




## Frames of Thought: Durkheim's Concepts Instead of Kant's A Priori Categories \*

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Research Article

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**Abstract:** It is a problem in philosophy how the mind understands nature. How the results of observations come together in a meaningful form. Kant suggests a priori categories for this problem. According to him in the absence of the categories, the objects and phenomena that we perceive are in a relatively independent heap. A priori categories bring those independent pieces of observation together in an organized and meaningful form. Durkheim accepts Kant's approach to a priori categories, however, he suggests a social origin for them. Durkheim's attempt to explain the social origin of the categories results in differences in the number and content of a priori categories that Kant suggested. Durkheim's suggestion changes into general concepts that act as social facts which lead to individuals' thoughts.

**Keywords:** A priori categories, concepts, Durkheim, Kant, thought.

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Durkheim's effort to make sociology a scientific discipline leads him to establish a social basis for epistemology. With the systematic evaluation of Kant in *Critique of Pure Reason*, categories have become a new topic of discussion in the philosophical literature. The same motivation prompted Durkheim to study, especially in his last book, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, which this article is mainly based on, the a priori categories that Kant reintroduced to the philosophical literature. Categories, according to Durkheim, existed before Plato but found their first well-coordinated expression in the works of Aristotle (or Plato).<sup>1</sup> Durkheim's examination of categories has a sociological purpose rather than a philosophical one. As Jones indicated that Durkheim aims to find a solution to a philosophical problem through sociological methods based on the totemic religions of primitive societies.<sup>2</sup> According to Durkheim, who approaches the issue from a sociological point of view, sociology must be separated from philosophy in order to be established as a scientific discipline. In this sense, Durkheim aims to replace his approach with the epistemological argument of Kant, Hume, James, and their followers, which fundamentally changed the philosophical debate on the validity of knowledge.<sup>3</sup> Durkheim agrees with Kant about the existence and function of categories but criticizes him for not showing the source of the categories due to laziness in thought. It may be philosophically absurd to criticize Kant for not showing the origin of a priori categories, but it is sociologically reasonable.

The problem is related to the subject of knowledge. According to Kant, the subject is the individual, while for Durkheim, it is *animal social*. That is why Durkheim sees *sui generis* society as the source of the categories, besides his understanding of categories.

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<sup>1</sup> Although it is unclear whether the categories are in Plato or Aristotle, it can be determined through their texts that Durkheim mentions Plato while Kant associates with Aristotle.

<sup>2</sup> Susan Stedman Jones, "Forms of Thought and Forms of Society: Durkheim and the Question of the Categories," *L'Année Sociologique* 62, no. 2 (2012), 387.

<sup>3</sup> Anne Warfield Rawls, "Durkheim's Epistemology: The Neglected Argument," *American Journal of Sociology* 102, no. 2 (1996), 437.

Trying to demonstrate the origin of the categories' source as social, Durkheim adopts a social constructivist attitude, contrary to the philosophical tradition, and positions them not only in human history and action but also in social existence and collective consciousness.<sup>4</sup> Durkheim did not examine categories in a systematic and interconnected way as Kant did. Durkheim's views on categories can mainly be reached through what he directly said, implied, and assumed. Durkheim's understanding of categories leads to contradictory opinions and interpretations while evaluating his view.

Durkheim sees categories as socially produced concepts but, at the same time, accepts them as an inseparable part of the mind. He associates them with religion in terms of making it possible to be social. In the introduction part of the *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, he defines the categories as follows:

At the root of our judgements, there are certain fundamental notions that dominate our entire intellectual life. It is these ideas that philosophers, beginning with Aristotle, have called the categories of understanding: notions of time, space, number, cause, substance, personality. They correspond to the most universal properties of things. They are like solid frames that confine thought. Thought does not seem to be able to break out of them without destroying itself, since it seems we cannot think of objects that are not in time or space, that cannot be counted, and so forth. The other ideas are contingent and changing, and we can conceive of a man, a society, or an epoch that lacks them; but these fundamental notions seem to us as almost inseparable from the normal functioning of the intellect. They are, as it were, the skeleton of thought. Now, when one analyzes primitive religious beliefs methodically, one naturally finds the principal categories among them. They are born in and from religion; they are a product of religious thought.<sup>5</sup>

Durkheim, who sees universality and necessity as the main

<sup>4</sup> Jones, "Forms of Thought and Forms of Society," 389.

