

## Durkheim's Naturalistic Moral Education: Pluralism, Social Change, and Autonomy

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Whatever happened to Emile Durkheim? The progenitor of modern educational sociological theory and research, today he is not so much dismissed as ignored. When mentioned in recent educational writing, he has become a stock character, a convenient trope whenever someone wants to argue against the idea that education is “mere socialization.”<sup>1</sup> In those rare occasions when he is heeded, it is commonplace to view Durkheim as a “conservative” thinker who valued social quietism over individual freedom. The last decade has seen many figures from the history of social science influencing educational discourse—Vygotsky, Wittgenstein, Bateson, Goffman, Garfinkle, Weber, Habermas, and the ever-present Marx and Dewey. It is at least curious that the man who gave so much credibility to sociology, anthropology and educational research has disappeared from educational discourse. Durkheim has a “public relations problem.” The problem is not Durkheim’s, of course, but ours in the education community, for we have forgotten a rich source of social and educational ideas.

My interest here is not antiquarian. Certainly Durkheim has had a tremendous, albeit indirect, influence on the history of educational thought, a history that has yet to be adequately told. If he has nothing to contribute to current, pressing issues in education I would be happy to leave him for historians of educational ideas. I argue that he provided at least one very important, timely idea for moral education. Contrary to recent arguments that the ideal of individual autonomy is inappropriate in a pluralistic society, Mark Cladis has recently shown that Durkheim’s articulation of moral autonomy is consistent with social pluralism.<sup>2</sup> Here I will show that Durkheim’s notion of autonomy is not only consistent with pluralism, his argument for autonomy was based upon his social analysis of increasing social pluralism and change. To explain the significance of Durkheim’s idea, I situate his argument for autonomy in the context of his *oeuvre*, and his *oeuvre* in his cultural and intellectual milieu. Durkheim’s specific recommendations for moral education are indeed questionable, yet his perspective on autonomy is a complex and provocative understanding of the relationship between individuals and society.

### DURKHEIM’S NATURALISTIC MORAL THEORY

Durkheim was foremost a sociologist, and his theory of moral education is a sociological theory. His whole intellectual life can be seen as grappling with the anxiety and strife that pervaded France between the Franco-Prussian and First World Wars. As Professor of Pedagogy at Bordeaux and later Paris, he viewed mandatory, publicly funded schooling as a primary social institution for the renewal of France, teaching citizens to negotiate collective life, mutual rights and obligations. The recommendations in *Moral Education* and *Evolution of Pedagogy in France*, read without the context of his sociological writing, would seem to support traditional conservative virtues education.<sup>3</sup>

Durkheim wanted us to understand that morals are “social facts” and that ethical ideas have their basis and primary justification in a particular social context. His naturalized perspective is consistently misinterpreted, most often placed in the virtues tradition (for example, Aristotle, Sts. Paul or Ignatius, or contemporary character education), or occasionally the justificationalist tradition (for example, Plato, Locke, Mill, Kant, Kohlberg, or Gilligan). To be sure, Durkheim framed his arguments against the background of these ethical ideas. Such was the intellectual context of his day, and provided the only language with which he could make himself understood. But to see his arguments for discipline, social attachment, and autonomy as a list of virtues to be taught or bases for ethical justification is to misread his intentions. To understand his intentions we need to examine his broader social theory.

In his desire to understand the social problems of his time and develop his naturalized theory of morals, Durkheim systematically critiqued both utilitarian-liberals (justificationalists) and traditional conservatives (virtues). He argued that both intellectual traditions ignore important aspects of moral life, even as both recognized important aspects of their social contexts. The liberal tradition recognized the increasing importance of individualism and individuals as moral decision makers, yet systematically failed to recognize the importance of interpersonal relationships and social traditions. Conservatives, on the other hand, did emphasize the impact of an individual's decisions on others and the wisdom of tradition, but insisted on seeing individualism as pathological and failed to understand the importance of social change.

In contrast, Durkheim sought to ground his ideas on a naturalized study of society rather than *a priori* arguments. In particular, he focused on two social facts—social pluralism and rapid social change—which necessitated a fundamentally different approach to moral education. Social pluralism required that individuals live in multiple communities with different beliefs and values, yet retain a sense of consistency and integrity across those social contexts. Rapid social change meant that people had to be able to adjust and reconsider their beliefs as their society changed. Thus, Durkheim's key problematic:

If children are to be given an idea of what moral life is, they must therefore be made to feel that it is normally subject to variations, yet without these variations discrediting it in their eyes. They must be made to understand that the morality of the future will probably not be that of today. At the same time the morality of today will still appear worthy of their respect.<sup>4</sup>

Contemporary approaches to moral education continue to emphasize ahistorical moral virtues or ethical justifications, yet the fundamental social facts of social pluralism and rapid social change are probably even more important today than they were in Durkheim's time.

