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**Should Sociology Care About Theories of Human Nature? :  
Some Durkheimian Considerations on the 'Social' Individual**

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# **Should Sociology Care About Theories of Human Nature?**

## **Some Durkheimian Considerations on the 'Social' Individual**

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### **Abstract**

Theories of human nature underlie major positions not only in social science but also in the public sphere and its relationship to inequality. When it comes to Durkheim, his theory of human nature is often confused with his critiques of intellectual individualism and his historical argument concerning moral individualism. This paper proposes to analytically separate Durkheim's apparently intertwined positions to show Durkheim's concept of the 'social individual' as found within his theory of human nature. This is the difference between society as the object of analysis where the individual is slowly expressed historically in regard to the transition from mechanical to organic solidarity and the conception of the relation between a human being and the manner in which social solidarity is generally realized in a human being, considered philosophically. It is with this evidence, this paper will show Durkheim's concept of the 'social' individual helps illuminate how social life itself is possible.

### **Introduction**

Durkheim deals with many concerns through his work: establishing sociology as a science, forming a parallel science of morality, examining the roots of solidarity in the division of labor in varying societies, and investigating the elementary forms of collective representations. In the explication of these ideas, Durkheim arrives at a concept of the 'social individual' as a 'social being'. However, due to his own competing agendas, his positivist stance, and strong critiques against the two different strains of methodological individualism, that of the possessiveness of Hobbes & Rousseau and that of utilitarians, his own positions become conflated into moral individualism with the cult of the individual at its core. So, as Durkheim is found doing many things simultaneously, his ontological and methodological positions, including his theory of human nature appear intertwined with his epistemological explication of such positions. Thus, to

illustrate Durkheim's concept of the 'social' individual is to analytically separate his critiques of methodological individualism from his demonstration of moral individualism as a historical social fact while showing the development of his theory of human nature throughout his corpus that is, in itself, analytically distinct from moral individualism.

### **Methodological Individualism and Durkheim's Critiques**

When the term 'individual' is used in a sociological sense, there is an implicit notion of how that term is being used in relation to a corresponding notion of 'society'. Methodological individualism, generally speaking, tries to explain this relation "in terms of individuals and their interaction." (Udehn, 2001: 1) In relation to Durkheim, there are two positions that Durkheim addresses in *The Division of Labor in Society* and in *The Rules of Sociological Method*: possessive individualism and utilitarian individualism. It is important to note that these positions are theories of human nature, found primarily in philosophy and economics, that Durkheim and others have taken up as methodological positions in social science. In Durkheim's goal of separating sociology from philosophy, he feels it is required of him to address these positions despite the fact their underlying assumptions, at times, address only indirectly his intended subject matter of society, which Durkheim often conflated his various uses of the term 'society' itself.<sup>1</sup> (Cf. Lukes, 1985: 19-21)

#### ***Possessive Individualism***

Before presenting Durkheim's critique, it would be of use to briefly summarize the two positions the critique is aimed at; that of Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes traced the origins of society to the 'original state of nature.' This state of nature was

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<sup>1</sup> Somewhere, Durkheim also used the term intellectual individualism to refer to this type of individualism, conflating possessive individualism and utilitarian individualism.

posited to have existed when individuals lived in a condition in which law and government are absent where “the life of man is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.” (Hobbes, 1968 [1651]: 186) With this condition as the starting point of analysis, where all that ostensibly exists are independent human beings, Hobbes, argues that without law or government to restrain them, individuals would be free to use violence to satisfy their immediate material needs and desires and would continually subdue others in order to maintain dominance over them. In taking this stance on human nature, Hobbes deduces that an uninterrupted struggle for dominance leads to a “war of all against all” in which everyone would be in constant fear of death since individuals would be free to use lethal force to satisfy their needs and obtain their ends without consequences. Hence, ‘society’ comes into existence only when individuals renounce violent means to pursue their own ends and thus “contract” out of the state of nature into society in exchange for security sustained by placing common rules at the disposal of a ruler who is capable of restraining them all. (Ibid.; Morrison, 2006)

