interest to all humanity. Unfortunately, the method philosophers ordinarily use to solve it is purely one of dialectic: All they do is analyze the idea they have of religion, even if they have to illustrate the results of that mental analysis with examples borrowed from those religions that best suit their model. But while this method must be abandoned, the problem of definition remains; and philosophy's great service has been to prevent it from being settled once and for all* by the disdain of the savants. The problem can in fact be approached in another way. Since all religions may be compared, all being species within the same genus, some elements are of necessity common to them all. By that I mean not only the outward and visible features that they all equally exhibit and that make it possible to define religion in a provisional way at the beginning of research. The discovery of these apparent signs is relatively easy, for the observation required does not go beyond the surface of things. But these external resemblances presuppose deeper ones. At the foundation of all systems of belief and all cults, there must necessarily be a certain number of fundamental representations and modes of ritual conduct[†] that, despite the diversity of forms that the one and the other may have taken on, have the same objective meaning everywhere and everywhere fulfill the same functions. It is these enduring elements that constitute what is eternal and human in religion. They are the whole objective content of the idea that is expressed when *religion* in general is spoken of.

How, then, can those elements be uncovered?

Surely it is not by observing the complex religions that have arisen in the course of history. Each of those religions is formed from such a variety of elements that it is very hard to distinguish what is secondary to them from what is primary, and what is essential from what is accessory. Simply consider religions like those of Egypt, India, or classical antiquity! Each is a dense tangle of many cults that can vary according to localities, temples, generations, dynasties, invasions, and so on. Popular superstitions intermingle in them with the most sophisticated dogmas. Neither religious thinking nor religious

*Swain rendered Durkheim's *prescrit* as "suppressed," as if he had written *proscrit*.

[†]*Attitudes rituelles*. On this phrase, see below, p. 301n.

practice is shared equally among the mass of the faithful. The beliefs as well as the rites are taken in different ways, depending on men, milieux, and circumstances. Here it is priests, there monks, elsewhere the laity; here, mystics and rationalists, theologians and prophets, and so on. Under such conditions, it is difficult to perceive what might be common to all. It is indeed possible to find ways of studying some particular phenomenon fruitfully—such as prophetism, monasticism, or the mysteries—through one or another of those systems in which it is especially well developed. But how can one find the common basis of religious life under the luxuriant vegetation that grows over it? How can one find the fundamental states characteristic of the religious mentality in general through the clash of theologies, the variations of ritual, the multiplicity of groupings, and the diversity of individuals?

The case is altogether different in the lower societies. The lesser development of individuality, the smaller scale of the group, and the homogeneity of external circumstances all contribute to reducing the differences and variations to a minimum. The group regularly produces an intellectual and moral uniformity of which we find only rare examples in the more advanced societies. Everything is common to everyone. The movements are stereotyped; everyone executes the same ones in the same circumstances, and this conformity of conduct merely translates that of thought. Since all the consciousnesses are pulled along in the same current, the individual type virtually confounds itself with the generic type. At the same time that all is uniform, all is simple. What could be more basic than those myths composed of a single theme, repeated endlessly, or than those rites composed of a small number of movements, repeated until the participants can do no more. Neither the popular nor the priestly imagination has yet had the time or the means to refine and transform the basic material of ideas and religious practices; reduced to essentials, that material spontaneously presents itself to examination, and discovering it calls for only a minimal effort. Inessential, secondary, and luxurious developments have not yet come to hide what is primary.² Everything is boiled down to what is absolutely indispensable, to that without which there would be no religion. But the indispensable is also the fundamental, in other words, that which it is above all important for us to know.

Thus, primitive civilizations are prime cases because they are simple cases. This is why, among all the orders of facts, the observations of ethnog-

²This is not to say, of course, that primitive cults do not go beyond bare essentials. Quite the contrary, as we will see, religious beliefs and practices that do not have narrowly utilitarian aims are found in every religion (Bk. III, chap. 4, §2). This nonutilitarian richness is indispensable to religious life, and of its very essence. But it is by far less well developed in the lower religions than in the others, and this fact will put us in a better position to determine its *raison d'être*.

