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Sociology face to face with pragmatism: Action, concept, and person

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Abstract

Émile Durkheim faced his final challenge in the confrontation with pragmatism. Pragmatism had emerged as an important theoretical approach for the study of both life and action. As argued in this article, Durkheim's attempt to explain the philosophical underpinnings of sociology was sharpened by his critical engagement with pragmatism. In Durkheim's work, the confrontation between pragmatism and sociology brought the focus onto the problem of the irreducibility of thought and action. According to the French scholar, one of the main challenges for sociology was to reconstruct the basic concepts of pragmatism, but in a way that stood in opposition to various central presuppositions underlying classical forms of this philosophical doctrine. His in-depth confrontation with pragmatism gave Durkheim the opportunity to clarify the meaning of his own scientific project, including the meaning of its fundamental categories. The theory of knowledge arising from Durkheim's interpretation of pragmatism was most clearly established in his *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, resulting in a genuinely sociological understanding of action, concept, and person. More importantly, however, some of Durkheim's most valuable contributions can be derived from his effort to move away from pragmatism.

Keywords

Action, collective representations, concept, ideal, Durkheim, practice, pragmatism, religious experience, social theory

The confrontation between sociology and pragmatism

Durkheim's lectures on pragmatism were delivered at the Sorbonne between 1913 and 1914; they were published, somewhat belatedly, in 1955 on the basis of notes taken by

his students (Durkheim, 1955, 1983 [1955]). Despite their limited impact and marginal status, these lectures play a pivotal role in a number of recent studies which aim to overcome the paradigmatic opposition between positivism and idealism and which seek to shed light on Durkheim's influence on contemporary developments in social theory. Armand Cuvillier, who was the first scholar to edit Durkheim's lectures on pragmatism, pointed out that the debate on pragmatism had been an important occasion for Durkheim to articulate particular aspects of his thought, which he never expressed with the same clarity in any of his other writings. This applies especially to his theory of truth, his epistemology, and his 'general philosophy' (Durkheim, 1955: 10, 1983 [1955]: xix and 20). The analysis of these lectures permits us not only to resituate Durkheimian thought in relation to several alternative epistemological positions in contemporary sociology, but also to articulate and defend a framework whose distinctive nature and strength are based on its own philosophical foundation. How can we describe 'a philosophical perspective and a science', both emerging, both concerned with the 'sense of *life and action*' and, so, both 'children of the same era' (Durkheim, 1983 [1955]: 1)? Whatever approach we take to this question, the radical nature of the Durkheimian critique of pragmatism prevents us from seeing it as a way of supporting pragmatism, even implicitly. Undoubtedly, Durkheim had a sustained interest in pragmatism, but this does not mean that he regarded the triumph of rationalism against what he saw as one final assault as less significant. One may legitimately argue that Durkheim proved incapable of recognizing his real adversary. One may also criticize him for the scholastic, superficial, and somewhat limited nature of his discussion of pragmatism, or even argue that it is flawed due to some substantial misinterpretations. And, of course, one may object to the strong nationalist undertones that, right from the beginning, have seemed, to some, to undermine the scope of Durkheim's approach (Durkheim, 1955: 28; 1983 [1955]: 1–2; Joas, 1984). Nonetheless, we should not restrict our assessment to these points of controversy, but instead remember that one of Durkheim's key aims was his *defence* of sociology as a scientific discipline. From this perspective, the point is neither to scrutinize Durkheim's conception of pragmatism for the purpose of exegesis, nor to examine to what extent his analysis does justice to the real meaning of pragmatism; rather, the point is to consider the experience produced by the encounter between Durkheim and pragmatism. Specifically, the question is to what degree pragmatism poses a challenge not only to classical rationalism, against which it explicitly struggled, but also, in a more fundamental sense, to social science. For Durkheim, a pragmatic sociology is a contradiction in terms. When trying to make sense of this view, we are confronted with two options: *either* we aim to show that, contrary to Durkheim, the assumption concerning the apparent incompatibility between pragmatism and sociology is misleading, *or* we intend to demonstrate that, following Durkheim, the reflection on this apparent incompatibility may allow us to provide a genuine foundation for social science.

In the literature, one will find two recently developed approaches that stand out owing to the fact that they are not based on strict exegetical considerations, but introduce a new line of thought in social theory that is nevertheless firmly situated in the Durkheimian tradition. The first approach is the one developed by Hans Joas, who, on the basis of a radical reinterpretation of Durkheim's work, seeks to go beyond Habermas's theory of communicative action. According to Joas (1996 [1992]: sec. 1.5; 1999 [1992]: 57–73),

Durkheim can be regarded as a theorist of action, and the debate on pragmatism plays an enlightening role in this regard. The second approach is the one advocated by Anne W. Rawls, who proposes to examine Durkheim's work in relation to Harold Garfinkel's ethnomethodological programme (and its focus on constitutive practices). According to Rawls (1997: 25), particular passages in the lectures on pragmatism should not lead the reader astray. Even if one may easily get the impression that Durkheim embraces some form of idealism in these lectures, she argues that his comments make sense only if understood in relation to his work *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, notably with regard to the central passages in which his own epistemology is fully developed (Rawls, 1996: 439). For both Joas and Rawls, it is crucial to recognize that Durkheimianism is *not* reducible to pragmatism. Yet, this irreducibility is understood in two different ways: in Joas, it serves as a limit to a comprehensive theory of the 'creativity of action', and, therefore, it is the mark of the shortcomings inherent in Durkheim's sociology of action; in Rawls, the irreducibility of sociology to pragmatism is the result of a perceptive critique that shows the remarkable lucidity of Durkheim, since pragmatism is what we have to extricate ourselves from, in order to develop a 'socio-empirical epistemology' capable of grasping the intimate relationship between social practices and conceptual categories generated by ritualized collective activities.¹