Whereas Hobbes’ analysis focused upon the lack of restraint in human nature, in *The Social Contract and Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau concentrated on the aspect of human nature in which jealousy and envy prevail. As such, as soon as society begins to develop in the creation of common social rules, it tends to create private property favoring self-interest. Under this view of human nature, Rousseau questioned how a ‘common interest’ arises to replace individual self-interest. His analysis showed that a common interest arises only when human beings subordinate their individual will to the ‘general will’, thus creating the conditions of society. For Rousseau, this general will is formed by individuals pooling their own distinct separate wills together. When this occurs, a transformation takes place in the nature of individual will to the extent that the individuals involved become subject to the totality formed by their

common union and thus the general will “receives its unity” as the collective will of society as the source of moral and collective authority. (Rousseau, 1967: 18-19; Morrison, 2006)

With both positions of possessive individualism stated, it is now possible to turn to Durkheim’s position. Durkheim treats Hobbes and Rousseau specifically in two places within his essay on *Rousseau’s Social Contract*, which was drafted after a course given at the University of Bordeaux and within *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1984:121-124, 142-144).

Durkheim sees that Hobbes constitutes the social bond through the voluntary submission “to an absolute sovereign in order to avoid the horrors of the state of war [... but what is problematic is that it] does not explain all details of social organization.” (Durkheim, 1960: 136) Although Hobbes highlights the restraining capacity of society, the emphasis placed on the individual as the source of the social bond and therefore the individual as the source of social restraint when they contract out of nature is problematic. This leads to the view that individuals are naturally resistant to society and comply with it only when they are compelled by the force of an external ruler and the restraint inherent in law; which is to say that there is no indigenous regulation, only imposed regulation. Under Hobbes, if society is only an association serving ends dictated by individuals, then individuals must create society and the individual has to be persuaded to comply with social rules by an appeal to their interest in self-preservation. But, this is insufficient; as Durkheim writes in *Rules*, “the instinct of self-preservation did not come by itself and without cause to fertilize this first germ of specialization.” (1982: 122) Rather, for Durkheim, restraint is nothing more than a byproduct of individual will which is added incrementally to social reality and was imposed externally by society independent of the individual, thus arguing that restraint springs from collective life, a form of indigenous regulation.

In regard to Rousseau, Durkheim writes,

“[There is] an increasing effort to root the social being in nature. But therein lies the weakness of the system. While, as we have shown, social life for Rousseau is not contrary to the natural order, it has so little in common with nature that one wonders how it is possible. Rousseau says somewhere that respect for the legislator's authority presupposes a certain social spirit. But his remark applies still more to the establishment of a society. If, however, a society is formed of isolated, atomized individuals, one is at a loss to see where it comes from. Perhaps if Rousseau had granted a Hobbesian state of war we might understand why, with a view to ending it, men should organize into a body and go so far as to recast their original nature. But he cannot advance this explanation because in his view the state of war is a result of life in common. And just as he fails to explain how social life, even in its imperfect historical forms, could come into being, he has great difficulty in showing how it can possibly cast off its imperfections and establish itself on a logical basis.”(Durkheim, 1960: 137)

From this, it is clear that Durkheim holds a great deal of respect for Rousseau as his view of society parallels Rousseau's in many aspects but he rejected, as he did with Hobbes, Rousseau's tendency to ultimately derive society from the individual – a methodological position. For Durkheim, Rousseau used a method which started from individual disposition in order to arrive at social subject matter. By relying on philosophical and idealist concepts of individualist natures, Rousseau's concept of the individual was able to appear morally and organically complete without society. But for Durkheim, this account of the emergence of society is unsatisfactory and insufficient; it ignores that the collective structure of society, including morality, is separate from the individual and therefore the individual could not be complete

without society. This methodological possessive individualism sees its downfall directly in *Rules*, where Durkheim writes,

“Neither Hobbes nor Rousseau appear to have noticed the complete contradiction that exists in admitting that the individual is himself the creator of a machine whose essential role is to exercise domination and constraint over him. Alternatively, it may have seemed to them that, in order to get rid of this contradiction, it was sufficient to conceal it from the eyes of its victims by the skilful device of the social contract.” (1982: 142)

For Durkheim, Hobbes and Rousseau see society’s existence and formation as a mere “conventional arrangement, with no link at all in reality.” (1982: 143) By logical extension, this is to suggest that by conventional arrangement, society can suddenly be undone and that is an untenable position, not only for Durkheim but for reason itself.

