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The Dualism of Human Nature and its Social Conditions

Emile Durkheim

Although sociology is defined as the science of society, in reality it cannot deal with human groups, which are the immediate concern of its research, without in the end tackling the individual, the ultimate element of which these groups are composed. For society cannot constitute itself unless it penetrates individual consciousnesses and fashions them 'in its image and likeness'; so, without wanting to be overdogmatic, it can be said with confidence that a number of our mental states, including some of the most essential, have a social origin. Here it is the whole that, to a large extent, constitutes the part; hence it is impossible to try to explain the whole without explaining the part, if only as an after-effect. The product *par excellence* of collective activity is the set of intellectual and moral goods called civilization; this is why Auguste Comte made sociology the science of civilization. But, in another aspect, it is civilization that has made man into what he is; it is this that distinguishes him from the animal. Man is man only because he is civilized. To look for the causes and conditions on which civilization depends is therefore to look, as well, for the causes and conditions of what, in man, is most specifically human. This is how sociology, while drawing on psychology, which it cannot do without, brings to this, in a just return, a contribution that equals and exceeds in importance the services it receives from it. It is only through historical analysis that it is possible to understand what man is formed of; for it is only in the course of history that he has taken form.

The work we have recently published on the *Elemental Forms of Religious Life* may illustrate by example this general truth. In attempting a sociological study of religious phenomena, we have been led to glimpse a way to explain scientifically one of the most typical distinctive features of our nature. Since, to our great surprise, the principle on which this explanation is based does not seem to have been noticed by the critics who have so far discussed the book, it has seemed to us that it could be of interest to set it out in brief to the readers of *Scientia*.

I

This distinctive feature is the constitutional duality of human nature.

At all times, man himself has had a keen sense of this duality. Everywhere, indeed, he has conceived of himself as formed of two radically heterogeneous beings: the body, on the one hand, the soul on the other. Even when the soul is represented under a material form, the material of which it is composed is considered not to be of the same nature as the body. It is said that it is more ethereal, more subtle, more plastic, that it does not affect the senses like truly sensory objects, that it is not subject to the same laws, etc. Not only are these two beings substantially different, but they are, to a large extent, independent of each other, often even in conflict. For centuries it was thought that the soul could, already in this life, escape from the body and lead an autonomous existence from afar. But it is above all at death that this independence has always asserted itself the most clearly. When the body dissolves and melts into nothing, the soul survives it, and in new conditions pursues, for a more or less extensive time, the course of its destiny. It can even be said that, although closely associated, the body and soul do not belong to the same world. The body forms an integral part of the material universe, as made known to us by sensory experience; the homeland of the soul lies elsewhere, and the soul strives unceasingly to return to it. This homeland is the world of sacred things. Accordingly it is invested with a dignity that has always been refused to the body; while this is considered essentially profane, the soul inspires something of the sentiments that are everywhere reserved for that which is divine. It is made of the same substance as sacred beings: it differs from them only in degrees.

A belief so universal and so permanent cannot be purely illusory. For it to be felt, in all known civilizations, that man is double, there must be something in him that has given birth to this sentiment. And indeed, psychological analysis confirms this: at the very core of our inner life, it finds the same duality.

Our intelligence and our activity present two very different forms: there are the sensations¹ and sensory tendencies on the one hand, conceptual thought and moral activity on the other. Each of these two parts of ourselves gravitates round a pole that is its own, and these two poles are not just distinct, they are opposed. Our sensory appetites are necessarily egoistic; they are concerned with our individuality and with it alone. When we satisfy our hunger, thirst, etc., without any other tendency in play, it is ourselves and ourselves alone that we satisfy.² Moral activity, on the contrary, is recognizable by the sign that the rules of conduct to which it conforms are open to universalization; it pursues, then, by definition, impersonal ends. Morality begins only with disinterest, with attachment to something other than ourselves.³ There is the same contrast in the intellectual order. A sensation of colour or of sound is closely dependent on my individual organism and I cannot detach it from this. It is impossible for me to make it pass from my consciousness into the consciousness of another. I can well

invite another to place himself before the same object and experience its action, but the perception he will thus have of it will be his work and will be his, just as mine is my own. Concepts, on the contrary, are always common to a plurality of men. They constitute themselves thanks to words; yet the vocabulary and grammar of a language are neither the work nor property of anybody in particular; they are the product of a collective construction and they express the anonymous collectivity that makes use of them. The idea of man or of animal is not personal to me; it is to a large extent common to me with all the people that belong to the same social group as me. Accordingly, because they are common, concepts are the instrument *par excellence* of all intellectual interchange. It is through them that minds commune. No doubt each of us, in thinking through them, individualizes the concepts that we receive from the community, marks them with our personal imprint; but there is nothing personal that is not open to individualization of this kind.⁴