raphers have often been veritable revelations that have breathed new life into the study of human institutions. Before the middle of the nineteenth century, for example, it was generally believed that the father was the essential element of the family; it was not even imaginable that there could be a family organization of which paternal power was not the keystone. Bachofen's discovery toppled that old notion. Until quite recent times, it was thought obvious that the moral and legal relations that constitute kinship were only another aspect of the physiological relations that result from shared descent. Bachofen and his successors, McLennan, Morgan, and many others, were still operating under the influence of that preconception. But, quite the contrary, we have known ever since we became acquainted with the nature of the primitive clan that kinship cannot be defined by common blood.* To return to religions: Exclusive consideration of the religious forms that are the most familiar to us long led us to believe that the idea of god was characteristic of all that is religious. The religion I will study below is largely a stranger to any notion of divinity. In it, the forces to which the rites are addressed differ greatly from those that are of paramount importance in our modern religions, and yet they will help us to understand our modern religions better. Nothing is more unjust, therefore, than the disdain with which too many historians still regard ethnographers' work. In point of fact, ethnography has often brought about the most fertile revolutions in the various branches of sociology. For the same reason, moreover, the discovery of unicellular creatures, which I noted earlier, transformed the idea of life that was widely held. Since life is down to its fundamental features among very simple beings, those features may be less easily misread.

But primitive religions do not merely allow us to isolate the constituent elements of religion; their great advantage is also that they aid in its explanation. Because the facts are simpler, the relations between them are more apparent. The reasons men invoke to explain their actions to themselves have not yet been refined and revamped by sophisticated thought: They are closer and more akin to the motives that caused those actions. To understand a delusion properly and to be able to apply the most appropriate treatment, the doctor needs to know what its point of departure was. That event is the more easily detected the nearer to its beginnings the delusion can be observed.

*Jacob Johann Bachofen (1815–1887) postulated the existence of matriliney (reckoning descent through the female line) and matriarchy or mother right, a stage he envisaged as standing between primitive promiscuity and patriarchy. Ethnographic study worldwide has borne out the first and discredited the second. Like Bachofen, John Ferguson McLennan (1827–1881) and Lewis Henry Morgan (1818–1881) were lawyers interested in the rules that govern family and property. Among other achievements, Morgan pioneered the study of kin statuses distinct from blood relationship; McLennan is credited with having drawn attention to totemism. See below, Bk.I. chap.4, p. 85.

Conversely, the longer a sickness is left to develop, the more that original point of departure slips out of view. This is so because all sorts of interpretations have intervened along the way, and the tendency of those interpretations is to repress the original state into the unconscious and to replace it with other states through which the original one is sometimes not easy to detect. The distance between a systematized delusion and the first impressions that gave birth to it is often considerable. The same applies to religious thought. As it progresses historically, the causes that called it into existence, though still at work, are seen no more except through a vast system of distorting interpretations. The popular mythologies and the subtle theologies have done their work: They have overlaid the original feelings with very different ones that, although stemming from primitive feelings of which they are the elaborated form, nevertheless allow their true nature to show only in part. The psychological distance between the cause and the effect, and between the apparent cause and the effective cause, has become wider and more difficult for the mind to overcome. The remainder of this work will be an illustration and a test of this methodological point. We will see how, in the primitive religions, the religious phenomenon still carries the visible imprint of its origins. It would have been much more difficult for us to infer those origins by considering more developed religions alone.

Thus, the study I undertake is a way of taking up again the old problem of the origin of religions *but under new conditions*. Granted, if by origin one means an absolute first beginning, there is nothing scientific about the question, and it must be resolutely set aside. There is no radical instant when religion began to exist, and the point is not to find a roundabout way of conveying ourselves there in thought. Like every other human institution, religion begins nowhere. So all speculations in this genre are rightly discredited; they can consist of only subjective and arbitrary constructions without checks of any sort. The problem I pose is altogether different. I would like to find a means of discerning the ever-present causes on which the most basic forms of religious thought and practice depend. For the reasons just set forth, the causes are more easily observable if the societies in which they are observed are less complex. That is why I seek to get closer to the origins.³ The reason is not that I ascribe special virtues to the lower religions. Quite the contrary, they are crude and rudimentary; so there can be no question of making them out to be models of some sort, which the later religions would