### ***Utilitarian Individualism***

The utilitarian strain of methodological individualism differs from possessive individualism in that possessive individualism recognized the significance of society but saw the individual as its point of origin. Primarily advocated by John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham, it had become an influential doctrine by the second half of the nineteenth century, placing the individual at the center of social life. Unlike the notion of human nature presented by Hobbes and Rousseau, the utilitarian notion of human nature asserted that individuals act on their own free will and are completely autonomous and self-determined. What follows from this is a theory of human motivation where individuals share common motives of utility which incite them to realize their self-interest by the pursuit of private economic gain. Under this premise, individual social action is based on economic interchanges of utility within society, but beyond this the individual has no obligation to society otherwise; meaning that the larger context of social rules outside the

individual were historically and socially irrelevant because society and its collective existence is reduced to the spontaneous actions, decisions and attitudes of individuals. (Macpherson, 1962)

In this regard, Durkheim's respect for Rousseau did not extend to this utilitarian strain; while clarifying his position on Rousseau and Kant in his essay "Individualism and the Intellectuals", he wrote that "it would be quite pointless to move heaven and earth [...] to combat an enemy that is in the process of quietly dying a natural death." Although Durkheim developed a more intricate critique within *The Division of Labor* (1984: 194-195; 220-221) and within *Rules* (1982: 67), how he sets the utilitarian strain aside in this essay is far more succinct:

"There is a preliminary ambiguity which must be cleared up first of all. In order to facilitate the condemnation of individualism, it has been confused with the narrow utilitarianism and utilitarian egoism of Spencer and the economists. This is to take the easy way out. It is not hard, in effect, to denounce as an ideal without grandeur that narrow commercialism which reduces society to nothing more than a vast apparatus of production and exchange, and it is only too clear that all social life would be impossible if there did not exist interests superior to the interests of individuals." (Durkheim, 1973; Lukes, 1969: 20)

In this sense then, utilitarian individualism is the tendency to reduce society to the economic acts of individuals. In regard to the source of restraint that concerned Hobbes and Rousseau, the utilitarian position considers it only insofar as restraint is of utility; For Durkheim, this position overlooks the existence of the larger framework of social rules and the immediate social obligations that acted as restraints on individuals. For the utilitarian position to ignore this, it is also to ignore how society is always prior to the individual historically and thus cannot locate the power to impose an external limit on individuals by individuals since, according to Durkheim,

individuals are not analytically separable from society in the sociological, and therefore economic, sense since economies operate as part of a total social and collective whole. Given this, insofar as society precedes the individual historically and exists as an objective structure, the scientific study of society is possible without taking into account the individuals' separate attitudes and dispositions. (Lukes, 1973: 3-16; Morrison, 2006)

### **Durkheim's Individualism: Moral Individualism as a Historical Social Fact**

With the two positions on methodological individualism, that of possessive individualism and utilitarian individualism, clearly stated along with Durkheim's critiques, it is now evident that the concept of individualism Durkheim develops throughout his work is analytically distinct from the theories of human nature/methodological individualism present in the history of philosophy and economic theory. In order to illustrate how that concept of individualism is analytically distinct from Durkheim's theory of human nature and therefore his concept of the 'social' individual, it is necessary to briefly demonstrate how his argument concerning individualism is an argument in regard to historical social facts and not his concept of human nature. Thus, in *The Division of Labor* (1984) as Durkheim is trying to give the division of labor a sociological explanation rather than a purely economic explanation, he has little choice but to talk about the ebbs and flows of history. In doing so, he demonstrates that moral individualism is a historical social fact by examining the individual historically in two respects: (1) in regard to the transition from mechanical to organic solidarity where the autonomy of the individual slowly increased; and in regard to the concept of the 'individual' from the point of view of social development in different societies.