<sup>5</sup> Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 9-10.

feature that distinguishes categories from other knowledge, does not refer to anything other than the study of primitive religions that indicates categories are social. To determine that the categories are of social origin, the "reason" and the "concept" need to be explained in Durkheim's work. He explains the reason in terms of the categories, in fact, in terms of basic concepts. He accepts categories as the most general existing concepts. Because, according to Durkheim, categories can be applied to any real being; they are not dependent on any particular object or individual subject. Durkheim sees categories as the common meeting ground of all minds and at the same time as the necessary meeting place. The reason, which is nothing but a collection of basic categories according to him, has an authority that we cannot escape whenever we want. When we try to get rid ourselves of some of these basic notions, we come across sharp resistance.<sup>6</sup> This means that the notions or the categories, but at the same time the reason, are both independent of individuals and impose themselves on individuals. That reminds Durkheim's *faits sociaux* (social facts) that have to determine the coercive effect on the individual who lives in a society. Primarily due to this property, general concepts can determine thoughts.

According to Durkheim, who thinks logical thought is made of concepts, exploring what kind of a role society may have played in the emergence of logical thought is synonymous with considering what role society may have played in the formation of concepts.<sup>7</sup> If Durkheim's logic in this statement is applied to categories, it can be concluded that categories are the most basic and comprehensive concepts. Investigating what kind of a role society may have played in the birth of concepts is synonymous with investigating what role society played in the formation of categories. In this case, it is essential to understand what "concept" means in Durkheim's work, especially in *Religious Life*.

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<sup>6</sup> Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 13.

<sup>7</sup> Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 434.

Durkheim distinguishes the notion from sensory representations. According to him, sensory representations are in constant flux; even in this flow, they do not remain in a similar situation. Each sensory representation functions precisely at the moment they emerge. On the contrary, the concept is, in a sense, outside the flow of time and events. It is as if in a separate, less active part of the mind.<sup>8</sup> Contrary to sensory representations, the concept does not act on its own with an internal, spontaneous development; it resists change. It is such a way of thinking that it is fixed and clarified at every moment of the time.<sup>9</sup> Though this clarification and fixation are not as constant as expressed. According to Durkheim, "...the categories of human thought (here concepts) are never fixed in a particular form; they are formed, degenerated, reformed. They vary in accordance with time and space."<sup>10</sup> However, the reason, which Durkheim names as divine reason, evoking the Platonic realm of ideas or Aristotle's superlunar world, on the contrary, never changes. Durkheim asks, "How could this invariance account for such constant variability?"<sup>11</sup> With this description, Durkheim places the concept in a position that is between constantly changing sensory representations and never changing perfect representations. Concepts can change, though they probably cannot be changed as long as they are socially 'necessary.' "If it does change, change does not come about because of its nature but because we discovered some imperfection in it because it (probably socially) needs to be rectified."<sup>12</sup> In this sense, while Durkheim criticizes the individual experience for its constant change, he also includes Kant's 'reason' in this critique because it never changes in the face of a slow change in society.

According to Durkheim, a concept is, to some extent, unchangeable, if not universal, at least can be universalized because

<sup>8</sup> Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 434-5.

<sup>9</sup> Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 435

<sup>10</sup> Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 14.

<sup>11</sup> Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 14.

<sup>12</sup> Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 435.

the concept is essentially an impersonal representation.<sup>13</sup> "It is in the form of collective thought that impersonal thought revealed itself to humanity for the first time..."<sup>14</sup> In this sense, a "concept" is not just that of an individual; it is shared by other individuals. Therefore, we cannot transfer a feeling that is experienced individually without a common communication ground with someone else. However, people's minds can communicate through concepts as impersonal representations.<sup>15</sup> Due to the mere existence of society, there has always been a system of representations with extraordinary qualities apart from individual sensations and images. Durkheim considers these representations as a medium of communication and states that through them, minds reach each other, and people understand each other. There is such a power, a spiritual weight, in these social representations that they impose themselves on individual thoughts. The individual realizes the existence of a world of thoughts that transcends himself/herself in the face of this spiritual power. From this moment, s/he realizes that there is a common set of exemplary concepts above his/her individual representations and that s/he must organize her/his personal thoughts according to the concepts. Concepts (or categories) thus fulfill their task by creating a common communication medium.<sup>16</sup>

A concept cannot be viewed as just a general idea. Because Durkheim, based on Kant's definition of synthetic a priori, says that if concepts were only general thoughts, they could not add much to knowledge.<sup>17</sup> As Durkheim points out, a general quality exists in specific elements; the general ones are the specific elements that have been summarized and simplified. Individuals can compare their perceptions and comprehensions with their own special tools, and reveal common features in objects; in short, they

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<sup>13</sup> Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 435.