³It will be seen that I give the word "origins," like the word "primitive," an entirely relative sense. I do not mean by it an absolute beginning but the simplest social state known at present—the state beyond which it is at present impossible for us to go. When I speak about origins and the beginnings of history or religious thought, this is the sense in which those phrases must be understood.

only have had to reproduce. But their very lack of elaboration makes them instructive, for in this way they become useful experiments in which the facts and the relations among facts are easier to detect. To uncover the laws of the phenomena he studies, the physicist seeks to simplify those phenomena and to rid them of their secondary characteristics. In the case of institutions, nature spontaneously makes simplifications of the same kind at the beginning of history. I wish only to put those simplifications to good use. Doubtless, I will be able to obtain only very elementary facts by this method. When I have accounted for them, to the extent this will be possible, the novelties of all kinds that have been produced in the course of evolution will still not be explained. But although I would not dream of denying the importance of the problems such novelties pose, I think those problems benefit by being treated at the proper time, and there is good reason not to tackle them until after those whose study I have undertaken.

II

My research is not solely of interest to the science of religions. There is an aspect of every religion that transcends the realm of specifically religious ideas. Through it, the study of religious phenomena provides a means of revisiting problems that until now have been debated only among philosophers.

It has long been known that the first systems of representations that man made of the world and himself were of religious origin. There is no religion that is not both a cosmology and a speculation about the divine. If philosophy and the sciences were born in religion, it is because religion itself began by serving as science and philosophy. Further, and less often noted, religion has not merely enriched a human intellect already formed but in fact has helped to form it. Men owe to religion not only the content of their knowledge, in significant part, but also the form in which that knowledge is elaborated.

At the root of our judgments, there are certain fundamental notions that dominate our entire intellectual life. It is these ideas that philosophers, beginning with Aristotle, have called the categories of understanding: notions of time, space,⁴ number, cause, substance, personality.* They correspond to

*Usually referred to in Kantian circles as the "categories of understanding" or the "categories of the understanding," technically these are called "pure concepts of understanding"—that is, concepts, or rules for organizing the variety of sense perceptions, that lie ready in the mind and are brought into play by our efforts to make sense of our sensations. For clarifying correspondence on these points, I thank Professor Robert Paul Wolff.

⁴I call time and space categories because there is no difference between the role these notions play in intellectual life and that which falls to notions of kind and cause. (See on this point [Octave] Hamelin, *Essai sur les éléments principaux de la représentation*, Paris, Alcan [1907], pp. 63, 76.)

the most universal properties of things. They are like solid frames that confine thought. Thought does not seem to be able to break out of them without destroying itself, since it seems we cannot think of objects that are not in time or space, that cannot be counted, and so forth. The other ideas are contingent and changing, and we can conceive of a man, a society, or an epoch that lacks them; but these fundamental notions seem to us as almost inseparable from the normal functioning of the intellect. They are, as it were, the skeleton of thought. Now, when one analyzes primitive religious beliefs methodically, one naturally finds the principal categories among them. They are born in and from religion; they are a product of religious thought. This is a point that I will make again and again in the course of this book.

Even now that point has a certain interest of its own, but here is what gives it its true significance.

The general conclusion of the chapters to follow is that religion is an eminently social thing. Religious representations are collective representations that express collective realities; rites are ways of acting that are born only in the midst of assembled groups and whose purpose is to evoke, maintain, or recreate certain mental states of those groups. But if the categories are of religious origin, then they must participate in* what is common to all religion: They, too, must be social things, products of collective thought. At the very least—since with our present understanding of these matters, radical and exclusive theses are to be guarded against—it is legitimate to say that they are rich in social elements.

This, it must be added, is something one can begin to see even now for certain of the categories. For example, what if one tried to imagine what the notion of time would be in the absence of the methods we use to divide, measure, and express it with objective signs, a time that was not a succession of years, months, weeks, days, and hours? It would be nearly impossible to conceive of. We can conceive of time only if we differentiate between moments. Now, what is the origin of that differentiation? Undoubtedly, states of consciousness that we have already experienced can be reproduced in us in the same order in which they originally occurred; and, in this way, bits of our past become immediate again, even while spontaneously distinguishing themselves from the present. But however important this distinction might

