Philosophy in France in 1912
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S. Baciocchi and F. Théron (ed.)
II.

[... 360] The leading philosophical work of the year has been that of M. Durkheim: *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse.* In fact, I have already analyzed in this journal some chapters of it which appeared in advance in the form of articles. But they were not the fundamental parts of the work. The two dominant ideas may be stated as follows.

In the first place, the essence of religion is the consciousness of the social bond, the fact that we feel the total life of society as a psychological and moral reality superior to man, possessing a real unity in which we all participate. It has been long observed that each of the ancient religions was
essentially the religion of a people, as was that of Israel; or the religion of a city, as was the cult of Minerva or that of Jupiter Capitolinus. This observation must be generalized. The Australian tribes, to the study of whose religious ideas M. Durkheim has devoted the greater part of his book, also manifest in their rites and in their beliefs an unconscious identification of the clan or tribe with that which they consider as divine and sacred. The cult of the totem is a sort of worship of the group symbol (culte du drapeau). The soul of the group, the social spirit, that which we should today call the soul of the nation, is a reality no less actual than the soul of a man. This reality, whose power and whose beneficence toward the individual have been recognized in every age, is that which furnishes to religion its indestructible basis.

This furnishes an explanation of the double fact that God has need of the faithful and the faithful have need of God. Without society, as Auguste Comte has already observed, we are nothing; we owe to tradition and to education (that is to say, to the collectivity), language, the sciences, technical methods, the arts, civilization, the affective and intellectual development without which our sentiments, even the most delicate and personal, would never have come into being. But inversely, God has need of being loved and served, for society is no more than the individuals who compose it. If men do not cherish within them the feeling of the social bond, of the community which unites them, of the strength which they draw from it, the gods pass away, religion is enfeebled, and with it the morality upon which it closely depends.

It is wrong, then, to consider religion as fundamentally a system of ideas or of explanations of the world. Above all, it consists in the feeling on the part of the individual that he lives in the midst of psychological and moral forces of the same nature as his own, but of incomparable power, purity and elevation. In embodying these forces in a cult, he acquires a new power; if he becomes detached from it, he is weakened and enfeebled. It is for this reason that the most important rite of every religion is the assembling of its followers, the voluntary provocation of those states of exaltation which the modern psychologists have analyzed in the case of the intoxication of crowds, a phenomenon which presents essentially the same characteristics as do states of religious exaltation. It is from this fact that the feeling of sacredness spreads by a sort of contagion over places, over the forces of nature, over the souls of the living and the dead, over acts and institutions of every sort.

In the second place, this conception of religion makes it possible to explain a religious fact of the highest importance: the duality of man, the opposition of the senses and the intellect, of egoism and altruism, of the spiritual and the material life, together with the unequal value and dignity which attach to these two poles of human nature.

The empiricists attempt to explain this duality by attenuating [362] it; they try to make reason spring from sensation, and ethics from interest. The idealists proceed in the same way, but in an inverse direction; both become stranded on this point. And nevertheless, this fact is so evident that it cannot be suppressed. The sociological explanation of religion may give the solution of this difficulty. We have seen, in fact, that the social forces have the power to raise the individual above himself and to make him live a different life from that which is implied in his nature as an individual. By the very fact that he is social, man then is dual, and there is a partial break in the continuity of the two beings which coexist in him, analogous to that which exists between the social and the individual, between the part and the unique type of totality which results from the synthesis of these parts. From this point of view, the duality of human nature becomes intelligible without its being necessary to reduce it to a mere appearance; for there are really two different and almost antagonistic sources of life in which we simultaneously participate. The noble being which is in us has not fallen into the sensible world as a sort of adventitious element, coming from no one knows where; it springs from this world and is its product, but one which transcends the elements which have served to produce it.
In this way, the science of religion will be able to develop without doing any injury to that element in all religions which is worthy of reverence. It will be a true science, since it will study social phenomena as natural phenomena, governed by natural laws as are all other phenomena which man analyzes and studies; and at the same time it will not cause the disappearance of the sentiments of moral elevation and of piety to which we quite justifiably cling. In our endeavor to comprehend the nature and the personal existence of society, nothing prevents our retaining for it the sentiments of love, of adoration, of faith, which are addressed to the unknown and inaccessible God. And we apportion these sentiments among the various groups in which we participate: family, country, humanity—this positive trinity—in the proportion of the actual relations which we have with each of these moral persons, and the duties which these relations impose upon us.

III.

[363] This theory of the socio-religious sentiment constitutes, as we may see, a discovery quite analogous to the discovery in physics of the weight of the atmosphere, under which men lived for ages before coming to realize that they were sustaining such pressure. The approach to this theory was prepared for by Auguste Comte, whose views indeed approximate it very nearly. But Comte did not completely grasp the idea on account of not having clearly conceived the personal character of society and the analogy between the acts and products of individual life and those of society. But it is clear that, when formulated, the theory effects in a measure a synthesis of positivism and historicism. Does this mean that it ought to be substituted for the naturalistic and animistic (or rather, ‘subliminalistic’) hypothesis, in order to solve the problem of the “origin of religions”? I do not think so. To seek the origin of religions and to ask oneself which of the three hypotheses is the true one, is to proceed like a chemist who, in seeking the origin of sulphuric acid, should ask himself whether this origin is in the sulphur, the oxygen or the hydrogen. In order to make sulphuric acid, all three are necessary. And it is thus with most of the things of this world, particularly the chief psychological and social functions. The cry of emotion, the signal-cry, the cry of command, onomatopoeia, instinctive vocal metaphors, the conscious expression of abstract ideas, have combined and recombined in successive layers to form the language which we now speak. Art springs from play, from imitation, from the quest for agreeable sensations and emotions, from sympathy, from the desire for affective generalization and expression, and from still other sources. It exists only through realizing the synthesis of all these tendencies.

