

## ON TRANSLATING DURKHEIM

Steven Lukes

In this essay I shall address two intimately related questions concerning translation. They both concern the range of permissible or legitimate translations. The first concerns what lies within that range. How—that is, on what grounds—do we determine which translations are acceptable? And the second concerns what defines the limits of that range. How do we determine which translations are not going to pass muster? Both these questions concern standards: that is what tests must a translation pass to be deemed legitimate, on the one hand, or illegitimate, on the other? I shall address these questions by looking at the specific case of English translations of some central works of Emile Durkheim and in particular I shall focus on his masterpiece, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*.

But as a way of approaching these questions, I first want to say something about the various ways in which particular translations can go wrong, or at least mislead. What are the typical ways in which we recognize a given translation to be defective? In his fascinating discussion of Weber and the ‘iron cage’ Peter Baehr has suggested four.<sup>1</sup> First, there are straightforward cases of “simple incompetence, rendering terms incorrectly, eliding them or omitting them altogether”—errors due to “simple and ubiquitous human failings: carelessness, negligence, rashness.”<sup>2</sup> To this list we should surely add ignorance and stupidity. The first English translations of *The Division of Labour* and *The Rules of Sociological Method* abundantly exemplify this first category.<sup>3</sup> An appendix to my doctoral thesis on Durkheim consists in a list of some of the most egregious examples including the most egregious, namely, the omission in that English edition of *The Rules*

---

<sup>1</sup> Peter Baehr, *Founders, Classics, Canons: Modern Disputes over the Origin and Appraisal of Sociology's Heritage* (London: Transaction, 2002), 183–204.

<sup>2</sup> Baehr, *Founders, Classics, Canons*, 186–87.

<sup>3</sup> Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*, trans. G. Simpson (New York: Macmillan, 1933); *The Rules of Sociological Method*, trans. S.A. Solovay, J.H. Mueller, ed. G.E.G. Catlin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938).

of an entire paragraph crucial to the argument of chapter 1 (“What is a Social Fact?”), which, so far as I know, passed unnoticed by readers.<sup>4</sup>

Baehr’s second category involves “something deeper and more sociologically problematic: an inability to understand, or at least convey, the conceptual matrix in which the original terms are located.”<sup>5</sup> This, as he remarks, can involve “pulling a work into an interpretive orbit that disturbs the original constellation of themes idioms and emphases.”<sup>6</sup> Baehr gives the example of Parsons’s radically downplaying Weber’s emphasis on psychological *Antriebe* in his translation of *The Protestant Ethic*. An obvious example concerning Durkheim, discussed by Robert Jones and Douglas Kibbee, is the ubiquitous (and probably unavoidable) practice of translating Durkheim’s injunction to study social facts *comme des choses* as an injunction to consider them as ‘things.’ The flat term ‘things’ altogether fails to capture the cluster of ideas that ‘*choses*’ conveyed to Durkheim and his contemporaries. As Jones and Kibbee point out, Durkheim’s phrase is to be understood in the context of the Third Republic’s admiration of German education (they cite Jules Ferry’s remark that *‘La leçon des choses [c’est] à la base de tout’*) and Durkheim’s expressed hope that emulating the German special social sciences could encourage the French to treat philosophical questions according to the methods of the positive sciences. They would then be ready to acknowledge that ‘things,’ “whether human or physical, are irreducibly complex,” that “simple conceptual combinations” could no longer be mistaken for reality itself, and that education *‘à l’école des choses’* was “the only education adequate to the moral and spiritual needs of the Third Republic,” inducing in pupils “a pronounced feeling for the collective life, for its reality and its advantages.” Durkheim, in short, was seeking to replace the language of Cartesian rationalism with the “more inductive, more experimental lexicon of German empiricism—one that emphasized complexity over simplicity, the concrete over the abstract, inductive over deductive, and so on.” With this new perspective on social facts, the French would come to see that society was not reducible to its component parts, that it was not merely an idea but “a moral power more elevated than ourselves.” In short,

---

<sup>4</sup> Steven Lukes, “Emile Durkheim: an Intellectual Biography” (Ph.D. diss., Oxford University, 1968).

<sup>5</sup> Baehr, 187.