*The phrase "participate in," which occurs frequently, has usually not been replaced with simpler possibilities such as "partakes of" or "shares in" because the notion of participation that can be seen in the sentence "Jesus participated in divine and human nature" must be borne in mind, together with an argument in which Durkheim was engaged. Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, whose book *Les Fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures* Durkheim criticizes, considered "participations" to exemplify the inherent illogic of "primitive" thought. Durkheim held just the opposite.

be for our private experience, it is far from sufficient to constitute the notion or category of time. The category of time is not simply a partial or complete commemoration of our lived life. It is an abstract and impersonal framework that contains not only our individual existence but also that of humanity. It is like an endless canvas on which all duration is spread out before the mind's eye and on which all possible events are located in relation to points of reference that are fixed and specified. It is not *my time* that is organized in this way; it is time that is conceived of objectively by all men of the same civilization. This by itself is enough to make us begin to see that any such organization would have to be collective. And indeed, observation establishes that these indispensable points, in reference to which all things are arranged temporally, are taken from social life. The division into days, weeks, months, years, etc., corresponds to the recurrence of rites, festivals, and public ceremonies at regular intervals.⁵ A calendar expresses the rhythm of collective activity while ensuring that regularity.⁶

The same applies to space. As Hamelin⁷ has shown, space is not the vague and indeterminate medium that Kant imagined. If purely and absolutely homogeneous, it would be of no use and would offer nothing for thought to hold on to. Spatial representation essentially consists in a primary coordination of given sense experience. But this coordination would be impossible if the parts of space were qualitatively equivalent, if they really were mutually interchangeable. To have a spatial ordering of things is to be able to situate them differently: to place some on the right, others on the left, these above, those below, north or south, east or west, and so forth, just as, to arrange states of consciousness temporally, it must be possible to locate them at definite dates. That is, space would not be itself if, like time, it was not divided and differentiated. But where do these divisions that are essential to

⁵In support of this assertion, see Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, *Mélanges d'histoire des religions*, the chapter on "La Représentation du temps dans la religion," Paris, Alcan [1909].

⁶Through this we see how completely different are the complexus of sensations and images that serves to orient us in duration, and the category of time. The first are the summary of individual experiences, which hold only for the individual who has had them. By contrast, the category of time expresses a time common to the group—social time, so to speak. This category itself is a true social institution. Thus it is peculiar to man; animals have no representation of this kind.

This distinction between the category of time and the corresponding individual sensations could easily be made in regard to space and cause. This may perhaps help clear up certain confusions, which have fed controversies on these questions. I will return to this point at the Conclusion of the present work.

⁷Hamelin, *Essai sur les éléments principaux de la représentation*, pp. 75ff.

space come from? In itself it has no right, no left, no high or low, no north or south, etc. All these distinctions evidently arise from the fact that different affective colorings have been assigned to regions. And since all men of the same civilization conceive of space in the same manner, it is evidently necessary that these affective colorings and the distinctions that arise from them also be held in common—which implies almost necessarily that they are of social origin.⁸

Besides, in some instances this social character is made manifest. There are societies in Australia and North America in which space is conceived in the form of an immense circle, because the camp itself is circular;⁹ and the spatial circle is divided in exactly the same way as the tribal circle and in its image. As many regions are distinguished as there are clans in the tribe, and it is the place the clans occupy in the encampment that determines the orientation of the regions. Each region is defined by the totem of the clan to which it is assigned. Among the Zuñi, for example, the pueblo is made up of seven sections; each of these sections is a group of clans that has acquired its own unity. In all likelihood, it was originally a single clan that later subdivided. Space similarly contains seven regions, and each of these seven sections of the world is in intimate relationship with a section of the pueblo, that is, with a group of clans.¹⁰ "Thus," says Cushing, "one division is considered to be in relation with the north; another represents the west, another the south,¹¹ etc." Each section of the pueblo has its distinctive color, which symbolizes it; each region has its own color, which is that of the corresponding section. Over the course of history, the number of basic clans has varied, and the number of regions has varied in the same way. Thus, spatial organization was modeled on social organization and replicates it. Far from being built into human nature, no idea exists, up to and including the distinction be-

⁸Otherwise, in order to explain this agreement, one would have to accept the idea that all individuals, by virtue of their organico-psychic constitution, are affected in the same manner by the different parts of space—which is all the more improbable since the different regions have no affective coloring. Moreover, the divisions of space vary among societies—proof that they are not based exclusively on the inborn nature of man.

