DURKHEIM'S RELATIONAL ACCOUNT OF SOCIAL ONTOLOGY

DANIEL SAUNDERS

Daniel Saunders is studying philosophy and sociology at Wichita State University in Kansas. He is currently a senior and plans to attend grad school in philosophy next semester. Daniel is primarily interested in metaphysics and the philosophy of science—especially the topics of scientific realism, ontology, the unity of science, and philosophy of social science. When he is not working on philosophy, Daniel enjoys cooking, competing on the debate team at Wichita State, and watching '90s sitcoms with his friends.

ABSTRACT: *Secondary commentators on Emile Durkheim have interpreted his ontology in conflicting and contradictory ways. Some have claimed that he treats social entities as mysterious substances which exist over and above individuals. Others claim he is ontologically committed to exactly nothing more than individuals. Few studies have carefully analyzed his ontological commitments in detail, and the conventional wisdom on the issue leaves much to be desired. I argue Durkheim holds neither a substance nor an individualist view of social ontology. Instead, he is committed to the reality of emergent social relations which form the proper subject matter of sociology.*

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INTRODUCTION

In the final accounting of all that exists, would society be included on that list? What about markets, federal governments, or the proletariat? These are the core questions of social ontology, a field of inquiry concerning what kind of status we should assign to social entities.[1] Do social entities exist? If they do, how should we characterize their existence? Those who believe in the reality of social entities are loosely called ontological holists. In contrast, ontological individualists hold that individual persons are the only entities that actually exist and regard markets and the like as merely useful fictions that help social scientists communicate about collective behavior.[2] Research into social ontology has accelerated in recent years,[3] and Emile Durkheim remains one of the key figures in conversations about the fundamental conceptual issues in social science. Much has been written about Durkheim concerning his position on explanatory holism and meaning holism—the claim that social facts cannot be explained in terms of individual facts as well as the claim that the meaning of social terms is not reducible to individual terms—but far less has been written about Durkheim and his ontology.[4] As we shall see, there are frequently inconsistent interpretations of Durkheim's stance on social ontology advanced by secondary commentators. The confusion is partly amplified by his tendency to avoid explicit treatment of ontological questions. Despite this situation, it is still possible to discern Durkheim's implicit ontology. This paper advances three arguments. First, in contrast to the suggestions made by some commentators, Durkheim holds that society is composed neither of social substances nor of merely individuals. Second, Durkheim is an ontological holist who holds a relational view of social ontology (in a relational social ontology, society is to be identified with a series of relations). Third, adopting this interpretation of Durkheim's ontology clarifies some features of his account of social explanation.

1 Deborah Tollefsen, "Social Ontology," in *Philosophy of Social Science: A New Introduction,* ed. Nancy Cartwright and Eleanora Montuschi (Oxford: Oxford Press, 2015), 86.

2 Julie Zahle and Finn Collin, "Introduction," in *Rethinking the Individualism-Holism Debate*, ed. Julie Zahle and Finn Collin (Cham: Springer, 2014), 1-5.

3 Brian Epstein, "A Framework for Social Ontology," *Philosophy of Social Science* 46, no. 2 (2015): 1.

4 Steven Turner, "Durkheim as a Methodologist? Part I-Realism, Teleology, and Action," *Philosophy Social Science* 13, no. 4 (1983): 1.

This paper is divided into three parts. First, I describe some of the predominate ways of interpreting Durkheim's ontology and identify ways in which they fail to capture the nuance of his position. Second, I explicate his relational position and explain the role ontological commitments play in his account of social explanation. Third, I make my conclusion.

A SURVEY OF INTERPRETATIONS

There are three predominate interpretations of Durkheim's social ontology. The first holds that he believes in the reality of a social level irreducible to the individual level. I will refer to this as the standard interpretation. The second holds that Durkheim regards society as a substance, an independently existing entity with properties. I will refer to this as the substance interpretation. The third holds that Durkheim's ontology only consists of individuals. I will refer to this as the individualist interpretation. In the process of analyzing the inadequacies of these interpretations, we can learn a few lessons about what an adequate account of his ontology must look like. Let us look more closely at each position in turn.