<sup>6</sup> Baehr, 187–8.

Durkheim's injunction expressed his "search for an ideal worthy of veneration by the 'new man' of the Republic."<sup>7</sup>

Baehr's third type of translational deficiency involves "an underestimation of the literary qualities and philosophical allusions of the author's texts." Weberian examples are Parsons's rendering of Goethe's 'elective affinities' as 'correlations' and of Nietzsche's 'last men' as 'the last stage' of cultural development. Durkheim's style is less hospitable to literary allusions than Weber's, but in various instances his philosophical allusions and implications have got lost in translation. A very telling case of this is the very title of the book on religion, where what is at issue is central to the philosophy of science, namely: what counts as a proper explanation. As Karen Fields shrewdly observes '*élémentaire*' means either 'elementary' or 'elemental' and she gives a good set of reasons for preferring 'elemental,' but for the fact that the book's existing title had become so much part of its life in English. Her exposition of these reasons is worth quoting at length. She writes:

The question is not right or wrong translation but the scope each alternative leaves for right or wrong understanding. On the one hand, 'elementary' will do in some respects; think of the concept 'elementary particles,' defined as being the smallest and most fundamental particles known. On the other hand, in day-to-day usage, 'elementary' has a diminutive and vaguely dismissive connotation and sets up the same potential problem for some readers as 'simple.' Consider Sherlock Holmes's 'Elementary, my dear Watson,' or consider the charge, 'You just don't seem to get the most elementary points,' which means the easiest or simplest—addressed by a scold to a dimwit. Durkheim means 'simplest' as well, but (in addition to the other considerations already referred to) he means it as particle physicists mean it, scientists who assuredly mean things that challenge the intellect. He seeks to explore building blocks of human social life, as physicists explore building blocks of matter. 'Elementary' is suitable only if used in a restricted sense that is not altogether Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's and not at all the scold's. In a sense, Durkheim was attempting in his study what the Curies were attempting in their labs.

Durkheim's 'simplest' forms are indispensably part of the most complex. Alternatively, they can be thought of as atoms and compared to the chemical substances that make up the periodic chart, the elements. The *formes* that he discovers in this particular study are the elements to be found in the makeup of the religions he thought of as more *complexes* or as 'higher' in an evolutionary sense. Durkheim is interested in 'a fundamental and

---

<sup>7</sup> R.A. Jones and D.A. Kibbee, "Durkheim, Language and History: a Pragmatist Perspective," *Sociological Theory* 11 (1993): 161, 165, 163, 166, 167.

permanent' aspect of humanity and in its 'ever-present source,' which can be discerned if studied in what he takes to be its *elemental* forms. Whatever those forms are (and I now paraphrase a physicist), they have an underlying identity that persists despite unceasing change and limitless diversity. Moreover, as in the physicist's search for elementary particles, the question of chronological origin is related and yet separable. So if we understand the phrase *formes élémentaires* in that way, we need not get bogged down, as some have, in the notion that Durkheim made the error of thinking totemism brought him to origins in a chronological sense. Instead we can take him at his word.<sup>8</sup>

Elsewhere, Karen Fields gives another striking example of this kind of deficiency, showing how and why all previous translators have totally failed to understand how and why all previous translators have totally failed to understand a passage that probably held "no obscurity at all for those of Durkheim's original French audience who had attended a *lycée*."<sup>9</sup>

Rien ne vient de rien. Les impressions qu'éveille en nous le monde physique ne sauraient, par définition, rien contenir qui dépasse ce monde. Avec du sensible, on ne peut faire que du sensible; avec de l'étendu, on ne peut faire de l'inétendu.<sup>10</sup>

Fields convincingly argues that Durkheim is here invoking Descartes' distinction between *res cogitans* and *res extensa* in order to contrast what is real but imagined, and thus without extension, and what is materially or physically real. She plausibly observes that the former embraces the words *moral, idéal, spirituel, social, sacré, conscience, and représentation*.<sup>11</sup>

The fourth way, according to Baehr, in which translations can prove defective is in failing to register 'the total configuration' of the target author's language, which, moreover, may only become apparent as 'new perspectives' are trained upon it.<sup>12</sup> The Weberian examples he cites are *Lebensführung, Sinnzusammenhang, Arbeitsverfassung* and *Gehäuse*. The Durkheimian examples I suggest are the linked oppositions 'sociology/psychology,' 'social/individual,' 'moral rules/sensual appetites,' 'concepts/

<sup>8</sup> Karen E. Fields, introduction to *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, by Emile Durkheim, trans. K. Fields (New York: Free Press, 1995), lix–lx.