⁹See Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, "De Quelques formes primitives de la classification," *AS*, vol. VI, 1903, pp. 47ff.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 34ff.

¹¹[Frank Hamilton] Cushing, "Outlines of Zuñi Creation Myths," *Thirteenth Report*, BAE, Washington, DC, Government Printing Office, 1896, pp. 367ff. [Throughout, quoted material is translated into English from Durkheim's French renderings.]

tween right and left, that is not, in all probability, the product of religious, hence collective, representations.¹²

Analogous demonstrations concerning the notions of genus, force, personality, and efficacy will be found below. One might even ask whether the notion of contradiction does not also arise from social conditions. What tends to make this plausible is the fact that the hold the notion of contradiction has had over thought has varied with times and societies. Today the principle of identity governs scientific thought; but there are vast systems of representation that have played a major role in the history of ideas, in which it is commonly ignored: These systems are the mythologies, from the crudest to the most sophisticated.¹³ Mythologies deal with beings that have the most contradictory attributes at the same time, that are one and many, material and spiritual, and capable of subdividing themselves indefinitely without losing that which makes them what they are. These historical variations of the rule that seems to govern our present logic show that, far from being encoded from eternity in the mental constitution of man, the rule depends at least in part upon historical, hence social, factors. We do not know exactly what these factors are, but we can presume that they exist.¹⁴

Once this hypothesis is accepted, the problem of knowledge can be framed in new terms.

Up to the present, only two doctrines have opposed one another. For some, the categories cannot be derived from experience. They are logically prior to experience and condition it. They are thought of as so many simple data that are irreducible and immanent in the human intellect by virtue of its natural makeup. They are thus called *a priori*. For others, by contrast, the categories are constructed, made out of bits and pieces, and it is the individual who is the artisan of that construction.¹⁵

¹²See Robert Hertz, "La Prééminence de la main droite: Etude de polarité religieuse," *RP*, December, 1909. On this question of the relations between the representation of space and the form of the group, see the chapter in [Friedrich] Ratzel, *Politische Geographie* [Leipzig, R. Oldenbourg, 1897], titled "Der Raum im Geiste der Völker" [pp. 261–262].

¹³I do not mean to say that it is unknown to mythological thinking but that mythological thinking departs from this principle more often and more overtly than scientific thought. Conversely, I will show that science cannot help but violate it, even while following it more scrupulously than religion does. In this respect and many others, there are only differences of degree between science and religion; but if these should not be overstated, it is important to notice them, for they are significant.

¹⁴This hypothesis has already been advanced by the founders of *Völkerpsychologie*. It is referred to, for example, in a short article by Wilhelm Windelband titled, "Die Erkenntnislehre unter dem Völkerpsychologischen Gesichtspunkte," in *ZV* [Lichtenstein, Kraus Reprints, Ltd., 1968], VIII, pp. 166ff. Cf. a note by [Heymann] Steinthal on the same subject, *ibid.*, pp. 178ff.

¹⁵Even in the theory of [Herbert] Spencer, the categories are constructed from experience. The only difference in this respect between ordinary and evolutionary empiricism is that, according to the latter,

Both solutions give rise to grave difficulties.

Is the empiricist thesis adopted? Then the categories must be stripped of their characteristic properties. In fact, they are distinguished from all other knowledge by their universality and their necessity. They are the most general concepts that exist, because they are applied to all that is real; and just as they are not attached to any particular object, they are independent of any individual subject. They are the common ground where all minds meet. What is more, minds meet there of necessity: Reason, which is none other than the fundamental categories taken together, is vested with an authority that we cannot escape at will. When we try to resist it, to free ourselves from some of these fundamental notions, we meet sharp resistance. Hence, far from merely depending upon us, they impose themselves upon us. But the characteristics of empirical data are diametrically opposite. A sensation or an image is always linked to a definite object or collection of definite objects, and it expresses the momentary state of a particular consciousness. It is fundamentally individual and subjective. Moreover, we can do as we wish with representations that are of this origin. Of course, when sensations are present to us, they impose themselves on us *in fact*. By right, however, we remain free to conceive them otherwise than they are and to picture them as occurring in an order different from the one in which they occurred. In regard to them, nothing is binding on us unless considerations of a different sort intervene. Here, then, are two sorts of knowledge that are like opposite poles of the intellect. Under these conditions, to reduce reason to experience is to make reason disappear—because it is to reduce the universality and necessity that characterize reason to mere appearances, illusions that might be practically convenient but that correspond to nothing in things. Consequently, it is to deny all objective reality to that logical life which the function of the categories is to regulate and organize. Classical empiricism leads to irrationalism; perhaps it should be called by that name.