These two aspects of our psychic life thus oppose one another as the personal and impersonal. There is, within us, a being that represents everything to itself by relation to itself, from its own point of view, and that is concerned, in what it does, only with itself. But there is also another within us, that knows things *sub specie aeternitatis*, as if it draws on another thought than our own, and that at the same time strives, in its acts, to achieve ends that go beyond it. The old formula, *Homo duplex*, is therefore verified by the facts. Indeed, far from us being straightforward, our internal life has something like a double centre of gravity. On the one hand there is our individuality, and, more especially, our body that is its foundation⁵; on the other, everything that, within us, expresses something other than ourselves.

These two groups of states of consciousness are not just different in their origins and properties; there is a veritable antagonism between them. They mutually contradict and negate one another. We cannot give ourselves over to moral ends without moving away from ourselves, without unsettling the instincts and inclinations that are the most deeply rooted in our body. There is no moral act that does not imply a sacrifice, for, as Kant has shown, the law of duty cannot compel obedience without humbling our individual or, for him, our 'empirical' sensibility. This sacrifice we might well accept without resistance, and even with enthusiasm. But even when carried out with a joyous élan, it is still real; the pain that the ascetic seeks is still pain. And this antinomy is so deep and so radical that in the end it can never be resolved. How can we belong altogether to ourselves and altogether to others, or vice versa? The self cannot be something altogether other than itself, for then it would vanish. This is what happens in ecstasy. To think, one must be, one must have an individuality. But, on the other hand, the self cannot be altogether and exclusively itself, for then it would empty of all content. If, to think, one must be, one must also have things to think about. Yet what would consciousness consist of, if it expressed nothing except the body and its states? We cannot live without

representing to ourselves the world around us and the objects of every sort that fill it. But by this alone, that we represent them to ourselves, they enter into us and thus become part of ourselves; as a result we hold by them, we attach ourselves to them at the same time as to ourselves. Consequently, there is in us something other than ourselves to call up our activity. It is an error to think it is easy for us to live as egoists. Absolute egoism and absolute altruism are ideal limits that can never be attained in reality. They are states that we can approach indefinitely, but without ever adequately actualizing.

It is no different in the order of knowledge. We do not understand except in thinking through concepts. But sensory reality is not cut out to enter spontaneously and by itself the framework of our concepts. It resists this, and to make it pliant with it, we must force it to some extent, submit it to all sorts of laborious operations that alter it to make it assimilable by the mind, and we never manage to triumph completely over its resistance. Our concepts never succeed in mastering our sensations and translating them completely into intelligible terms. They take a conceptual form only if they lose that which is most concrete in them, that which gets them heard by our sensory being and moves it to action: they then become something fixed and dead. Hence we cannot understand things without giving up, in part, a feeling for life, and we cannot feel it without giving up an understanding of it. No doubt we sometimes dream of a science that would adequately express all of reality. But it is an ideal that we might well keep on getting nearer to, but that it is impossible for us to achieve.

This internal contradiction is one of the characteristics of our nature. According to Pascal's formula, man is both 'angel and beast', without being exclusively one or the other. The upshot is that we are never completely in accord with ourselves, since we cannot follow one of our two natures without the other suffering as a result. Our joys can never be pure; there is always some pain mixed in with them, since we cannot simultaneously satisfy the two beings within us. It is this disagreement, this perpetual division against ourselves that forms both our grandeur and our wretchedness: our wretchedness, since we are thus condemned to live in suffering; our grandeur also, since it is this that distinguishes us among all beings. The animal takes its pleasure in a unilateral, exclusive movement: man alone is obliged, as a matter of course, to give suffering a place in his life.