A. THE STANDARD INTERPRETATION

The *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* is typical of the standard interpretation:

> First, Durkheim makes an ontological claim concerning the *sui generis* reality of social facts. Second, Durkheim makes an epistemological and methodological claim, arguing that social facts should be treated as real objects existing external to the researcher's mind.[5]

The second claim is much clearer than the first. Durkheim advises sociologists to take social facts to be irreducible to facts about individuals and study them as objective features of the world. It is easy to find textual evidence consistent with this view throughout *The Rules of Sociological Method*. He writes that "the first and most basic rule is to consider social facts as things."[6] Durkheim wants to show that sociology can become just as scientific as the natural sciences, a discipline with a unique object of study and

5 Paul Carls, "Emile Durkheim," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* 2017, http://www.iep.utm.edu/durkheim/.

6 Emile Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, ed. Steven Lukes, trans. W.D. Halls, (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1982), 60.

with rigorous methods that can glean objective truth. He notes how pervasive it is for social thinkers to prioritize theory over observation and how, when they do make observations, it is often in a selective and unsystematic way. He emphasizes the thinghood of social facts to encourage sociology to move in an empirical direction and to become a discipline that takes the systematic collection of data very seriously. The standard interpretation is widely held. For instance, Steven Lukes, one of his most well-respected commentators and biographers, characterizes him similarly in several places.[7] In contrast to the clarity of the second claim concerning methodology and epistemology, the first claim concerning ontology is more unclear, and its ambiguities are the subject of this paper. It is unclear in three specific ways.

First, it is unclear whether Durkheim's comments on social facts are useful in elucidating his ontology. It is not always possible to make a straightforward inference from his comments concerning facts to his commitments concerning ontology, despite Carls' talk of ontological commitment to facts. If we think of ontology as the study of the type of *entities* that exist in the world rather than the *facts,* then it appears that the encyclopedia definition is confused. If, on the other hand, we think of facts as entities, it still does not clear up the issue. As I will show in my analysis of the individualist interpretation, secondary commentators continue to talk as if social facts are distinct from entities, which means that the confusion remains. Moreover, even if Durkheim included facts in his ontology, I will show he is also committed to some kind of social entity in addition to facts—a feature not captured by the standard interpretation.

Second, it is unclear what kind of entity is supposed to emerge *sui generis*. It could be the case that Durkheim is only committed to the existence of individuals but holds that individuals gain emergent properties when placed into networks of association. Under this view, Durkheim is only committed to emergent properties but not to social objects or substances. This is the more austere approach. On the other hand, it could be the case that social substances emerge from individuals. This line would entail ontological holism. The standard interpretation provides insufficient resources to determine which position Durkheim holds.

7 Steven Lukes, Introduction to *The Rules of Sociological Method*, ed. Steven Lukes, trans. W.D. Halls (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1982) 3; Steven Lukes, *Emile Durkheim: His Life and Work a Historical and Critical Study* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1973), 19, 81.

Third, it is unclear what the relationship between ontology and the injunction that we should treat social facts as objects is. Does "treat" merely mean an instrumental treatment—the idea that sociologists gain a practical advantage from pretending markets are real entities, talking in a language which contains them but nonetheless remains agnostic on the reality of the social entities? Or does "treat" entail ontological commitment?

These questions demonstrate that more investigation is needed. Rather than attempting to answer them directly, I will return to them in the conclusion. Let us examine the other two interpretations.

B. THE SUBSTANCE INTERPRETATION

The second major thread of interpretation is associated with Durkheim's earliest critics who accused him of a substance ontology.[8] It is rather hard to provide a precise account of what his critics took him to hold, as their writings are largely polemical and do not take the time to carefully lay out what they think Durkheim means. However, the underlying theme of these critiques is that Durkheim regards social groups as a kind of *substance,* which exists above and beyond the individuals and possessed properties that are only true of the group but not true of the individuals. One critic quoted in Lukes says "the concept of society as existing outside the individuals is pure metaphysics," while another writes that "men are not, when brought together, converted into another kind of substance."[9] This view is not isolated to critics during the nineteenth century. The contemporary scholar Emmanuel Renault writes,

> This type of ontological assumption is characteristic of the Durkheimian definition of institutions as a reality having stability and authority over individuals, and it is precisely this definition that leads to the idea that the social should be studied as a "thing," that is as a substance.[10]

Renault demonstrates that there is a pervasive tendency to immediately equate any talk of social things with social substances, a move that too hastily ignores other options.