Notwithstanding the sense we ordinarily attach to the labels, it is the apriorists who are more attentive to the facts. Since they do not take it as self-evident truth that the categories are made of the same elements as our sense representations, they are not committed to impoverishing the categories systematically, emptying them of all real content and reducing them to mere verbal artifices. Quite the contrary, apriorists leave the categories with all their distinctive characteristics. The apriorists are rationalists; they believe

the results of individual experience are consolidated by heredity. But that consolidation adds nothing essential; no element enters into their composition that does not originate in the experience of the individual. Also, according to that theory, the necessity with which the categories impose themselves upon us in the present is itself the product of an illusion, a superstitious prejudice that is deeply rooted in the organism but without foundation in the nature of things.

that the world has a logical aspect that reason eminently expresses. To do this, however, they have to ascribe to the intellect a certain power to transcend experience and add to what is immediately given. But for this singular power, they offer neither explanation nor warrant. Merely to say it is inherent in the nature of human intellect is not to explain that power. It would still be necessary to see where we acquire this astounding prerogative and how we are able to see relationships in things that mere spectating cannot reveal to us. To confine oneself to saying that experience itself is possible only on that condition is to shift the problem, perhaps, but not to solve it. The point is to know how it happens that experience is not enough, but presupposes conditions that are external and prior to experience, and how it happens that these conditions are met at the time and in the manner needed. To answer these questions, it has sometimes been imagined that, beyond the reason of individuals, there is a superior and perfect reason from which that of individuals emanated and, by a sort of mystic participation, presumably acquired its marvelous faculty: That superior and perfect reason is divine reason. But, at best, this hypothesis has the grave disadvantage of being shielded from all experimental control, so it does not meet the requirements of a scientific hypothesis. More than that, the categories of human thought are never fixed in a definite form; they are ceaselessly made, unmade, and remade; they vary according to time and place. By contrast, divine reason is immutable. How could this invariance account for such constant variability?

Such are the two conceptions that have competed for centuries. And if the debate has gone on and on, it is because the arguments back and forth are in fact more or less equivalent. If reason is but a form of individual experience, then reason is no more. On the other hand, if the capacities with which it is credited are recognized but left unaccounted for, then reason apparently is placed outside nature and science. Faced with these opposite objections, the intellect remains uncertain. But if the social origin of the categories is accepted, a new stance becomes possible, one that should enable us, I believe, to avoid these opposite difficulties.

The fundamental thesis of apriorism is that knowledge is formed from two sorts of elements that are irreducible one to the other—two distinct, superimposed layers, so to speak.¹⁶ My hypothesis keeps this principle intact. The knowledge that people speak of as empirical—all that theorists of empiricism have ever used to construct reason—is the knowledge that the direct

¹⁶It is perhaps surprising that I should not define apriorism by the hypothesis of innateness. But that idea actually has only a secondary role in the doctrine. It is a simplistic way of portraying the irreducibility of rational cognition to empirical data. To call it innate is no more than a positive way of saying that it is not a product of experience as usually conceived.

action of objects calls forth in our minds. Thus they are individual states that are wholly¹⁷ explained by the psychic nature of the individual. But if the categories are essentially collective representations, as I think they are, they translate states of the collectivity, first and foremost. They depend upon the way in which the collectivity is organized, upon its morphology, its religious, moral, and economic institutions, and so on. Between these two kinds of representations, then, is all the distance that separates the individual from the social; one can no more derive the second from the first than one can deduce the society from the individual, the whole from the part, or the complex from the simple.¹⁸ Society is a reality *sui generis*; it has its own characteristics that are either not found in the rest of the universe or are not found there in the same form. The representations that express society therefore have an altogether different content from the purely individual representations, and one can be certain in advance that the former add something to the latter.