<sup>9</sup> Karen Fields, "What Difference Does a Translation Make? *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* in French and English," in *The Cambridge Companion to Durkheim*, eds. J.C. Alexander, P. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 164.

<sup>10</sup> Emile Durkheim, *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1912) pp. 321–2.

<sup>11</sup> Fields, "What Difference Does a Translation Make," 174–77; see also Fields, "Durkheim and the Idea of Soul," *Theory and Society* 25 (1996): 193–203.

<sup>12</sup> Baehr, 188.

sensations,' 'sacred/profane.' In the introduction to my book on Durkheim, I suggested that these dichotomies are all in certain ways isomorphic, deriving from and explained by the basic and multiple dichotomy between the social and the individual.<sup>13</sup> One key text for understanding this conceptual architecture is his essay on "The Dualism of Human Nature."<sup>14</sup> Defective translation—or, at any rate, defective understanding arising from reading English renderings—results from assumed connotations attaching to these terms that are absent from Durkheim's French originals. So, for example, for Durkheim, the antonyms of *moral* refer to the biological, physical and sensual. As Fields, once more, correctly observes, for Durkheim

'moral' is real but not material. 'Good' is often not its synonym; together with 'spiritual,' 'social' and 'mental' often are. 'Individual' stands with the antonyms of 'moral' because Durkheim's 'individual' denotes the body, its drives and appetites, its sensory apparatus—in short our body considered as being distinct from our human being.<sup>15</sup>

This latter he tends to speak of as the 'person'—a usage followed in a famous essay by Marcel Mauss.<sup>16</sup> So it is 'the person' that is the sacred object of what he called the religion of 'individualism.' That term itself has sharply different connotations in French, where it is standardly pejorative, and in English, where it is not.<sup>17</sup> Thus Durkheim's idea of a socially cohesive 'religion of individualism' appropriate to modern times has an air of paradox in the French language that is absent in English. Moreover, for Durkheim, what is moral is social, public and shared, varying with time and place and is not "private, with its origin in some mysterious somewhere in the depths of the physical individual, as our commonsense usage suggests."<sup>18</sup>

Notice that these four failings of translation are all historicist failures of faithfulness to the original text. The first, we might say, consists in mistaking what Austin called locutionary acts: the translation gets either the sense or the reference of the author's words wrong, or both. The second

<sup>13</sup> Steven Lukes, *Emile Durkheim: His Life and Work: A Historical and Critical Study* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 1–36.

<sup>14</sup> Emile Durkheim, *Emile Durkheim on Morality and Society*, ed. Robert N. Bellah (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973).

<sup>15</sup> Fields, introduction to *Elementary Forms*, lv.

<sup>16</sup> Marcel Mauss, "Une catégorie de l'esprit humain: la notion de personne, celle de 'moi,' un plan de travail," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 68 (1938): 263–81.

<sup>17</sup> Steven Lukes, *Individualism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1973).

<sup>18</sup> Fields, introduction to *Elementary Forms*, iv.

mistakes the author's illocutionary acts: misunderstanding or failing to register what Durkheim was doing in writing of *choses*. The third seems to be a wider or deeper version of this: partly grasping but mainly failing to grasp, and thus distorting the author's intended meaning. And the fourth, similarly, misfires by failing to signal a wider semantic field distinctive of the author's structure of thought, which consists in a web of intricately interconnected synonyms and antonyms. And all these failings (or at least the latter three) are in large part due to the difficulty of being, in these ways, faithful to the original in English.

But, I now want to ask: is faithfulness to the original the only test that a legitimate translation has to pass? And what does it involve anyway? I am going to suggest that there is a plurality of such tests and that, moreover, they are, in interesting ways, interdependent.