Durkheim felt that Kant had reconceptualized the relationship between individual-justificationalist and the social-virtues traditions better than any other philosopher. Autonomy derives from the Greek, *autos* (self) and *nomos* (rule), and Kant appropriated the Greek notion of civic self-rule to explain the importance of individual self-rule. Autonomy is the condition of living in accordance to laws one gives oneself, or stated negatively, not being under the control of another. Thus,

autonomy has both a descriptive and a normative sense. A person can be described as autonomous, meaning that the person is neither unnecessarily dependent on others nor overwrought by emotions, and can complete self-assigned tasks. A person can also assert their autonomy, meaning that the person has rights upon which others cannot infringe. Durkheim interpreted Kant as having derived his normative claim for individual moral autonomy from his transcendental claim that humans are rational agents. *Qua* rational agents, people are capable of moral deliberation and must be accorded the right to deliberate. From this transcendental claim, Kant provided an ahistorical argument for the ethical basis of right action, and the rights and obligations of people.

Durkheim's naturalistic critique of Kant sought to understand why moral autonomy had become important, and the social conditions that make Kant's argument sensible. Durkheim was, in Rorty's sense, a historicist because he denied that there is a deepest level of the self or any such thing as human nature. Indeed, Durkheim was the first to argue systematically that "socialization, and thus historical circumstance, goes all the way down."<sup>5</sup> Durkheim argued against ethicists and educational theorists who "assert that human nature is universally and eternally the same. It is regarded as self-evident that to the question of how to think about the world and how to behave in it there is a single right answer which holds true for the whole of the human race."<sup>6</sup> Durkheim underscored the jingoism of ethicists who sought to discover ahistorical human nature and use schools as a means to elicit or instill it. Durkheim would rather we understood that all ethics and education is sectarian, for a particular people at a particular time.

Durkheim's naturalized views of morality led him to establish a "science of society," and apply his findings to France's social problems. Durkheim asserted the importance of sociality in the human make up in modern, complex societies, an aspect of humanity he felt was undervalued. However, he rejected the pre-Revolutionary hegemony of the church and monarchy as outdated social institutions, inadequate for new social conditions.

#### NATURALIZED JUSTIFICATION OF MORAL AUTONOMY

His first naturalized study of morals appeared in his doctoral dissertation.<sup>7</sup> Foremost a critique of Adam Smith, Durkheim stressed the limitations of mechanistic economic theories that portrayed division of labor as a necessary good.<sup>8</sup> He argued that division of labor was one manifestation of much broader changes in industrial societies. In traditional societies people lived in largely self-contained, homogenous communities. Industrial, urban life necessitated interacting with a variety of people, and negotiating life and work together. Morals had changed. People could not rely on habituated or conventional responses. Life had become far too complex for social norms to prescribe moral action in every instance. Instead, social norms emphasized individuality in responding to social and moral problems. Complex, industrial societies responded to changing social circumstances by *requiring* adults to live autonomous lives. Simply behaving correctly could no longer constitute moral action, contrary to traditional conservatives. A person must intend an action to be moral. The collective conscience did not play a less significant role, but had changed its character to require greater individual conscience and

consciousness. In this way, throughout his career, he trumpeted his critique of the idea that a state is supreme to its citizens.

Durkheim further explored the complex historical and social development of individual autonomy in the lectures published as *Evolution of Educational Thought*. Humanists assumed that individuals are capable of autonomously performing their responsibilities, making individuality “natural.” They responded to the social necessity of individuality by developing a “cult of man” that portrayed individual differences as natural and praiseworthy. Liberal philosophers provided ethical ideas that justified these new morals, and attempted to provide *a priori* bases for deliberating moral action. Utilitarian philosophers, in turn, had provided a psychology to describe how people might deliberate. Durkheim’s naturalized history of ethics enabled him to show how autonomy became fundamental to the Western idea of being human.