Everything leads us then to believe that religion likewise achieves its unity through convergence, instead of receiving it ready-made from a single source. The essence of things, as Aristotle would say, is not in their origins, but in their end. And is not this, furthermore, in harmony with the principle of the independence of organ and function, the importance of which in sociology is recognized by M. Durkheim?

[364] May we not bring forward at this point both a restriction and a supplementation of the explanation of homo duplex through the opposition of the animal and the social life? Society itself is dual. On the one hand, it is, if not an organism, at least a system of differentiated elements which cooperate according to the principle of the division of labor, and which have been rightly compared since antiquity to the system formed by the belly and the limbs;—on the other hand, it is a community of equals or similars (semblables) who attain agreement through a natural process of imitation, and who hold as an ideal, as a norm of value, the logical accord of their thoughts and the moral accord of their wills. There is then a society of differentiation and a society of equalization or assimilation, and the second is superior to the first. It seems then that in man himself, likewise, it is not merely his participation in social life which causes the spiritual order
to be superior to the material order. May we not say that if we draw our intellectual and moral substance from the good society, it is because this has already participated in an absolute which is superior to it? Or may we say, as physics would perhaps suggest to us, that dualism is a constant characteristic of all stages of the real, and that the advance toward identity is everywhere in antithesis to organization and individuation?

At any rate, the social theory of religion is the actual center of a most vigorous discussion pro and con. The question as to its origins is at present being discussed and it is asked whether it owes more to the ideas of Auguste Comte and Espinas or to those of Savigny and of Simmel. Let us leave aside these questions as to influence, the interest attaching to which does not perhaps justify the place which has been given them in the history of philosophy. Analytical geometry was invented at the same time by Fermat and by Descartes, the infinitesimal calculus by Newton and by Leibniz. It is the tree which we must consider and not the roots. Let us also leave aside the criticisms which spring only from lack of comprehension: they are numerous as always. Some criticisms, however, are based upon philosophical positions inherently opposed to the sociological theory. From the standpoint of naturalistic monism, [365] for example, some are indignant that anyone should wish to maintain and scientifically account for the homo duplex. That would be to lead us, says M’ Matisse, in the Revue des idées, “to that old aberration which, deifying humanity, isolated it from the rest of creation.”[10] The representatives of the religious point of view, on the contrary, become apprehensive as to the naturalistic consequences of this doctrine; they declare it impossible to preserve toward society, considered as a product of the laws of nature, the sentiments which have been felt toward God. They fear that in this explanation of religion, a vital belief, the belief in the transcendental character of the deity, becomes illusory. To make God retreat into nature, says M. Lachelier, whose expression of this point of view is most profound, is to deprive him of his essential attribute: “That which may be expressed in terms of science, no longer belongs to the domain of freedom.”[4]

On the part of the psychologists, the objections are different, but no less numerous. On the one hand, some say that to deify society is to favor a new sort of mysticism, to destroy the individual, to sacrifice whatever is unique and whatever is creative in his nature. If it is society which conserves our patrimony, artistic and moral, says M. Darlu, is it not still the individual man who augments and transforms this heritage? Furthermore, he adds, to recognize that society appears to the individual as a sort of God, is to admit that the true source of the religious sentiment is the individual and not the social consciousness; for it is not by itself that society is able to produce this effect of majesty. If society has a consciousness, it ought to be on a level with its nature. Finally, says M. Delacroix, is not the exaltation which results from social union often produced in its fulness without giving birth to religious sentiments? For example, in the theater, in political meetings, at festivals? The Dionysiac state which results from the action of the crowd, from social communion, is not then the true source of our belief in the divine; it may exalt it, render it more efficacious; it will not suffice to give rise to it. And the same is true of the relation between reason and sense. If this relation did not exist to begin with for material or technological reasons, if the necessities of hunting and fishing, of the encampment, of the cooking of foods, had not taught us to distinguish the reasonable idea which succeeds from the absurd idea which miscarries, the social intelligence would find no material—with which to work. It would have no content on which to bestow the character of disinterested value—of aesthetic or moral value—which it impresses upon the distinction between the true and the false.[7]

IV.

The number and variety of these objections sufficiently show the importance which is attached to the sociological ideas of M. Durkheim in France, and the interest which they have aroused by
their significance and their novelty. Furthermore, those who have written in opposition to them have been almost unanimous in rendering homage to the importance of his doctrine, and also in recognizing that it marks a significant stage in the development of the history and philosophy of religion. [...]

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