At this point in my argument I shall (perhaps controversially) simply assume a version of Quine's thesis of the indeterminacy of translation: that there are no uniquely correct translations between languages, in the strong sense that there is no objective matter to be right or wrong about where the meaning of words is concerned and that to aim at the correct translation is to pursue a mistaken ideal.<sup>19</sup> In the face of this situation, Quine and others, notably Donald Davidson and Richard Grandy, have proposed various strategies, known as principles of interpretive charity, to deal with the problem. Of these, Quine's own is the crudest. He proposes what he calls the commonsense maxim of translation that "assertions startlingly false on the face of them are likely to turn on hidden differences of language" and that "one's interlocutor's silliness, beyond a certain point, is less likely than bad translation—or, in the domestic case, linguistic divergence."<sup>20</sup> Davidson's version is subtler: he proposes that we should 'optimize' agreement by making most of our interlocutors' utterances come out as true and most of their inferences as rational.<sup>21</sup> Grandy, in my view, improves on this by proposing, with his so-called 'principle of humanity', that we should assume basic similarities of relations between beliefs, desires and the world between ourselves and those we are translating and should prefer attributing explicable falsehoods to mysterious

---

<sup>19</sup> W.V.O. Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1960).

<sup>20</sup> Quine, *Word and Object*, 59.

<sup>21</sup> Donald Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 47 (1974): 5–29.

truths.<sup>22</sup> But all three charity strategies are suggested ways of excluding possible candidates from counting as legitimate translations.

But let us start from the other end. Which candidates are to be included? It is obvious that we have different goals and interests when we interpret and when we translate and, in particular, when we translate the texts of classic sociologists. Here, once more, I shall refer to Peter Baehr's very helpful discussion in his book *Founders, Classics, Canons*. Discussing the understanding of classic texts, he discusses different positions that have been developed and revised: specifically three groups—those in the camps of 'presentism' and of 'historicism' and positions that have arisen from critiques of historicism. What I draw from this discussion is that there are alternative tests a translation (interpretation) can be required to pass (which, in each case, it may do more or less well).

One is to interpret them from our own current vantage point, as contributing to contemporary social scientific practice or present-day debates, as when Marx and Weber are seen as conflict theorists, or as when Durkheim's theory of suicide is considered, as it often is, alongside other competing explanations of current statistics, operationalizing its variables (anomie, egoism and so on) and abstracting from its contextual specificities (diagnosing the pathologies of *fin-de-siècle* France). An interesting instance of such translation/interpretation is given by Robert Merton's celebrated conversion in his "Social Structure and Anomie" of Durkheim's anomie into his own version of anomie as the socially-structured incapacity to attain the culturally valued success ethic in 1930s America—a neat reversal of Durkheim's concept's original meaning of anomie as the social condition inducing the malady of infinite aspiration. But this too is, I would claim, legitimate translation.<sup>23</sup>

An interesting, and more complex, instance of presentist-motivated translation shows how present-day assumptions can, when deployed in translation, surprise us by illuminating the historical meaning of a text or passage. An example is given by Karen Fields in her discussion of how to translate a passage in which Durkheim explains his strategy of studying the simplest case available, in order to uncover the fundamental sources or 'elements' of religious life. His own enterprise is, she writes, like that of a doctor seeking to uncover the cause of a delusion. Her claim is that

---

<sup>22</sup> Richard Grandy, "Reference, Meaning and Belief," *Journal of Philosophy* 70 (1973): 439–52.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Merton, "Social Structure and Anomie," in *Social Theory and Social Structure* (New York: Free Press, 1957).

Durkheim's French passage seems reminiscent of Freud, while Joseph Swain's 1915 translation is not. The Swain translation is as follows:

In order to understand an hallucination perfectly, and give it its most appropriate treatment, a physician must know its original point of departure. Now this event is proportionately easier to find if he can observe it near its beginnings. The longer the disease is allowed to develop, the more it evades observation [*au contraire, plus on laisse à la maladie le temps de se développer, plus il se dérobe à l'observation*]; that is because all sorts of observations have intervened as it advanced, which tend to force the original state into the background [*qui tendent à refouler dans l'inconscient l'état original*], and across which it is frequently difficult to find the initial one.<sup>24</sup>

Her own translation is decidedly, for us, an unambiguous improvement:

To understand a delusion properly and so be able to apply the most appropriate treatment, the doctor needs to know what its point of departure was. The event is the more easily detected the nearer to its beginnings the delusion can be observed. Conversely, the longer a sickness is left to develop, the more the 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.<sup>25</sup>

Durkheim, so far as we know, did not know of Freud, and yet Fields's version is not only more accessible to us but may well also be historically more appropriate, for, as Fields writes,

there is good reason to think that Durkheim knew of the celebrated work being done in the 1880s at the Hôpital Salpêtrière in Paris by Jean-Martin Charcot, Freud's predecessor in the study of hysteria, and of the huge controversy about that work in the mid-1890s. . . . Present in the passage is the notion that today we term 'screen memories', which is generally credited to Freud, not Charcot. The plot thickens when we realize that Freud certainly knew of and cited Durkheim's work (including *Formes*) in his 1917 paper, 'The Return of Totemism in Childhood.' In this way, correcting Swain's inaccuracies can add nuance to a scholarly question.<sup>26</sup>

Those in the historicist camp require of translations that to be legitimate they be faithful to the original text. But how is this test of legitimacy to

---

<sup>24</sup> Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (London: Allen and Unwin, 1915), 7. Quoted in Fields, introduction, liii.

<sup>25</sup> Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, trans. K. Fields, 6–7.

<sup>26</sup> Fields, introduction to *Elementary Forms*, liii.

be administered? Do we mean faithful to the author's meaning understood as illocutionary intent (to which he has privileged access) or to what we can take him to have been *doing* (which he may not have adequately understood, and which we may claim to understand better in the light of hindsight). Furthermore, as the example just cited shows, hindsight can sometimes reveal historical truths that a strictly historicist approach would conceal. The examples I discussed earlier of inadequate Durkheim translations were all failures to pass the historicist test.

Finally there are the intermediate positions, developed in reaction to historicism, of which the most interesting is perhaps Rorty's idea of 'rational reconstruction,' involving imaginary conversations with our predecessors, who are assumed to respond to our criticisms and suggestions, in which Durkheim becomes, so to speak, our contemporary as we seek to articulate our projects to his and to justify both accordingly. As we argue with 'him' and criticize his arguments and claims, he becomes "our contemporary, or our fellow citizen, or a fellow member of the same disciplinary matrix."<sup>27</sup> We converse, so to speak, with an educable Durkheim. From this standpoint, the question of what a text means is not reducible to an author's statements but is rather a question of "our interests and purposes"—subject, we might add, to certain limits set by a historicist interpretation.<sup>28</sup> Of course at a certain point (which?) our educable Durkheim ceases to be Durkheim. Jones and Kibbee comment that on Rorty's view, therefore, a text "will have as many meanings as there are contexts in which it might be placed" and there will be "at least as many 'Durkheims' as there are schools of contemporary sociological theory."<sup>29</sup>

But this sounds dangerously like 'anything goes.' So it leads me to my final question, namely how to define the limits of legitimate translation. This is where I think the strategy of the charity principles comes in. For when interpreting and translating a social and political thinker like Durkheim, we have to assume that his texts will meet certain standards of reasoning and that some attributions will count against our translations. But which? We could say: those which, in Quine's words, have him asserting what is "startlingly false" or would manifest "silliness."<sup>30</sup> Better to say,

---

<sup>27</sup> Richard Rorty, "The Historiography of Philosophy: Four Genres," in *Philosophy in History*, eds. R. Rorty, J. Schneewind, Q. Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 51–52.

<sup>28</sup> Jones and Kibbee, 157.

<sup>29</sup> Jones and Kibbee, 157, 156.

<sup>30</sup> Quine, 59.

I think, with Grandy, that when faced with attributions which have Durkheim asserting something that is, not just *prima facie* but on reflection, indefensible, then, unless his asserting it is explicable, that too should count against the translation. In order to make this point, I would like to conclude with a real and up-to-date example of a controversial interpretation of Durkheim where what is at issue is a proposed translation which fails the Grandy test.