Thus the traditional antithesis of body and soul is not an empty mythological conception, without foundation in reality. It is indeed true that we are double, that we actualize an antinomy. But then a question arises that philosophy and even positive psychology cannot avoid: what is the source of this duality and antinomy? What is the source of how, to take another of Pascal's phrases, we are this 'monster of contradictions', who can never be completely satisfied with himself? If this curious state is one of the distinctive traits of humanity, the science of man must seek to account for it.

II

The solutions that have been proposed for this problem are, however, neither numerous nor varied.

Two doctrines, which have had an important place in the history of thought, consider they remove the difficulty by denying it, that is, by treating the duality of man as mere appearance; they are empiricist and idealist monism.

According to the first, concepts are only more or less elaborate sensations: they would entirely consist of groups of similar images to which a same word may give a sort of individuality; but they would not have any reality outside of the images and sensations of which they are the extension. In the same way, moral activity would just be another aspect of self-interested activity: the person who obeys duty would only be obeying their own well-informed interest. Seen in these terms the problem disappears: man is one and, if serious frictions arise within him, it is because he does not act or think in line with his nature. The concept, rightly understood, could not oppose the sensation from which it draws its existence, and the moral act could not find itself in conflict with the egoistic act since it comes, at bottom, from utilitarian motives, if, at least, there is no mistake about the true nature of morality. Unfortunately, the facts that set up the question still stand altogether intact. It remains the case that man has in all times been someone troubled and vexed; he has always felt torn, divided against himself, and the beliefs and practices to which, in all societies, throughout all civilizations, he has attached the highest value, had and still have as their concern, not to suppress these inevitable discords, but to attenuate their consequences, to give them a meaning and purpose, to make them more bearable, to provide consolation for it at the very least. It is inadmissible that this state of universal and chronic malaise has been a product of a simple aberration, that man has been the author of his own suffering and has foolishly persisted in it, if his true nature predisposed him to live harmoniously; for experience would have been bound in time to dispel so deplorable an error. At the very least, it should have explained where this inconceivable blindness might come from.—Moreover, it is known what serious objections the empiricist hypothesis stirs up. It has never been able to explain how the inferior could become the superior, how individual, obscure and confused sensation could become the impersonal, clear and distinct concept, how self-interest could transform into disinterest.

It is no different with the absolute idealist. For him, too, reality is one: it is made up solely of concepts, just as, for the empiricist, it is made up exclusively of sensations. To an absolute intelligence, seeing things as they are, the world would appear as a system of definite ideas, linked with each other in equally definite relations. As for sensations, they are nothing in themselves; they are only concepts that are blurred and mixed up with each other. The aspect under which they are revealed to us in experience arises solely from our inability to distinguish their elements. Given all this,

then there would not be any fundamental opposition between us and the world, or between the different parts of ourselves. The one we think we perceive would be due to a simple error of perspective that only needs correction. But in that case it would have to be evident that it progressively diminishes as the domain of conceptual thought expands, as we learn to think less through sensation and more through concepts, that is, as science develops and becomes a more important factor for us in the life of the mind. Sadly, history fails to bear out these optimistic hopes. Human unease, on the contrary, seems to go on increasing. The religions that insist most on contradictions in the thick of which we struggle, that aim most to offer us a picture of man as a tormented anguished being, these are the great religions of modern peoples, while the simple cults of inferior societies give out and inspire a bright confidence.⁶ Yet what religions express is the experience lived through by humanity: it would be quite surprising that our nature unifies and harmonizes if we feel that our dissonances are increasing. Moreover, assuming these dissonances are only superficial and apparent, it would still be necessary to give an account of this appearance. If sensations do not have any existence outside concepts, it would still be necessary to say how it comes about that these do not appear to us just as they are, but come across to us as blurred and confused. What is it that can have forced on them an indistinctiveness obviously contrary to their nature? Idealism is here faced with difficulties the opposite of those so often and so legitimately raised against empiricism. If it has never explained how the inferior can become the superior, how sensation, even in staying itself, can be raised to the dignity of a concept, it is equally hard to understand how the superior can become the inferior, how the concept can alter and degenerate in such a way as to become a sensation. This collapse cannot have been spontaneous. It must have been determined by some contrary principle. But there is no place for a principle of this kind in an essentially monist doctrine.