### *The Autonomy of the Individual in the Transition from Mechanical to Organic Solidarity*

For Durkheim, this historical transition from mechanical to organic solidarity increased the autonomy of the individual. This means that in societies integrated by mechanical solidarity, the individual was not a conspicuous social unit. Rather, individuality must have been at its lowest point of development because the 'pressure' exerted upon the individual by the common religious practices was so great that it tended to absorb all individual differences and purposes into collective purposes. If mechanical solidarity is the stage at which the individual is 'subordinated' to the collective forces of society, then organic solidarity must mark the beginning of individual separateness and autonomy. This can take place only when the pressure exerted by the common beliefs and practices are diminished. Hence, according to Durkheim's reasoning, 'individuals' must have first made their appearance in society in the form of the chief or leader of the tribe. This is sensible because to become distinct from the social mass and to become the first autonomous individuals is to first to differentiate oneself from the collectivity. At this level of solidarity, a leader is required to be separate from the undifferentiated tribal mass in order for their authority to carry any weight. This separation from the collectivity puts them beyond others and positions the leader to have a certain distinctness of experience relative to the collectivity. This and their leadership responsibilities confers individuality upon them, making them distinct from others. (1984: 143) Thus, it is the power of chiefs that makes them autonomous and capable of activity beyond the collective norm; and it is this that opens up the possibility of personal initiative, and constitutes the first moment when the individual steps forth from the group as someone distinct from its collectivity. As mechanical solidarity transitions to organic solidarity, autonomy is no longer limited to being identified with leaders. As the change in social cohesion reduces the intensity of the social attachments existing between society and

the individual, as a direct product of industrial society, this increased autonomy led to the rise of 'individualism'. (Durkheim, 1984: 121; Cf. Lukes, 1973: 52-58)

### ***The 'Individual' and Social Development in Different Societies***

Durkheim's analysis suggests that in segmental societies, where the individual tended to be absorbed in collective life, the links to society tended to be direct and the exerted social control was repressive. Under these conditions, when the force of social links began to weaken the bond between the individual and society, individuals became the recipients of rights and freedoms in which their ties to society were expressed indirectly. Thus, as industrial societies developed, adjustments in social solidarity changed the overall nature of the social mass, and this encouraged the development of individual autonomy in a number of ways: (1) Individuals were generally freed from the claims which society placed upon them in the form of social allegiances. As a result, beliefs and customs, which previously were not directly part of social life, began to develop. (2) As the social density of society grew, individual ideas began to dominate over collective ones. This stretched social life beyond the limits set by previous beliefs and moral rules. (1984: 115-117; 122) (3) As the division of labor accelerated, individuals were placed within a framework of causes which connected them to their own needs and wants rather than to the needs of society or the needs of others. This encouraged individual appetites and created the need for exploration and initiative. (1984: 117-118) (4) As the population increased, social activity, grew more varied and created a more differentiated social life. (1984: 119-121) (5) Changes occurring in the dependence of the individual on society as a whole brought about new activity, giving rise to 'modes of thinking and feeling' which became developed to an extent never before seen in human society. (1984: 121) (6) As societies developed in their division of labor, they became more condensed and this caused one form of 'psychological life' to disappear

and be replaced by another. Initially, individual differences started out by being subordinated to collective forces, but as societies developed a psychological life appeared, and this in turn transformed the psychological life of society. (1984: 130) For Durkheim, given this, society itself became freer and more extensive. Then as the social density of the population is increased, personal bonds become rare and weak and, in this case, individuals lose sight of one another other and thus lose interest. (1984: 201) As this mutual indifference grows it results in a loss of collective surveillance and the sphere of free autonomous action of each individual is extended in scope and, in fact, becomes a right.' (Cf. 1984: 85-87) As a result, the collective conscience begins to lose its hold over the individual and becomes more vague, ambiguous and indeterminate. When this happens, collective social rules lose their clarity and due to the increasing density of the population, the center of social life shifts; individuals no longer live at the center of social life as it becomes spread over a much larger territory. (1984: 135-137) Under these conditions, public opinion has less of an effect on the individual and exerts less constraint. Hence, as the collective grip of society over the individual loosens, there is more individual divergence. Under these conditions, the only collective representation left for the establishment of morality is the social fact that we are individual human beings and this equates to the rise of the cult of the individual:

“As all the other beliefs and practices assume less and less religious a character, the individual becomes the object of a sort of religion. We carry on the worship of the dignity of the human person.” (Durkheim, 1984: 122)

This is what has been referred to as Durkheim's moral individualism<sup>2</sup> and is now shown to be a historical social fact. (Cf. Giddens, 1971; Marske, 1987; Cladis, 1992) This historical argument coincides with Durkheim's demonstration that the division of labor becomes the link supporting the cult of the individual in societies increasingly organized by organic solidarity. (Durkheim, 1984: 123) So, now that Durkheim's critiques, along with his statement on the development of the cult of the individual as moral individualism are illustrated, the argument can now proceed to illustrate how Durkheim's concept of the 'social' individual, which is hinted throughout his work, is different from the already presented positions.

### **Durkheim's Theory of Human Nature and the Social Individual**

At times, throughout his work, Durkheim appears to be struggling with the relationship between psychology, philosophy and sociology. From Durkheim's work on education, his position on psychology could be summarized as the 'sociology of personality' while his more well known work in sociology, including his thematic sociology of morals, studied sociology as the relationship between the individual and society. As already shown, Durkheim's main focus is demonstrating the basis of morality in collective representations, which, based on the division of labor, has now historically arrived at moral individualism in lieu of a collective consciousness integrated by mechanical solidarity. However, this is not the concept of the 'social' individual as found within his theory of human nature. This is the difference between society as the object of analysis where the individual is slowly expressed historically in regard to the transition from mechanical to organic solidarity and the conception of the relation between a human being and

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<sup>2</sup> Also directly on this point, in *The Determination of Moral Facts*, Durkheim writes "Thus very far from there being the antagonism between the individual and society which is often claimed, moral individualism, the cult of the individual, is in fact the product of society itself. It is society that instituted it and made of man the god whose servant it is." (Durkheim, 1953: 29)

the manner in which social solidarity is generally realized in a human being, considered philosophically. What is now required is a demonstration of how this theory is hinted at throughout Durkheim's corpus until its full statement in "The Dualism of Human Nature and Its Social Conditions" and the tension found within *Rules* considering the "individual as an infinity" at the nexus of coercive social facts.

This argument demands evidence and the time of demonstration is finally here to show what portions of *The Division of Labor in Society*, *Rules of Sociological Method*, *Suicide*, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, *Sociology and Philosophy* and *Education and Sociology* hint at Durkheim's theory of human nature upon which his concept of the 'social' individual is based:

1. "With man it is completely different, because the societies he creates are much larger; even the smallest we know of are more extensive than most animal societies. Being more complex, they are also more changeable, and the conjuncture of these two causes results in social life among human beings not becoming fixed in a biological form. Even where it is most simple, it retains its specificity. There are always beliefs and practices that are common to men but that are not innate in them. But this characteristic becomes accentuated as social elements and social density increase. The greater the number of people associated together, the more they react upon one another; the more also the product of these reactions flows out beyond the organism. Man is thus subjected to causes *sui generis*, whose relative share in the constitution of human nature becomes ever more important." (Durkheim, 1984: 283)
2. "Yet our thought would be singularly misinterpreted if the conclusion was drawn from the previous remarks that sociology, in our view, should not even take into account man

and his faculties. On the contrary, it is clear that the general characteristics of human nature play their part in the work of elaboration from which social life results. But it is not these which produce it or give it its special form, they only make it possible.

