Émile Durkheim and the Emergence of Meaningful Social Agency

The central argument in the seminal text in religious studies – Émile Durkheim’s *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1995/1912) – is that human social groups are emergent causal agents, possessing characteristics independent of the individuals who make it up. The emergent characteristics of the social group include moral authority, intellectual refinement, emotional amplification, and a will distinct from that of the individuals that compose it. He argues that references to the divine in such social groups actually refer to this emergent social agency, which is why religious beliefs are in some manner *true*. Durkheim argues that in religious gatherings, individuals focus on some thing or idea (called a *totem*) that acts as a sign of the divine, and the group’s shared focus on this object or idea actually creates the emergent social agent, and reinforces its emergent characteristics. Durkheim ultimately fails to explain how it is that a group’s focus on a representative totem results in a new kind of group agency. It is precisely the idea of a metaperformative involving *encoded memory* that Durkheim needs to make his account clear. While he does an admirable job of pushing in this theoretical direction, he fails to fully conceptualize religion as a semantically-closed strange loop. His ‘brilliant failure’ is what makes this work so rich, influential, and worth theoretical attention.

Emergence and Cultural Sociality

Durkheim was one of the first theorists to demonstrate religion could be productively analyzed from a ‘systems’ or an ‘emergent’ approach to social organization.¹ For Durkheim, *society* is a uniquely human social accomplishment that transcends the individual, and plays an active and even self-centered role in the lives of the individuals who compose it. He writes,

Man is not simply an animal, plus certain qualities: He is something different. Human nature is the product of a recasting, so to speak, of animal

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¹ For an account of how Durkheim is explicitly working within an early ‘emergence’ paradigm, see Sawyer (2002).
nature....man is in relationship not only with a physical milieu, but also with a social milieu... In order to live, then, he must adapt to it. Now, to maintain itself, society often needs us to see things from a certain standpoint and feel them in a certain way. It therefore modifies the ideas we would be inclined to have about them, and the feelings to which we would be inclined if we obeyed only our animal nature – even to the extent of replacing them with quite opposite feelings. Does society not go so far as to make us see our own life as a thing of little value, while for animals life is property par excellence? (1995, 62, italics mine).

By describing the effects of society as a relational, holistic entity transcending individual minds, emotions, and values, he is exemplifying an emergent approach to human sociality.

For Durkheim, a ‘religious community’ is not something different from ‘society’; rather, what is achieved in religious gatherings is society. Religious gatherings are a means by which people become aware of and intensify the emergent qualities they possess as a result of sharing a language and culture. Religion is the primary way the very abstract nature of collective thought and collective emotions becomes salient and intensified in individual’s lives. He writes,

Religion is first and foremost a system of ideas by means of which individuals imagine the society of which they are members and the obscure yet intimate relations they have with it. Such is its paramount role (1995, 227).

Through religious rites and gatherings, people concentrate their collective forces. He writes,

If society is to be able to become conscious of itself and keep the sense it has of itself at the required intensity, it must assemble and concentrate. This concentration brings about an uplifting of moral life that is expressed by a set of ideal conceptions in which the new life thus awakened is depicted (1995, 424).

In traditional human societies, the “ideal conceptions” that awaken the moral life of society are the sacred concepts and symbols of religious life. However, he also suggests that gathering around political ideals serve just as well as religious ideas to facilitate and intensify the emergent nature of sociality. One is merely the other “transfigured.” Thus, there is no real difference ‘between Christians’ celebrating the principle dates of Christ’s life...and a citizens’ meeting commemorating the advent of a new moral charter or some other great event