If we set aside these theories, which eliminate the problem rather than resolve it, the only ones in circulation and worth scrutiny confine themselves to a statement of the fact to be explained, but without giving an account of it.

There is, to begin with, the metaphysical explanation for which Plato gave the formula. Man would be double since two worlds meet in him: on the one hand, that of non-intelligent and amoral matter, on the other, that of Ideas, the Mind and the Good. Since these two worlds are naturally opposed they battle within us, and since we draw from one as from the other, we are in conflict with ourselves. But if this wholly metaphysical response has the merit of affirming without trying to weaken the fact in need of interpretation, it confines itself to a hypostasization of two aspects of human nature, without giving an account of it. To say that we are double because there are two contrary forces within us is to repeat the problem in different terms, not to resolve it. It would remain necessary to say where these two forces come from and why it is they are in opposition. It is no

doubt quite possible to grant that the world of Ideas and of the Good contains its reason for existence in itself, through the supremacy attributed to it. But how does it come about that there is outside it a principle of evil, darkness and non-being? What useful function can this have?

Something one understands even less is how these two worlds in total opposition, and consequently bound to drive out and exclude each other, still tend to unite and interpenetrate in a way that gives birth to the hybrid and contradictory beings that we are. It seems their antagonism would have to keep them apart and make their marriage impossible. To draw on platonic language, the Idea, which is perfect by definition, possesses the plenitude of being; it is therefore sufficient to itself; it needs only itself to exist. Why should it stoop down to matter, with which contact can only denature it and make it demean itself? Or then again, why should matter aspire to the contrary principle, which it repudiates, and let it penetrate it? But in the end it is man who is the theatre *par excellence* of the conflict we have described; it is not found among other beings. Yet man is not the only setting where, according to the hypothesis, the two worlds ought to meet.

Still less able to explain things is the theory it is commonest to make do with nowadays: its foundation of human dualism no longer lies in two metaphysical principles at the basis of the whole of reality, but in the existence, within us, of two antithetical faculties. We possess both a faculty to think under the forms of the individual, which constitute sensibility, and a faculty to think under the forms of the universal and impersonal, which constitute reason. Our activity, for its part, displays two altogether opposite characteristics, depending on whether it is under the sway of sensory or of rational motives. Kant, more than anyone, has insisted on the contrast between reason and sensibility, between rational and sensory activity. But, if this classification of facts is perfectly legitimate, it does not offer any solution to the problem of concern to us. Given that we possess an aptitude to live both a personal and an impersonal life, what we need to know is not what name it is suitable to give these contrary aptitudes, but how they coexist in one and the same being, despite their opposition. Where does our ability come from to take a simultaneous part in these two existences? How are we made of two halves that appear to belong to two different beings? When each has been given a different name, the question has not been advanced a single step.

If there is too often satisfaction with this wholly verbal answer, it is because, very generally, the mental nature of man is considered a sort of ultimate given, not to be accounted for. Accordingly it is thought everything is said when, in looking for the causes of such and such a fact, it is linked to a human faculty. But why should the human mind, which all in all is only a system of phenomena in every way comparable with other observable phenomena, lie over and beyond explanation? We now know that our bodily organism is a product of a genesis; why should it be otherwise with our psychic constitution? And if there is anything about us that calls for urgent explanation, it is precisely the strange antithesis that it finds itself bringing about.

III

Moreover, what we have said *en route* about the religious form under which the human dualism is always expressed is enough to indicate that the answer to the question must be sought in a wholly different direction. Everywhere, as we have said, the soul has been considered a sacred thing; it has been seen as a fragment of the divinity that lives only for a time an earthly life and that tends, as of itself, to return to its place of origin. In this way it is opposed to the body, which is regarded as profane; and everything in our mental life that depends directly on the body—the sensations, sensory appetites—shares the same character. Thus they are described as inferior forms of our activity, while reason and moral activity are accorded a higher dignity: they are the faculties through which, we are told, we communicate with God. Even the man the most emancipated from all institutional religious belief represents the opposition to himself under a form that, if not identical, is at least comparable. Our different psychic functions are ascribed unequal value; they are ranked among one another, and it is those that depend on the body that are at the bottom of the hierarchy. But also, we have shown⁷ that there is no morality that is not permeated with religiosity. Even for the secular mind, Duty, the moral imperative, is an august sacred thing, and reason, this indispensable auxiliary of moral activity, naturally inspires analogous sentiments. The duality of our nature is therefore only a particular case of this division of things into the sacred and profane that is found at the basis of all religions, and it must be explained according to the same principles.