Professor Anne Rawls has recently published a book, *Epistemology and Practice: Durkheim's The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, which is a detailed chapter-by-chapter commentary on Durkheim's book.<sup>31</sup> Some years ago she published in the *American Journal of Sociology* an article, "Durkheim's Epistemology: The Neglected Argument," which was in turn criticized by Warren Schmaus to which she in turn replied.<sup>32</sup> Her case is that the *Formes* has been radically misunderstood by every single one of its interpreters: that it is essentially an argument (that is, she claims, convincing and important) for the social origins of the categories of the understanding (time, space, classification, force, cause and totality), an epistemological argument about the nature of mind and the origins of human reason, not a study in the sociology of knowledge, that the categories "enter the minds of individual persons during enacted practice in such a way as to be empirically valid": that is during religious rites they are "perceived through a different faculty of mind, an emotional faculty" and thus that the argument "explains the relationship between perceptions, ideas, and external reality in such a way that key thoughts and concepts can be shown to bear a valid and true relationship to an external reality, which in this case consists entirely of social forces." In short, the "moral forces generated by enacted practice are internalized as categories." Durkheim, supposedly, offers us "an empirical explanation of the origin of the categories" and by empirical origins he means "origins in shared enacted practices." So, for instance and in particular, "social practices are empirical, are perceived, and can furnish an empirically valid origin for the concept of causality." The category of causality originates in imitative rites

---

<sup>31</sup> Ann W. Rawls, *Epistemology and Practice: Durkheim's Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Cambridge: C. U. P., 2004).

<sup>32</sup> A. Rawls, "Durkheim's Epistemology: The Neglected Argument," *American Journal of Sociology* 102 (1996): 430–82. Warren Schmaus, "Rawls, Durkheim and Causality: a Critical Discussion," *American Journal of Sociology* 104 (1998): 872–86. A. Rawls, "Durkheim's Challenge to Philosophy: Human Reason Explained as a Product of Enacted Social Practice," *American Journal of Sociology* 104 (1998): 887–901.

that “make and reinforce the feeling of the causal efficacy of the totem” and “quite literally make and remake the moral community”: thus the “causal relation is a social force available in direct perception.” In sum, her argument is that

Durkheim’s discussion of ‘feelings’ and ‘internal states’ as a basis for knowledge, which has been disparaged as bad crowd psychology, in fact constitutes an argument of some consequence. Feelings of well-being and moral force are one of the results of totemic rituals that give rise to the category of causality. The causal efficacy of the ritual is perceived directly as a feeling of moral unity.<sup>33</sup>

Criticizing this argument, Schmaus concludes that Professor Rawls

never actually showed that social practices “produce” the categories. In fact, . . . they presuppose them. What those practices produce, at best, are collective representations that fulfill the functions of the categories. When she says the categories ‘come into being to fulfill the social need,’ this can mean only that certain collective representations were selected because they served these categorial functions.<sup>34</sup>

Therefore, at best Durkheim only succeeds in explaining the universality, inescapable authority and functional necessity of the categories and the ways they are represented (for instance in different cosmologies).

Schmaus goes further in offering an explanation of Durkheim’s excessive claims, suggesting that he “carried over in his sociology” the assumption made by the French *spiritualiste* philosophers “that we can introspect causal powers and not merely their effects or causal relations.”<sup>35</sup> In his criticism of Rawls’s argument Schmaus repeats what all the critical commentators, including the present author, on this part of Durkheim’s theory, except Professor Rawls, agree upon: that, in his vaunting ambition for sociology’s explanatory powers, he here went too far, making claims that cannot be intelligibly sustained.<sup>36</sup> He wanted to provide a sociological alternative to Humean empiricism and Kantian apriorism, by giving a sociological account of the form in which knowledge is elaborated, that is the categories or ‘fundamental notions’ which seem to us as inseparable from the normal functioning of the intellect. But if that account was to be causal, then it could not succeed for the reason suggested by Schmaus.

---

<sup>33</sup> Rawls, “Durkheim’s Epistemology,” 437, 442, 445, 449, 450.

<sup>34</sup> Schmaus, 885.

<sup>35</sup> Schmaus, 880.

<sup>36</sup> Lukes, *Durkheim: His Life and Work*, 448.