In the preface to the second edition of *The Rules,* Durkheim responds explicitly to critics who accused him of a scholastic substance ontology, writing,

8 Lukes, *Emile Durkheim,* 306, 313-15.

9 Lukes, *Emile Durkheim*, 314.

10 Emmanuel Renault, "Critical Theory and Process Social Ontology," *Journal of Social Ontology* 2, no. 1 (2016): 17-32.

> we had repeatedly declared that consciousness, both individual and social, did not signify for us anything substantial, but merely a collection of phenomena *sui generis*, . . . we were accused of realism and ontological thinking.[11]

11 Durkheim, *The Rules*, 34.

People do not often use the word "accusation" to describe characterizations with which they agree. This quote is especially striking because it suggests Durkheim is neither a social realist nor interested in doing social ontology. We can reject the substance ontology interpretation on the grounds of charity. In order to construct an interpretation that does not put him into self-contradiction, it is necessary to devise an interpretation that denies that he commits to social substances. If we can show that another viable interpretation is available, we should attribute it to Durkheim over a substance position.

An important lesson can be drawn from this discussion. Durkheim is trying to walk a fine line. This line runs between an individualist position in which society is an abstraction reducible to individual behavior and the substance position in which social entities are self-sufficient, independent beings distinct from all individuals.

C. THE INDIVIDUALIST INTERPRETATION

According to Little, Durkheim accepts the individualist ontological thesis. Little writes that "Durkheim . . . insists only that there are nonreducible social facts, not nonreducible social entities."[12] This view holds that facts and entities belong to different categories—a view at odds with the standard interpretation. One can see how Little might arrive at this conclusion. We saw in the preceding section that Durkheim rejects the idea that he theorizes society as a substance. This may imply that he believes in no social entities. In this interpretation, individuals are the only things that exist; when individuals are assembled together, new facts describe the group, but the group has no reality above and beyond the individuals that comprise it.

12 Daniel Little, *Varieties of Social Explanation: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Social Science* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991), 184.

The individualist interpretation is too austere to capture key portions of Durkheim's writings. He is committed to social entities. In the fifth chapter of *The Rules*, the issue is no longer social facts but social explanation. This chapter draws heavily on emergence arguments, which imply the existence of social entities. This chapter is also especially useful because it is not entangled with a discussion of social facts, which alleviates some of the confusion described earlier. Consider the following passage:

> the whole does not equal the sum of its parts; it is something different, whose properties differ from those displayed by the parts from which it is formed. Association is not, as has sometimes been believed, a phenomenon infertile in itself, which consists merely in juxtaposing external facts already given and properties already constituted. . . . Society is not the mere sum of individuals, but the system formed by their association represents a specific reality which has its own characteristics. Undoubtedly no collective entity can be produced if there are no individual consciousnesses: this is a necessary but not a sufficient condition. In addition, these consciousnesses must be associated and combined, but combined in a certain way. By fusing together, individuals give birth to a being, psychical if you will, but one which constitutes a psychical individuality of a new kind.[13]

13 Durkheim, *The Rules*, 129.

There is a lot to unpack in this passage, but it does provide substantial evidence that Durkheim is committed to social entities. He is making two moves here. First, he claims that association creates emergent properties by way of fusion. The whole is more than the sum of the parts; when two individuals enter into a labor contract, the sociologist is presented with three entities, not just two. If the social whole possesses properties not possessed by the individuals, then Durkheim is committed to saying the labor contract possesses properties not possessed by either the employer or the laborer. The labor contract instead possesses properties that are generated through the act of association.

The second move is to make an ontological commitment to properties. The first move alone is not sufficient to give us commitment to social entities. It is still possible to read Durkheim as holding a position in which we talk about social properties in a non-reducible language that contains emergent terms but without necessarily being committed to social entities. However, he is claiming something stronger. Durkheim is explicitly talking about the possibility of "collective entities" emerging as a result of association. This is more than just

an accident of word choice. He uses entity talk in other places in *The Rules*. For example,

> whenever elements of any kind combine, by virtue of this combination they give rise to new phenomena. One is therefore forced to conceive of these phenomena as residing, not in the elements, but in the entity formed by the union of these elements.[14]

He concludes the original block quote by claiming fusion results in a new psychic being—some type of collective consciousness. Interpreting Durkheim so as to avoid commitment to social entities cannot make sense of his claim that society is a system of associations above and beyond the individuals that compose it and those associations possess being. The system is meant to be understood as a real entity, not merely a language.

To summarize, the evidence indicates that the individualist position is too weak to capture the strength of Durkheim's ontological claims. However, the substance interpretation is too strong. His true position must fall somewhere between a commitment to social substances and a commitment to no social entities at all. The third option is to conceive of social entities as relational. I turn to the explication of that option now.