Collective representations, emotions and tendencies have not as their causes certain states of consciousness in individuals, but the conditions under which the body social as a whole exists. Doubtless these can be realized only if individual natures are not opposed to them. But these are simply the indeterminate matter which the social factor fashions and transforms. Their contribution is made up exclusively of very general states, vague and thus malleable predispositions which of themselves could not assume the definite and complex forms which characterize social phenomena, if other agents did not intervene. (Durkheim, 1982: 130-131)

3. “To be sure in so far as we are solidary with the group and share its life, we are exposed to their influence; but so far as we have a distinct personality of our own we rebel against and try to escape them. Since everyone leads this sort of double existence simultaneously, each of us has a double impulse. We are drawn in a social direction and tend to follow the inclinations of our own natures. So the rest of society weighs upon us as a restraint to our centrifugal tendencies, and we for our part share in this weight upon others for the purpose of neutralizing theirs. We ourselves undergo the pressure we help to exert upon others.” (Durkheim, 1951: 318-319)
4. “Human nature is the result of a sort of recasting of the animal nature, and in the course of the various complex operations which have brought about this recasting, there have been losses as well as gains. How many instincts have we not lost? The reason for this is that men are not only in relations with the physical environment, but also with a social

environment infinitely more extended, more stable and more active than the one whose influence animals undergo. To live, they must adapt themselves to this. Now in order to maintain itself, society frequently finds it necessary that we should see things from a certain angle and feel them in a certain way; consequently it modifies the ideas which we would ordinarily make of them for ourselves and the sentiments to which we would be inclined if we listened only to our animal nature; it alters them, even going so far as to put the contrary sentiments in their place. Does it not even go so far as to make us regard our own individual lives as something of little value, while for the animal this is the greatest of things? Then it is a vain enterprise to seek to infer the mental constitution of the primitive man from that of the higher animals.” (Durkheim, 1915: 66)

5. “When we said elsewhere that social facts are in a sense independent of individuals and exterior to individual minds, we only affirmed of the social world what we have just established for the psychic world. Society has for its substratum the mass of associated individuals. The system which they form by uniting together, and which varies according to their geographical disposition and the nature and number of their channels of communication, is the base from which social life is raised. The representations which form the network of social life arise from the relations between the individuals thus combined or the secondary groups that are between the individuals and the total society. If there is nothing extraordinary in the fact that individual representations, produced by the action and reaction between neural elements, are not inherent in these elements, there is nothing surprising in the fact that collective representations, produced by the action and reaction between individual minds that form the society, do not derive directly from the latter and consequently surpass them. The conception of the relationship which unites the

social substratum and the social life is at every point analogous to that which undeniably exists between the physiological substratum and the psychic life of individuals, if, that is, one is not going to deny the existence of psychology in the proper sense of the word.”

(Durkheim, 1953: 10)

6. “It follows from the definition that precedes, that education consists of a methodical socialization of the young generation. In each of us, it may be said, there exist two beings which, while inseparable except by abstraction, remain distinct. One is made up of all the mental states that apply only to ourselves and to the events of our personal lives: this is what might be called the individual being. The other is a system of ideas, sentiments and practices which express in us, not our personality, but the group or different groups of which we are party these are religious beliefs, moral beliefs and practices, national or professional traditions, collective opinions of every kind. Their totality forms the social being. To constitute this being in each of us is the end of education.” (Durkheim, 1956: 72-73)

These six selections, although clearly written for different purposes and general topics, all deal with the tension between the individual and society in regard to the relationship between psychology, philosophy and sociology. However, despite their various textual usages are related to Durkheim’s development of his sociology of morals, the referenced concept of the individual or human nature is not strictly the one identified as subject to the conditions of any specific society qualified by mechanical solidarity nor qualified by the modernity of organic solidarity but a more general concept of the ‘social’ individual. This concept of the ‘social’ individual has the same *form* wherever and whenever it is found; it is the *content* that qualifies this form that is subject to change and variation. This is most clearly stated within “The Dualism of Human

Nature and Its Social Conditions” (1973 [1914]: 149-166) where this tension in Durkheim’s struggle between psychology, philosophy and sociology reaches its climax and release as Durkheim starts off by admitting the following:

“Although Sociology is defined as the science of societies, it cannot, in reality, deal with the human groups that are the immediate object of its investigation without eventually touching on the individual who is the basic element of which these groups are composed. For society can exist only if it penetrates the consciousness of individuals and fashions it in "its image and resemblance." We can say, therefore, with assurance and without being excessively dogmatic, that a great number of our mental states, including some of the most important ones, are of social origin.” (1973 [1914]: 149)