Yet it is precisely this explanation that we have attempted in the work, already cited, on *The Elemental Forms of Religious Life*. We set out to show that sacred things are simply collective ideals attached on to material objects.⁸ The ideas and sentiments developed by a collectivity, whatever it may be, are invested owing to their origin with an influence, an authority, which brings the particular people who think them and believe in them to represent them to themselves under the form of moral forces that rule over and support them. When these ideals move our will, we feel led, driven, carried along by unusual energies, which clearly do not come from us but impose themselves on us, and for which we have feelings of respect and reverential awe, but also of gratitude for the comfort we receive from them; for they cannot communicate themselves to us without raising our *ton vital*. And these *sui generis* virtues are not due to any mysterious action; they are simply the effects of the scientifically analyzable but singularly fertile and creative psychic process called fusion, the communion of a plurality of individual consciousnesses in a common consciousness. But on the other hand, collective representations can constitute themselves only through embodiment in material objects, things, beings of all sorts, shapes, movements, sounds, words, etc., which outwardly sign and symbolize them; for it is only through expressing their feelings, translating them into signs, symbolizing them outwardly that individual consciousnesses, by

nature closed to one another, can feel they commune and are in unison.⁹ The things that play this role necessarily draw on the same feelings as the mental states that they represent and in a way materialize. They, too, are respected, held in awe, or sought as helping powers. They are therefore not put on the same level as the ordinary things that concern only our material individuality; they are set apart from these; we assign them an altogether different place in the totality of the real; we separate them: it is this radical separation that essentially constitutes their sacred character.¹⁰ And this system of conceptions is not purely imaginary and hallucinatory; for the moral forces that these things arouse in us are indeed real, just as the ideas are real which words call up for us after having helped form them. Here, then, is the source of the dynamogenic influence that religions have in all times exercised over men.

But it is impossible for these ideals, the product of group life, to take form and above all endure, unless they penetrate individual consciousnesses and are organized there in a lasting fashion. The great religious, moral and intellectual conceptions that societies draw from their heart during periods of creative effervescence, individuals carry off within themselves once the group has dissolved and social communion has done its work. No doubt once effervescence has subsided and everyone, resuming their private existence, moves away from the source where they get such warmth and such life, this does not continue at the same level of intensity. Yet it is not extinguished, since the action of the group does not completely stop, but constantly gives back to these great ideals a little of the force they tend to lose to egoistic passions and everyday personal preoccupations: this is what public festivals, ceremonies, rites of every kind are for. It is just that in thus coming to mingle with our individual life, these various ideals are themselves individualized; in close relation with our other representations, they harmonize with them, with our temperament, character, habits, etc. Each of us puts our own imprint on them; this is how everyone has their personal way of thinking about the beliefs of their Church, the rules of common morality, the fundamental notions that serve as a framework of conceptual thought. But even in individualizing and thus becoming elements of our personality, collective ideals still hold on to their characteristic attribute, namely, the prestige with which they are invested. Even when our own, they speak within us in a wholly different tone and with another accent than the rest of our states of consciousness: they command, they inspire in us respect, we do not feel on a level-footing with them. We understand that they represent something in us superior to us. It is therefore not without reason that man feels himself double: he really is double. There really are in him two groups of states of consciousness that contrast with one another in their origins, their nature, and the ends towards which they tend. One expresses only our organism and the objects with which it is most directly in relationship. Strictly individual, these states of consciousness attach us only to ourselves, and we can no more detach them from us than we can detach ourselves from our body. The others, on the

contrary, come from society; they translate it in us and attach us to something that goes beyond us. Being collective, they are impersonal; they turn us towards ends that we share in common with other men; it is through them and through them alone that we can commune with another. It is therefore indeed true that we are formed of two parts, and are like two beings who, even in their association, are made of very different elements and move us in opposite directions.