The manner in which both kinds of representations are formed brings about their differentiation. Collective representations are the product of an immense cooperation that extends not only through space but also through time; to make them, a multitude of different minds have associated, intermixed, and combined their ideas and feelings; long generations have accumulated their experience and knowledge. A very special intellectuality that is infinitely richer and more complex than that of the individual is distilled in them. That being the case, we understand how reason has gained the power to go beyond the range of empirical cognition. It owes this power not to some mysterious virtue but simply to the fact that, as the well-known formula has it, man is double. In him are two beings: an individual being that has its basis in the body and whose sphere of action is strictly limited by this fact, and a social being that represents within us the highest reality in the intellectual and moral* realm that is knowable through observation: I mean so-

*On Durkheim's characteristic uses of the term "moral," see above, p. lv–lvi.

¹⁷At least to the extent that there are individual, and thus fully empirical, representations. But in fact there probably is no case in which those two sorts of elements are not found closely bound up together.

¹⁸Furthermore, this irreducibility should not be understood in an absolute sense. I do not mean that there is nothing in the empirical representations that announces the rational ones, or that there is nothing in the individual that can be considered the harbinger of social life. If experience was completely foreign to all that is rational, reason would not be applicable to it. Likewise, if the psychic nature of the individual was absolutely resistant to social life, society would be impossible. Therefore a full analysis of the categories would look for the seeds of rationality in individual consciousness. I shall have occasion to return to this point in my Conclusion. All I wish to establish here is that there is a distance between the indistinct seeds of reason and reason properly so-called that is comparable to the distance between the properties of mineral elements, from which the living being is made, and the characteristic properties of life, once constituted.

ciety [*J'entends la société*]. In the realm of practice, the consequence of this duality in our nature is the irreducibility of the moral ideal to the utilitarian motive; in the realm of thought, it is the irreducibility of reason to individual experience. As part of society, the individual naturally transcends himself, both when he thinks and when he acts.

This same social characteristic enables us to understand where the necessity of the categories comes from. An idea is said to be necessary* when, due to some sort of internal property, it enjoys credence without the support of any proof. It thus contains in itself something that compels the intellect and wins over intellectual adherence without prior examination. Apriorism postulates that remarkable capacity without accounting for it. To say that the categories are necessary because they are indispensable to thought is simply to repeat that they are necessary. But if they have the origin that I am attributing to them, nothing about their ascendancy should surprise us any longer. They do indeed express the most general relationships that exist between things; having broader scope than all our ideas, they govern all the particulars of our intellectual life. If, at every moment, men did not agree on these fundamental ideas, if they did not have a homogeneous conception of time, space, cause, number, and so on. All consensus among minds, and thus all common life, would become impossible.

Hence society cannot leave the categories up to the free choice of individuals without abandoning itself. To live, it requires not only a minimum moral consensus but also a minimum logical consensus that it cannot do without either. Thus, in order to prevent dissidence, society weighs on its members with all its authority. Does a mind seek to free itself from these norms of all thought? Society no longer considers this a human mind in the full sense, and treats it accordingly. This is why it is that when we try, even deep down inside, to get away from these fundamental notions, we feel that we are not fully free; something resists us, from inside and outside ourselves. Outside us, it is opinion that judges us; more than that, because society is represented inside us as well, it resists these revolutionary impulses from within. We feel that we cannot abandon ourselves to them without our thought's ceasing to be truly human. Such appears to be the origin of the very special authority that is inherent in reason and that makes us trustingly accept its promptings. This is none other than the authority of society¹⁹ passing into certain ways of thinking that are the indispensable conditions of all

*Note here that the sense of the word "necessary" is distinct from the everyday concept of need. See also the next paragraph.

¹⁹It has often been noticed that social disturbances multiply mental disturbances. This is further evidence that logical discipline is an aspect of social discipline. The former relaxes when the latter weakens.

common action. Thus the necessity with which the categories press themselves upon us is not merely the effect of habits whose yoke we could slip with little effort; nor is that necessity a habit or a physical or metaphysical need, since the categories change with place and time; it is a special sort of moral necessity that is to intellectual life what obligation is to the will.²⁰

But if the categories at first do no more than translate social states, does it not follow that they can be applied to the rest of nature only as metaphors? If their purpose is merely to express social things, it would seem that they could be extended to other realms only by convention. Thus, insofar as they serve us in conceiving the physical or biological world, they can only have the value of artificial symbols—useful perhaps, but with no connection to reality. We would thus return to nominalism and empiricism by another route.