Long ago, in 1924 William Dennes wrote: “Durkheim’s theory of the origin of the categories depends upon his ambiguous conception of mind. If he takes mind in the Kantian sense, the sense usual in epistemology, as the subject’s system of cognitive faculties, it is ridiculous to say that the categories of mind are in any sense transferences from social organization.”<sup>37</sup> In his introduction in 1963 to Durkheim and Mauss’s *Primitive Classification* Rodney Needham wrote: “If the mind is taken to be a system of cognitive faculties, it is absurd to say that the categories originate in social organization . . . Different peoples conceive space and time differently, but no comparative study of their concepts can yield the origin of the categories of space and time; they classify by different principles, but in no circumstances can the study of these show how the faculty of classification itself originated.”<sup>38</sup>

Dennes and Needham were right and Durkheim in this claim overreached himself. He did, in his more ambitious moments, make it (as when he wrote of the categories having a ‘social origin’ and being ‘social caused’) but he was also aware—or, we might say, in the spirit of Rorty, latently or potentially aware, of its unsustainability. Now, as it conveniently happens, Professor Rawls in her subsequent book has herself proposed a test of translation, in which she claims that alternative translations will reflect acceptance or rejection of her interpretation (and enthusiastic endorsement) of Durkheim’s indefensible argument. The question at issue is: did Durkheim hold that the concept of causality has always constituted ‘an element of ordinary thought?’ In a key passage concerning mimetic rites, Durkheim writes:

*Mais nous n’avons pas à nous demander pour l’instant si elle [the principle of causality] est fondée ou non dans la réalité: il nous suffit de constater qu’elle existe et qu’elle la toujours constitué un élément dans la mentalité commune . . .*<sup>39</sup>

Swain and Fields translate this last phrase respectively as “an element of ordinary mentality” and “an element of ordinary thought.” Now, Rawls claims that this reading poses a problem for her thesis that Durkheim claimed causality to have a social origin:

<sup>37</sup> William Dennes, “The Methods and Presuppositions of Group Psychology,” *University of California Publications in Psychology* 6 (1924): 1–182.

<sup>38</sup> Rodney Needham, introduction to *Primitive Classification*, by E. Durkheim and M. Mauss (London: Cohen and West, 1963.)

<sup>39</sup> Emile Durkheim, *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse: le système totémique en Australie* (Paris: Alcan, 1912) p. 519.

There is an ambiguity in the French at this point that may have caused some translation difficulties. Durkheim used the French word 'commune' where the translators have used the word 'ordinary' in the English. The word *commun* in French can mean 'ordinary.' The feminine case of the word is *commune*. In this sentence the feminine case is called for. However, the word 'commune' in French, spelled with an 'e' can also be a different word, from *commun*, carrying a sense of communal, or shared living, or thinking. The question is whether or not Durkheim intended the feminine of *commun*, or the word for collective, *commune*. It is my sense that Durkheim did not mean to say that causality had always been an element of ordinary thought. He meant that it had always been an element of common, or communal thought. . . . The substitution of the word 'ordinary' for *commune*, with regard to human mental equipment in this sentence, supports the interpretation of Durkheim as a rationalist, who believed in underlying innate categories of the understanding. It sets up a claim that contradicts Durkheim's own clearly stated argument that causality has a social origin.<sup>40</sup>

In this debate Professor Rawls's proposed translation has Durkheim making claims that Dennes calls "ridiculous" and Needham "absurd." I prefer to say that they are startlingly implausible, if not 'silly,' and moreover that her proposed translation of *mentalité commune*, offered in support of her case, is also implausible. As for her argument that Durkheim was no rationalist, I observe that, in the Preface to the *Rules* Durkheim wrote that the only designation he accepted was that of "rationalist." My case, concerning Professor Rawls's interpretation and proposed translation of Durkheim is therefore this. Indeed the historicist Durkheim did rashly make indefensible claims about the social origin of the categories. In the spirit of Grandy's principle of humanity, we can explain these claims in terms of his vaunting ambition to explore to the limit the explanatory potential of sociology, his polemical disposition and, following Schmaus, his mistaken view inherited from the *spiritualists*. And the Rortian, rationally reconstructed Durkheim can easily be brought to see the folly of making such claims, which do, indeed, contradict very many passages in the texts, including the one just cited, when properly translated.

---

<sup>40</sup> Rawls, *Epistemology and Practice*, 238–39.