This duality corresponds, in sum, with the double existence that we lead simultaneously: one purely individual, which has its roots in our organism, the other social, which is nothing except an extension of society. The very nature of the elements between which there exists the antagonism we have described is evidence that this is its origin. In effect, it is between the sensations and the sensory appetites on the one hand, and intellectual and moral life on the other, that the conflicts take place, of which we have given examples. It is evident that passions and egoistic tendencies derive from our individual constitution, while our rational activity, whether practical or theoretical, is closely dependent on social causes. We have indeed often had occasion to establish that the rules of morality are norms developed by society;¹¹ the obligatory character that marks them is nothing other than the authority of society, communicating itself to everything that comes from it. On the other hand, in the book that is the occasion of the present study and that we can only refer to here, we have tried to show that concepts, the material of all logical thought, were, in origin, collective representations: the impersonality that characterizes them is proof that they are the product of an action itself impersonal and anonymous.¹² We have even found reasons to speculate that the great fundamental concepts termed categories were formed on the model of social things.¹³

The painful character of the dualism is explained by this hypothesis. No doubt, if society were only the natural and spontaneous development of the individual, these two parts of ourselves would harmonize and adjust with one another without conflict and without friction: the first, being only the extension and even completion of the second, would not encounter in it any resistance. But in fact society has its own nature and consequently altogether different demands than those that are involved in our nature as an individual. The interests of the whole are not necessarily those of the part; this is why society cannot form or maintain itself without requiring of us perpetual sacrifices that are costly to us. For the sole reason that it goes beyond us, it obliges us to go beyond ourselves; and to go beyond itself is, for a being, in some measure to emerge from its own nature, something which does not happen without a more or less painful tension. Willed attention is, as it is known, a faculty that starts to develop in us only under the action of society. But attention presupposes effort; since, to be attentive, it is necessary for us to interrupt the spontaneous rush of our representations, to stop consciousness from just letting itself go with the movement of dispersion that naturally sweeps it along, in a word, to do violence to some of our most tyrannical inclinations. And since the part of our social

being in the complete being that we are becomes ever greater with the advance of history, it is wholly improbable that an era should ever open up in which man has less need to resist himself and can live a life less tense and more at ease. Everything indicates, on the contrary, that the place of effort will always go on increasing with civilization.

Notes

1. To sensations, one should add images; but since these are only sensations living on after themselves, it seems to us unnecessary to mention them separately. It is the same with the conglomerations of images and sensations that are perceptions.
2. There are undoubtedly some egoistic dispositions that are not concerned with material things. But sensory appetites are the type, *par excellence*, of egoistic tendencies. We even think that the inclinations that attach us to a different kind of concern, whatever the role that egoistic motivation plays in it, necessarily imply a movement of expansion outside of ourselves that goes beyond pure egoism. This is the case, for example, with love of glory, of power, etc.
3. See our paper, at the French Society of Philosophy, on 'La détermination du fait moral' (*Bulletin de la Société Fr. de Phil.*, 1906, pp. 113 et sq.).
4. We do not mean to refuse the individual the faculty of forming concepts. He has learned to form representations of this kind from the collectivity. But, even the concepts that he forms in this manner have the same character as the others: they are constructed in a way to be able to be universalized. Even when they are the work of a personality, they are, in part, impersonal.
5. We say *our individuality* and not *our personality*. Although the two words are often taken for one another, it is important to distinguish them with the greatest care. The personality is made up essentially of supra-individual elements. (See, on this point, *Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, pp. 386-390).
6. See *Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, pp. 320-321, 580.
7. See 'La détermination du fait moral', in the *Bulletin de la Société Française de Philosophie*, 1906, p. 125.
8. See *Formes élémentaires*, etc., pp. 268-342. We cannot reproduce here the facts and analyses on which our thesis rests: we confine ourselves to going back over, in brief, the principal steps of the line of argument developed in our book.
9. *Les formes élémentaires*, etc., pp. 329 et sq.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 53 et sq.
11. *Division du travail social*, *passim*. Cf. 'La détermination du fait moral', in the *Bulletin de la Société Française de Philosophie*, 1906.
12. *Formes élémentaires*, etc., pp. 616 et sq.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 12-18, pp. 205 et sq., pp. 336 et sq., pp. 386, 508, 627.