While it might be obvious that this is to identify the ‘social’ relation between the individual and society, for Durkheim, this admission is an attempt to finally settle the problems posed by his social realism inherent in his attempt to distinguish social facts from physical, biological, and individual psychological facts about a decade earlier in *The Rules of Sociological Method*. In specifying sociology’s fundamental empirical object of social facts, Durkheim had defined social facts as ‘things’ that are “every way of acting, fixed or not, capable of exercising on the individual an external constraint; or again, every way of acting which is general throughout a given society, while at the same time existing in its own right independent of its individual manifestations.” (Durkheim, 1982: 59, 60) The key implication of this definition is that social facts only exist as such among other social facts, implying that members are interdependent and social facts are generally effective only within an order of a plurality of such facts. At the time, under this definition, it was not altogether clear that social individuals had any relevance for Durkheim. By starting his essay with the admission that we must deal with “the individual who

is the basic element of which these groups are composed”, Durkheim is framing his argument as an attempt to settle this issue.

Durkheim goes on to say that “To look for the causes and conditions upon which civilization depends is, therefore, to seek out also the causes and conditions of what is most specifically human in man. And so sociology, which draws on psychology and could not do without it, brings to it, in a just return, a contribution that equals and surpasses in importance the services that it receives from it. It is only by historical analysis that we can discover what makes up man, since it is only in the course of history that he is formed.” (1973 [1914]: 149-150) This appears to suggest an explanation as to why moral individualism seems to be confused with his theory of human nature, because it is a historical argument. But then Durkheim goes historically abstract: “In every age, man has been intensely aware of this duality. He has, in fact, everywhere conceived of himself as being formed of two radically heterogeneous beings: the body and the soul.” (Op. cit.:150) This not only situates his argument as a presentation of the underlying argument presented in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* but also in a much older debate concerning human nature, which appears to only further obfuscate his concept of the ‘social’ individual for the moment. But, as this discussion of the dualism of body and soul proceeds, Durkheim re-frames this distinction by considering as a hint that finds something universal about human nature and its expression as *the* elementary form of social life given its consistent presence ‘that men in all known civilizations have experienced’. Durkheim re-asserts the body-soul distinction as a distinction of polar opposites: between (1) sensation and sensory tendencies; and (2) conceptual thought and moral activity. He corresponds sensation and sensory tendencies to the personal and conceptual thought and moral activity to the impersonal, stating that, “The old formula homo duplex is therefore verified by the facts. Far from being simple, our

inner life has something that is like a double center of gravity. On the one hand is our individuality—and, more particularly, our body in which it is based; on the other is everything in us that expresses something other than ourselves.”<sup>3</sup> (Op. cit.:152) To this end, he argues that “the traditional antithesis of the body and soul is not a vain mythological concept that is without foundation in reality” but one that “the science of man must try to account for”. (Op. cit.: 154) Durkheim then proceeds to nominate two theories of human nature for elimination: empirical monism and idealistic monism; the two doctrines that called the ‘duality of man an illusion.’ After a brief discussion, in Durkheim using his style of argument by elimination, he simply states that since these two positions do not actually deal with the problem and therefore do not attempt to solve it, “the only remaining ones that are valid and merit examination are those which limit themselves to affirming the fact that must be explained, but which do not account for it.” (Op. cit.: 157) This leaves Durkheim with two proposals to consider: (1) that of the “ontological explanation for which Plato gave the formula. Man is double because two worlds meet in him: that of non-intelligent and amoral matter.” (2) That of “the existence of two antithetical faculties within us. We possess both a faculty for thinking as individuals and a faculty for thinking in universal and impersonal terms. The first is called sensitivity, and the second reason.” This is most commonly associated with Kant. He eliminates these by outlining the underlying argument presented in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* considering the basis of collective representations:

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<sup>3</sup> Relative to Durkheim’s critiques of methodological individualism and moral individualism, before going further, based on the discussion so far, regardless of how Durkheim’s concept of the ‘social’ individual is fully realized, the notion of the analytical distinctiveness of this concept in Durkheim’s corpus, even in its partially presented form has already proven to be self-evident.