To interpret a sociological theory of knowledge in that way is to forget that even if society is a specific reality, it is not an empire within an empire: It is part of nature and nature's highest expression. The social realm is a natural realm that differs from others only in its greater complexity. It is impossible that nature, in that which is most fundamental in itself, should be radically different between one part and another of itself. It is impossible that the fundamental relations that exist between things—precisely those relations that the categories serve to express—should be fundamentally dissimilar in one realm and another. If, for reasons that we shall have to discover,²¹ they stand out more clearly in the social world, it is impossible that they should not be found elsewhere, though in more shrouded forms. Society makes them more manifest but has no monopoly on them. This is why notions worked out on the model of social things can help us think about other sorts of things. At the very least, if, when they deviate from their initial meaning, those notions play in a sense the role of symbols, it is the role of well-founded symbols. If artifice enters in, through the very fact that these are constructed concepts, it is an artifice that closely follows nature and strives to come ever closer to nature.²² The fact

²⁰There is an analogy between this logical necessity and moral obligation but not identity—at least not at present. Today, society treats criminals differently from people who are mentally handicapped. This is evidence that, despite significant similarities, the authority attached to logical norms and that inherent in moral norms are not of the same nature. They are two different species of one genus. It would be interesting to research what that difference (probably not primitive) consists of and where it comes from, since for a long time public consciousness barely distinguished the delinquent from the mentally ill. From this example, we can see the numerous problems raised by the analysis of these notions, which are generally thought elementary and simple but actually are extremely complex.

²¹This question is treated in the Conclusion of this book.

²²Hence the rationalism that is immanent in a sociological theory of knowledge stands between empiricism and classical apriorism. For the first, the categories are purely artificial constructs; for the second, on the other hand, they are naturally given; for us, they are works of art, in a sense, but an art that imitates nature ever more perfectly.

that the ideas of time, space, genus, cause, and personality are constructed from social elements should not lead us to conclude that they are stripped of all objective value. Quite the contrary, their social origin leads one indeed to suppose that they are not without foundation in the nature of things.²³

In this fresh formulation, the theory of knowledge seems destined to join the opposite advantages of the two rival theories, without their disadvantages. It preserves all the essential principles of apriorism but at the same time takes inspiration from the positive turn of mind that empiricism sought to satisfy. (It leaves reason with its specific power, but accounts for that power, and does so without leaving the observable world. It affirms as real the duality of our intellectual life, but explains that duality, and does so with natural causes. The categories cease to be regarded as primary and unanalyzable facts; and yet they remain of such complexity that analyses as simplistic as those with which empiricism contented itself cannot possibly be right. No longer do they appear as very simple notions that anyone can sift from his personal observations, and that popular imagination unfortunately complicated; quite the contrary, they appear as ingenious instruments of thought, which human groups have painstakingly forged over centuries, and in which they have amassed the best of their intellectual capital.²⁴ A whole aspect of human history is, in a way, summed up in them.) This amounts to saying that to succeed in understanding and evaluating them, it is necessary to turn to new procedures. To know what the conceptions that we ourselves have not made are made of, it cannot be enough to consult our own consciousness. We must look outside ourselves, observe history, and institute a whole science, a complex one at that, which can advance only slowly and by collective labor.) The present work is an attempt to make certain fragmentary contributions to that science. Without making these questions the direct subject of my study, I will take advantage of all the opportunities that present themselves to capture at birth at least some of those ideas that, while religious in origin, were bound nevertheless to remain at the basis of human mentality.

²³For example, the category of time has its basis in the rhythm of social life; but if there is a rhythm of collective life, one can be certain that there is another in the life of the individual and, more generally, that of the universe. The first is only more marked and apparent than the others. Likewise, we will see that the notion of kind was formed from that of the human group. But if men form natural groups, one can suppose that there exist among things groups that are at once similar to them and different. These natural groups of things are genera and species.

²⁴This is why it is legitimate to compare the categories with tools: Tools, for their part, are accumulated material capital. Moreover, there is close kinship between the three ideas of tool, category, and institution.

BOOK ONE

PRELIMINARY

QUESTIONS