<sup>14</sup> Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 438.

<sup>15</sup> Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 435.

<sup>16</sup> Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 438.

<sup>17</sup> Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 438.

can generalize, but the qualities that are not found in specific concepts cannot be found in general concepts.<sup>18</sup> If concepts are primarily collective representations, they add to the knowledge that we access through personal experiences, everything society has accumulated over hundreds of years in concepts. In this sense, "thinking with concepts is not just seeing reality in its most general aspect; it means to shed a light upon our sensations, illuminates them and changes them."<sup>19</sup> The concepts are common to an entire society not because they represent a simple average of the individual representations therein; but because if they were, the knowledge they contained would be weaker than that of individual representations. In reality, they contain information that exceeds the average knowledge of individuals. They indicate what to think and, in a sense, how to think about the knowledge that belongs to the *sui generis* society. The fact that the concepts are primarily general ideas, that they describe categories and classifications rather than specific ones, is because the particular and variable properties of beings rarely concern society. Because of being a universal entity, society can only be affected by the general and permanent characteristics of those particular entities. In other words, if the concept is common to everyone, it is a collective work of the society that the concept belongs to.<sup>20</sup>

One other feature related to concepts is objectivity. Contrary to the expectation, even when concepts are made by all the rules of science, their effects do not come from their objective values alone.<sup>21</sup> The main factor for this is public opinion. Being correct is not a sufficient criterion for concepts to be functional. Moreover, correctness is a situation determined by the public in this sense. Concepts are not accepted if they are not compatible with other beliefs and ideas that exist in society, in short, with the collective representation system; minds remain unintelligible to them; in

<sup>18</sup> Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 434.

<sup>19</sup> Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 437.

<sup>20</sup> Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 436.

<sup>21</sup> Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 437.

this situation, they have no effect on society.<sup>22</sup> In this regard, it is sufficient to remember the influence of public opinion on science. As Durkheim constantly emphasizes, everything in social life, including science, is under the influence of public opinion. The value we attach to science mainly depends on the idea we form as a society about the quality of science and its place in life; it describes a state of public opinion. In this sense, a collective representation creates an opinion that it is objective primarily because it is collective. Because, according to Durkheim, it is not without reason that a concept survives and is widely used despite the resistance it is exposed to. If the concept were incompatible with the nature of facts and objects, it would not have had a wide range and long-lasting effect on minds.<sup>23</sup> In other words, a living concept is not incompatible with public opinion. Although there are some objections to Durkheim's approach, for an idea to be objective or true for everyone, it must correspond to the social, that is, the common interest of the society, or, in Durkheim's expression, must meet the needs of the *sui generis* society.

Durkheim accepts that collective representations and categories as collective representations are the product of a wide range of collaboration that takes place not only in space but in time. To produce collective representations, very different minds of different times came together, and their feelings and thoughts were intertwined. By combining the experience and knowledge of many successive generations, a much richer and more complex intellectual accumulation than a single individual could have concentrated on these common representations. In this way, according to Durkheim, reason exceeds the limits of empirical knowledge. From this point of view, an individual exceeds the limits of empirical knowledge or individual experience to the extent that he participates in society while thinking and acting.

As Durkheim tried to elucidate, categories meet the most general connections that exist among objects and events. Since they

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<sup>22</sup> Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 437.

<sup>23</sup> Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 439.



are more comprehensive than other concepts we have, they dominate all areas of our mental activities. Durkheim opposes that categories cannot be applied to other objects and events because they are of social origin. According to him, society is also a part of nature, only a more complex part, and therefore there is no significant difference between the relations in society and other areas of nature. According to Durkheim, without agreement on basic concepts such as time, space, and cause, there would be no social life due to a lack of communication between ideas. Durkheim thinks that society needs not only a moral consensus but also a minimal logical concord to survive. Categories provide this consensus to society. Categories are not necessary because of the simple habits that evoke Hume's explanations, which we can overcome with some effort, or for reasons accepted by a priorists. According to Durkheim, the necessity of categories is a special kind of necessity, which has the same quality related to the life of thought as a moral obligation to volition.