“In brief, this duality corresponds to the double existence that we lead concurrently: the one purely individual and rooted in our organisms, the other social and nothing but an extension of society. The origin of the antagonism that we have described is evident from the very nature of the elements involved in it. The conflicts of which we have given examples are between the sensations and the sensory appetites, on the one hand, and the intellectual and moral life, on the other; and it is evident that passions and egoistic tendencies derive from our individual constitutions, while our rational activity—whether theoretical or practical—is dependent on social causes. We have often had occasion to prove that the rules of morality are norms that have been elaborated by society; the obligatory character with which they are marked is nothing but the authority of society, communicating itself to everything that comes from it. In the book that is the occasion of the present study but which we can only mention here, we have tried to demonstrate that concepts, the material of all logical thought, were originally collective representations. The impersonality that characterizes them is proof that they are the product of an anonymous and impersonal action. We have even found a basis for conjecturing that the fundamental and lofty concepts that we call categories are formed on the model of social phenomena.” (Op. cit.:162)

From this it is not only clear that his concept of the ‘social’ individual is analytically distinct from methodological individualism and from the historical social fact of moral individualism, but that his theory of human nature is also analytically distinct in the history of philosophy. This is a mere bonus. Now, Durkheim’s conception might be summarized by the pseudo-equation:

The Social Individual = Biophysical Being + Social Being.

This conception does not conflict with Durkheim's conception of social facts where he states that to "attempt an inventory of all the characteristics peculiar to an individual, is an insoluble problem. Every individual is an infinity, and infinity cannot be exhausted." (Durkheim, 1982: 110) Rather, this conception, at least attempts to solve the problem by not reducing social reality to a mere epiphenomenon of individual psychology but by realizing the collective aspect in which that infinity is realized and considering that aspect the 'social' element of the individual. In this regard, in the relation between the individual and society, Durkheim concludes "The Dualism of Human Nature" by taking on the tension between infinity and its collective aspect:

"There is no doubt that if society were only the natural and spontaneous development of the individual, these two parts of ourselves would harmonize and adjust to each other without clashing and without friction: the first part, since it is only the extension and, in a way, the complement of the second, would encounter no resistance from the latter. In fact, however, society has its own nature, and, consequently, its requirements are quite different from those of our nature as individuals: the interests of the whole are not necessarily those of the part. Therefore, society cannot be formed or maintained without our being required to make perpetual and costly sacrifices." (1973 [1914]: 163)

This identifies the source of many social problems and conflicts in the denial of accepting a Durkheimian conception of human nature as those who hold the possessive or utilitarian view of individualism are unwilling to "do violence to certain of our strongest inclinations" (Ibid.) in recognizing that as "society surpasses us, it obliges us to surpass ourselves; and to surpass itself, a being must, to some degree, depart from its nature." (Ibid.) Thus, in everyday life it is important to recognize that Durkheim's concept of the 'social' individual helps illuminate how social life itself is possible. This is even more so, during times of great personal challenges, as it

reminds us that everyday problems of social life and more general social problems are not just the problem of independent human beings but problems of a collectivity; the main disagreement is who gets to be a member of that collective.

### **Beyond Durkheim Own Writings**

Now that that analytical distinctiveness of Durkheim's concept of the 'social' individual is sufficiently achieved, the intellectual question that remains is what is the significance of it? What does this mean for Durkheim's sociology and how Durkheim is read? Does this lead to re-evaluations of Durkheim many concepts and their contemporary applications relative to education, law, religion, labor and the family? However, to answer beyond the affirmative is another argument entirely; rather the more practical implication is whether collective representations as realized in the 'social' individual can be seen as a precursor, if not a classical theoretical basis for developing a cognitive sociology based upon our social nature and its relationship to the contemporary sociological literature. That is the notion that motivated this inquiry into Durkheim's concept of the 'social' individual.

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