Consistent with the individualistic, justificationalist tradition of ethical thought, Durkheim argued that “taken by itself, civilization has no intrinsic and absolute value; what makes it valuable is its correspondence to certain needs.”<sup>9</sup> People developed societies for their benefit, societies create moral norms because of the necessities of social action, and social action should benefit individuals. Complex, industrial and urban societies created social norms that help individuals by facilitating individuality in responding to moral deliberation. At macroscopic levels of analysis, individual autonomy and morality are not antithetical and are mutually dependent in complex, pluralistic urban societies. At microscopic and day-to-day levels, social mores will often be contrary to individual wishes. Recognizing this, Durkheim did not devise a normative theory to explain away this fundamental problem. “If, from a certain point of view, there is antagonism between them, it is not because they serve different ends. On the contrary, it is because they lead to the same end, but through opposing means.”<sup>10</sup>

Durkheim argued for three functional ways to overcome this conflict: first, ensure that individuals recognize their duty to society and act upon that duty with regularity; second, ensure that individuals are emotionally attached to social groups so that social goals become personal goal; third, enable individuals to deliberate about moral action to maintain the social order that helps individuals. These three goals form Durkheim’s recommendations in *Moral Education*. Schools must prepare children to live autonomous lives, teaching why actions are moral, what purposes they serve: “to teach morality is neither to preach nor to indoctrinate; it is to explain” (*ME*, 120). If we understand the reasons, rational and historical, for our moral norms and actions, then we can adjust them when the conditions of social life change. His theory of moral education reflects his complex understanding of social life, recognizing the importance of habit, emotion, and reason in maintaining social institutions that make life better for individuals, and schools play an important role in all three.

#### NATURALIZED CRITIQUE OF LIBERALISM

While Durkheim recognized the importance of the utilitarian liberal tradition, he also stressed that individuality is not reducible to the individual. Deliberated

moral action is only possible when individuals are inculcated into the elaborate social institutions available in complex societies. The benefits of living in civil society and conforming to its restrictions normally outweigh the limitations.

Since the superiority of society to [people] is not simply physical but intellectual and moral, [society] has nothing to fear from critical examination. By making [people] understand by how much the social being is richer, more complex, more permanent than the individual being, reflection can only reveal to [them] the intelligible reasons for the subordination demanded of [them] and for the sentiments of attachment and respect which habit has fixed in [their] heart.<sup>11</sup>

He expressed the common view of many that French society was decaying because of an overemphasis on egoistic individualism.<sup>12</sup> This was not a philosophical problem; it was a sociological problem. Statistics indicated that France's industrial and commercial professions held the greater proportion of suicides. Durkheim asserted that this was due to their continual mismatch between needs and resources, a result of social pluralism and rapid social change. People in urban, industrial societies had a relatively unstable life compared with agricultural and crafts people. He called this mismatch "anomie." "Anomie, therefore, is a regular and specific factor in suicide in our modern societies....[It] results from [people's] activity lacking regulation and...consequent suffering."<sup>13</sup> More generally, anomic people transgress social mores because they do not understand social mores and are not sufficiently integrated into society for other people to correct their actions. Society was unable to exert proper control on their desires, allowing desires and resources to become mismatched. Consistent with the traditional conservatives, Durkheim reminded his readers that only in civil society can we be individuated, feel the constraints of society, and yearn for the spontaneity that social norms inhibit. "We must, then, be receptive to [society's] influences, rather than turning back jealously upon ourselves to protect our autonomy" (*ME*, 72).

Simply acting to benefit specific other people in an economic arrangement is morally neutral, a difficulty with social contract and utilitarian theories. To refute the idea that society is simply the sum of individuals in economic or egoistic transactions, he pointed to the collective representations embodied in ritual, language, social institutions, manners: that is, "social facts."<sup>14</sup> The collective can do more than individuals working alone. Shared representations, resources and experiences enable society to outlive individuals to benefit future citizens. In part, these shared representations define a citizen's rights and duties, the sphere of decisions and responsibilities society has delegated to the individual. Moral actions are those whose beneficiary is society. "To act morally is to act in terms of the collective interest" (*ME*, 59). Morality is good because it makes society possible and society makes a richer, more varied life possible. Durkheim argued that respect for authority is not incompatible with autonomy, and he was sure that his science of society would provide the reasons so that individual autonomy could coexist with social attachment.