THE RELATIONAL ACCOUNT OF DURKHEIM'S ONTOLOGY

What does a relational picture of social ontology look like? Society is a real entity, but its reality consists of a network of relations between individuals. Society is to be identified with the relationship between parent and child, romantic partners, teacher and student, buyer and seller, sovereign and subjects. This series of dyad relationships also exists in a network with one another. In addition to the dyadic relations, there will also be multi-part relationships. Taken all together, these relations constitute a society. The crucial feature that makes a relational ontology distinct from a substantial ontology is that there is not any entity that exists behind the relations. Society is just the relations between every member. However, this is not the same as saying society is nothing more than a group of individuals. As illustrated above, Durkheim believes that these relations are emergent and possess

14 Durkheim, *The Rules*, 39.

properties not possessed by the individuals taken in isolation.

Investigating social ontology is not an isolated concern for Durkheim studies. Proper analysis illustrates that his account of social explanation is mutually reinforcing with his ontology. Clarifying the relationship between explanation and ontology helps clarify the relationship between social facts and ontology.

Durkheim advises sociologists to provide causal explanations of social facts in terms of other, antecedent social facts rather than in terms of individual beliefs, desires, or behaviors.[15] Moreover, only prior social forces can establish new social facts.[16] That social forces play a necessary role in social causation suggests that they must have ontological weight. If we cannot explain social facts in terms of individual facts, it suggests, but does not necessarily entail, a commitment to social entities. However, Durkheim makes the stronger commitment clear, writing "it is appropriate, since it is clear that, not having the individual as their substratum, [social facts] can have none other than society."[17] Social facts must be facts that describe society rather than facts that describe individuals. If social facts cannot be facts that describe individuals then there must be some other entity in Durkheim's ontology for which they are meant to describe. The term "substratum" here may suggest a substance ontology but, in light of the preceding section, the more charitable reading is that social relations form the substratum rather than a substance. Thus, we can finally describe the relationship between social facts and ontology. Social facts are facts which describe social relations. This seems like a simple claim, but it is important to notice how it departs from the standard interpretation. Rather than an ontological commitment to social facts, Durkheim has an ontological commitment to social entities which facts describe.

In an article criticizing Willard van Orman Quine's rejection of property ontology, Elliot Sober argues that eliminating properties from our ontology causes a loss in the explanatory power of evolutionary biology.[18] Sober claims that the best version of evolutionary theory uses traits as the unit of analysis rather than groups or individual objects. We can read Durkheim as taking a similar argumentative strategy about the explanatory

15 Durkheim, *The Rules*, 134.
16 Durkheim, *The Rules*, 120.

17 Durkheim, *The Rules*, 52.

18 Elliot Sober, "Evolutionary Theory and the Ontological Status of Properties," *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 40, no. 2 (1981): 147-76.

advantage of a commitment to social entities. The social entities are the *explanans*, not the individuals. If we have an ineliminable commitment to social entities in our explanation of social facts, then we are best off committing to social entities in our ontology. If Sober's argument is sound and Durkheim holds that social explanation cannot be converted into explanations about individual entities, then positing the existence of social entities offers an explanatory advantage. This provides further evidence against the individualist interpretation. Eliminating social entities from Durkheim's ontology would make it extremely difficult to explain his comments concerning explanation.

CONCLUSION

This investigation was motivated by three points of vagueness in the standard interpretation of Durkheimian social realism. First, it was unclear what the relationship between social facts and social ontology was supposed to be. It is now clear that social facts are the facts that describe social entities. In order for his account of social facts to be coherent, one must be committed to a social entity that facts can describe, as individuals cannot play that role.

Second, it was unclear what type of social entity was supposed to emerge. Now it is clear that Durkheim rejects a substance account. He writes as much explicitly. Charity requires that we do not ascribe a substance view to him. Instead, a more plausible reading attributes a relational view. When he suggests that he is committed to social entities, the commitment stems from individuals entering into association and the subsequent relations forming an independent reality of their own. No evidence can be found which suggests that Durkheim believes that social substances emerge from the interactions of individuals. Instead, society is to be identified with a series of relations amongst individuals.

Finally, it was unclear what was meant by the claim that sociologists should *treat* social facts as real objects. It could potentially mean that Durkheim is an instrumentalist about social facts, advising sociologists to act as if social entities are real—speaking in a language that implies their existence—but ultimately remain agnostic about ontology. The evidence clearly shows that Durkheim is committed to something more than just individuals. Society plays a necessary role in his account of social explanation. Individuals entering into association create new emergent properties, which have reality for Durkheim. Talk of social entities is deeply entangled with his account of emergence. Any interpretation that suggests he is only committed to individuals is too austere to capture this component of his writing.