Durkheim thinks that social practices are primarily not ideal. They do not consist of ideas, representations, and beliefs. According to him, society consists of the practice that causes the emergence of a social real power that the participants of the social group experience together. The certainty of this power gives rise to commonly experienced fundamental concepts that Durkheim called categories of the mind. As Rawls mentioned, according to Durkheim, the purpose of religion in the history of humanity is to ensure the practices that are necessary to produce these basic concepts.<sup>24</sup> Durkheim sees a community that has come together to practice religious rituals in a determined place and time as a small example of society. According to Durkheim, societies can come into existence only where these collective religious practices are carried out, which produce the collective mind categories that enable the communication of individuals who belong to the same group.<sup>25</sup> Categories are produced as social forces influence their

<sup>24</sup> Rawls, *Durkheim's Epistemology: The Neglected Argument*, 438.

<sup>25</sup> Rawls, *Durkheim's Epistemology: The Neglected Argument*, 439.

members of society in the process of ritual practices.<sup>26</sup>

Durkheim tried to find a social origin for Kant's a priori categories, but these two approaches are not the same. Contrary to Durkheim, although Kant's a priori categories are active in time and space, in a sense, they exist in the structure of the mind independently of time and space. Kant's categories are not the properties of the object those are affected by social facts; they are a way the mind thinks about the object. Durkheim relates the significant properties of some frequently repeated thoughts in a society with the concepts and the categories that he accepts as more general and comprehensive forms of concepts. Indeed, this approach is different from the categories that Kant understood and tried to explain. These frequently repeated concepts can lead the thoughts of individuals in accordance with society's common will, but this does not mean that they are the same as Kant's a priori categories. According to Kant's approach, in the absence of categories, the objects and phenomena that we perceive through the forms of time and space remain in a relatively independent heap.<sup>27</sup> This heap of perceptions, which is independent of each other, needs to be organized according to a solid principle by being brought together and related to each other; this is exactly the task that the mind fulfills by means of categories. The subject (mind) does not find the connection of these perceptions with each other ready in the objects themselves. For example, an object with a density less than water floats on water. No relationship can be seen between density and floating through any simple observation. Nevertheless, through the category of *relation* in Kant's classification, a researcher can relate them with each other, and this relation results in functional knowledge: If the density of an object is lesser than a kind of liquid, it floats on that liquid. As an interpretation, it can be said that Kant's categories lead mind on how to think while Durkheim's concepts lead about what to think.

<sup>26</sup> Rawls, *Durkheim's Epistemology: The Neglected Argument*, 437.

<sup>27</sup> Ernst Cassirer, *Kant'ın Yaşamı ve Öğretisi*, çev. Doğan Özlem (İstanbul: İnkılap Kitabevi, 1996), 204.

In another way also, Durkheim's approach differs from Kant's. In Kant's approach, there are twelve categories, but the number of categories is not determined in Durkheim's work. Durkheim's list of categories is probably the most ambiguous part of his book, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. According to Rawls, there are only six categories: time, space, classification, force, causality, and totality in Durkheim's work.<sup>28</sup> For Nielsen, there are seven categories, and the content of the list is partially different from Rawls' list. Categories in Nielsen's list are totality, time, space, causality, person, substance, and number. On the other hand, according to Mauss, who is Durkheim's nephew and closest colleague, the number of categories may be more than that is mentioned in *Religious Life*. Following Mauss's approach, Nielsen claims that apart from the aforementioned basic category, many categories can exist in different historical periods and cultures.<sup>29</sup> Some researchers like Rawls think this is a confusion and other researchers' understanding of Durkheim causes that. However, whether this is confusion or not, contrary to Rawls' opinion, Durkheim's own understanding of categories causes this issue. As mentioned above, according to Durkheim, categories are the most general concepts, and concepts are the most repeated thoughts in society. If a researcher considers this definition, there should be hundreds of categories which, as Nielsen indicated, differ from one society to another and one period to another.

In conclusion, Durkheim's main purpose is to try to indicate how social facts affect an individual's way of thinking and its content through categories that are defined as the most general concepts, which are also the most repeated thoughts in society. The main property of categories is repetition, besides having social origin for Durkheim. In this sense, there are many, if not hundreds, categories depending on the frequency of the repetition of

<sup>28</sup> Rawls, *Durkheim's Epistemology: The Neglected Argument*, 435.

<sup>29</sup> Donald A. Nielsen, *Three Faces of God: Society, Religion, and the Categories of Totality in the Philosophy of Emile Durkheim* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 187.

general thoughts, except for main categories like time, space, substance, classification, etc. Considering this approach, sometimes nationalism, patriotism, other times pluralism, and universalism lead individuals' thoughts by means of sufficient repetition. This means that, like these concepts, basic elements of ideologies due to repetition can also be considered as categories in accordance with Durkheim's approach.

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