The constraints required to benefit from social life pose limitations for individual freedom. If one wants to gain the benefits of social life, one has to conform "to some degree." The degree depends upon their developed understanding of their

social contexts and their ability to work within those constraints. His approach, however, is markedly different than traditional conservatives. He focused on mastery of skills and development of understanding and ability rather than inculcating personality traits. He stressed that social norms do not define the extent of morally responsible action. Social institutions *per se* are neutral with respect to moral autonomy. Some institutional arrangements are conducive to autonomy, others limit or quash autonomy. Durkheim wanted us to look in both directions at once: look at society from the perspective of the developing person, and the institutional arrangements needed to foster autonomy; and look at personal development from the perspective of developing and maintaining healthy social institutions.

#### A NATURALIZED MORAL AUTONOMY

Durkheim's "autonomy" is rather different than Kant's ahistorical transcendental justification, and also rather different than the common conflation of autonomy and freedom.

To be autonomous means, for the human being, to understand the necessities he has to bow to and accept them with full knowledge of the facts. Nothing that we do can make the laws of things other than they are, but we free ourselves of them in thinking of them, that is in making them ours by thought. This is what gives democracy a moral superiority. Because it is a system based on reflection, it allows citizens to accept the laws of the country with more intelligence and thus less passively. Because there is a constant flow of communication between themselves and the State, the State is for individuals no longer like an exterior force that imparts a wholly mechanical impetus to them. Owing to constant exchanges between them and the State, its life becomes linked with theirs, just as their life does with that of the State.<sup>15</sup>

The necessity for considered, context constrained moral action augured Durkheim's sociological theory of moral autonomy.

Autonomy was neither a primary good nor a symptom of a pathological society, as the liberals and conservatives argued respectively. The desire and exhibition of autonomy is a healthy expression of a new form of social solidarity and response to new social conditions. The autonomous person better understands the constraints and possibilities, social and psychological, on a decision, and acts in the collective interest because of numerous and firm social attachments. An autonomous person may transgress a social mores, but only because they thoroughly understood social norms and needs, and felt that the transgression was justified for society's benefit. He gave Christ and Socrates as examples of autonomous people who understood how their societies needed to change. "Socrates expressed, more clearly than his judges, the morality suited for his time."<sup>16</sup> Durkheim underplayed revolution because his life and country were ripped by revolutions. Rather, he stressed vigilant care of social institutions.

#### NATURALIZED MORAL EDUCATION

Recognizing one's obligation to abide by social norms, duty, and consistently acting according to those norms, regularity, comprise what Durkheim called discipline. Discipline helps us deal with the uncertainty of life, especially the uncertainty of other people's actions, by greatly constraining the possibilities. Social rituals, embodied in manners, tact, etiquette and legal obligations, should be

understood as cognitive, physical, and emotional buffers that help to decrease sensory stimuli and deliberation. Thus, “[t]here enter quite utilitarian considerations, which are intrinsic to the nature of the act and to its outcomes, possible or probable” (*ME*, 30). If we were forced to negotiate behavior for each new situation, we would not be able to maintain complex societies. Discipline also helps us to regulate our desires, seeking an equilibrium state with an appropriate balance of ability and desire. Discipline keeps us centered about this equilibrium, neither expecting too much nor too little. Regularity of behavior allows us to function at a fairly high level of abstraction because we do not need to worry about relatively mundane things. This emphasis on learning social norms was the basis of Piaget’s later study of morality, where he saw that children’s attitudes towards rules and intentionality changed as their cognitive abilities improved.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, Durkheim emphasized the necessity of accustoming the child at an early age to self-control and moderation: “we can make [them] feel that [they] should not yield without reservation to [their] inclinations, but that there is always a limit beyond which he ought not to go” (*ME*, 142). The child becomes aware that moral forces are unlike physical forces, which are beyond control. These moral constraints are open to circumvention but it is unwise to do so. In this way the child learns to take responsibility for actions and be aware of the nature of actions, understanding which actions are correct.

Initially, the motivation to obey expectations must be external, but as the collective conscience becomes internalized the individual becomes self-regulating. In early life it is through obeying a person who has moral authority, usually a parent or teacher, that the child learns to want to imitate the authority to gain authority. Secular teachers are denied a source of moral authority, without which they have difficulty inculcating the skills, knowledge, and disposition their students need to intelligently understand social life. The changing nature of social norms led to the difficulty of exploring social reality without having society and morality lose their sacred character. A leap of faith about the goodness of social mores is necessary, Durkheim tells us, because we cannot completely explain social life rationally. Schools and other social institutions must inculcate a willingness to accept the essential goodness of society for students to be able to behave morally later.

Learning to act in terms of the collective interest is the role Durkheim saw for the emotions in education. Durkheim proposes “to link the students as directly as possible with that to which these ideas and feelings refer. Education through direct experience affects the moral as well as the intellectual elements of culture” (*ME*, 97). Only if teachers properly direct children’s emotions can children eventually learn to think for the benefit of society and themselves. We teach children which emotions are appropriate and under which circumstances. Schooling that does not do so could not seriously be regarded as educational, because it does not regard the individual’s life as significant. Durkheim understood that emotions are at once fundamental to our being and the only means of ensuring moral behavior.

Schools should be the primary place to bridge between parochial family life, and broader political and vocational life. Emotional attachment to specific people and



groups beyond their immediate family enables individuals to serve society voluntarily by serving people they care for. By attaching people emotionally to society, rather than economically, they will choose to act morally.

Collective order structures action through voluntary adherence, through the actor's ability to see and feel in institutions something familiar and desirable....If education is successful, if motivation is fitted to the emotional core of the crystallized structure, then constraint is no longer experienced as such.<sup>18</sup>

Social life acts to smooth over egoistic concerns and helps us concentrate on the collective. Public festivals, ceremonies, and rites help to replenish and reinvigorate our attachments to society so that when we have a concern we are less likely to act in an antisocial way. Our shared beliefs, a product of common life, give us a common vocabulary and common goals that enable us to overcome egoistic desires.

#### AUTONOMY RECONSIDERED

The word "autonomy" is mired in a particular intellectual tradition and evokes connotations quite unlike Durkheim's use of the word, and a neologism might help to distinguish Durkheim's sociological connotation from the Kantian or liberal uses of the word. Nevertheless, Durkheim's articulation and defense of moral autonomy as a primary goal of public schooling was based on his belief that schooling and morals must respond to the changing needs of society. Schools had to change, he argued, to socialize citizens for their current contexts, but enable them to adapt and thrive in a pluralistic society with rapidly changing social norms. His analysis and recommendations for France in the first years of the twentieth century warrant careful attention. The social conditions that worried him are all the more pressing for today's Western, industrial, urban societies.

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1. For example, Kieran Egan, "Educating and Socializing: A Proper Distinction?" *Teachers College Record* 85 (1983): 27-42.

2. For example, John Kekes, *Against Liberalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 159-79; and Mark Cladis "Emile Durkheim and Moral Education in a Pluralistic Society," in *Durkheim and Modern Education*, ed. G. Walford and W.S.F. Pickering (London: Routledge, 1998), 19-32.

3. Emile Durkheim, *Moral Education: A Study in the Theory and Application of the Sociology of Education*, trans. E.K. Wilson and H. Schnurer (New York: Free Press, 1961). This book will be cited as *ME* in the text for all subsequent references. Emile Durkheim, *The Evolution of Educational Thought*, trans. P. Collins. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977). For example, M. Jean Bouas, "The Three R's of Moral Education: Emile Durkheim Revisited," *Educational Forum* 57 (1993): 180-85.

4. Emile Durkheim, "A Discussion on the Effectiveness of Moral Doctrines," in *Durkheim: Essays on Morals and Education*, trans. H.L. Sutcliffe, ed. W.S.F. Pickering (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), 131.

5. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), xiii.

6. Durkheim, *The Evolution of Educational Thought*, 321.

7. Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*, trans. G. Simpson (New York: Free Press, 1933).

8. Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Philadelphia: A. Finley, 1817) and Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. C.J. Bullock (New York: P.F. Collier, 1909).

9. Durkheim, *Division of Labor in Society*, 54.

10. *Ibid.*, 397.



11. Emile Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, trans. S.A. Solovay and J.H. Mueller (New York: The Free Press, 1938), 123.
12. Eugen Weber, *France: Fin de Siécle* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1986).
13. Emile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, trans. J.A. Spaulding and G. Simpson. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952), 258.
14. Durkheim, *Rules of Sociological Method*.
15. Emile Durkheim, *Professional Ethics and Civic Morals* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957), 91.
16. Emile Durkheim, *Sociology and Philosophy*, trans. D. Pocock (London: Cohen and West, 1965), 64-65.
17. Jean Piaget, *Moral Judgement of the Child*, trans. M. Gabain (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1977).
18. J.C. Alexander, "Rethinking Durkheim's Intellectual Development: On the Complex Origins of a Cultural Society," in *Emile Durkheim: Critical Assessments* vol. 1, ed. P. Hamilton (London: Routledge, 1990), 219.