The following analysis makes a case for a third view: in accordance with Rawls's perspective, it is based on the assumption that the irreducible nature of Durkheimianism can be interpreted in a positive way and that, more importantly, the very foundation of social science is at stake in this confrontation. Likewise, we will acknowledge that, throughout his entire *oeuvre*, Durkheim's object was what Rawls describes as 'the direct experience of the social' (Rawls, 1996, 2007, 2009 [2004]). His discussions concerning the *a priori* forms of understanding, the overcoming of both Kantianism and empiricism, and, finally, the critique of pragmatism have no other purpose than to highlight the level at which this experience can be found. Yet, in light of Durkheim's lectures on pragmatism, it seems that this level is of a different nature from, and goes beyond, that of shared traditional practices. From this point of view, we will have to reconsider and reassess an argument made in these lectures that is often harshly judged (and, hence, considered a bad argument): the one concerning the *heterogeneity* of thought and action.

Religious experience

One of the main challenges posed by the notes taken by Durkheim's students during the lectures he delivered between 1913 and 1914 concerns the elaboration of a sociological project within a philosophical framework. This challenge can also be found in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, a study that is not limited to ethnological research or to the sociology of knowledge, but aimed at establishing a new theory of truth, based on a critique of the transcendental deduction of categories, and thus at establishing the conditions of objective knowledge on new grounds, which go beyond Kant. There are only very few commentators, such as Joas, who have sought to understand the meaning of this philosophical 'finale' without reducing its significance to the disciplinary conflict in which sociology has sought to assert its independence. Aware of the latest developments that have shaped the debates on Durkheim's writings, Joas takes issue with Habermas's interpretation of Durkheim, which he puts forward in *The Theory of*

Communicative Action (1987a [1981], 1987b [1981]): from a Habermasian perspective, Durkheim's theory of symbolism portrays rational forms of consensus as the modern substitute for the integrative functions of ritualized practices. Contrary to this view, Joas insists that Durkheim, throughout his life, remained a moral thinker who was deeply concerned with the social creation of ideals for action, rather than with a particular type of action rationality (Joas 1996 [1992]: sec. 1.5; 1999 [1992]: 72–73). In short, there is not merely one fixed ideal, concerning the conditions of 'consensus as such', but there are many *ideals*, following one another in history and thus changing their very content; the sacralization, or valorization, of these ideals is, therefore, a substantial process emerging from the very fact of collective life.

To be sure, Joas's critique of Habermas is not aimed at simply restating the Durkheimian position; on a more fundamental level, Joas seeks to replace Habermas's theory of communicative action with an alternative model of intersubjective action, capable of accounting for the role of creativity in the daily construction of social life. According to Joas, the normative significance of such an alternative model of human action cannot be derived from rational processes oriented towards mutual understanding, because it constitutes a theoretical framework that focuses on the creativity of social action, rather than on the rationality of linguistic communication. Whilst Joas (1984) insists that the pragmatist approach deserves to be examined in its own right, in a number of respects he is *critical* of Durkheim. In particular, Joas points at Durkheim's inability to situate creative processes within ordinary forms of social interaction, and he also questions what he sees as Durkheim's one-sided interpretation of social rituals and intensified experiences in extraordinary situations of collective effervescence. We can see that what is already at issue in this question is the legitimacy of the legacy claimed by ethnomethodology, which acknowledges the importance of ritual practices for the construction of social life. Their sociological centrality stems from the fact that, as Rawls puts it, 'they are what they represent' (1996: 446), they constitute 'their own effect' (1996: 449), and they allow for a direct experience of the social, at the very level of action. The study of pragmatism enables us not only to identify the obstacles encountered by Durkheimianism in the field of the sociology of action, but also to suggest ways in which these obstacles may be overcome.

Let us now return to the lectures that Durkheim delivered between 1913 and 1914. Right at the beginning of these lectures, Durkheim explains how he thinks pragmatism should be approached. According to the explanation he offers in his lectures, we are dealing not with a *doctrine*, but with a *method*, that is, with an unprecedented mode of questioning that opens new doors to studying the problems of truth and action: 'As a *method*, pragmatism is simply the attitude or general cast to be adopted by the mind when faced with problems' (Durkheim, 1983 [1955]: 11). This does not mean, however, that pragmatism is a purely instrumental or scientific approach. Rather, this implies that pragmatism enables us to regard *philosophy* – which had gone through a period of doctrinal fossilization, epitomized in Kantian and post-Kantian forms of conceptual dogmatism – as a *method*: that is, as a research activity, a construction process, and a problem-solving task. It is this way of critically reconsidering philosophical activity, this 'reconstruction in philosophy' (Durkheim, 1983 [1955]), which captivated Durkheim so profoundly that he came to regard pragmatism as the only serious rival to sociology.

If we want to be faithful to the debate, we must be careful not to reduce Durkheim's critical engagement with pragmatism to a form of *doctrinal* encounter based on merely theoretical comparisons, leaving aside the phenomena given to them and the type of analysis they can carry out. Instead, we should focus on a common problem and show how the different methods both complement and compete with each other on an *empirical* level. From Durkheim's point of view, the existence of this problem is beyond doubt: if we are truly committed to understanding pragmatism in terms of its empirical application, we must not limit ourselves to its general theses and methods. Rather, we have to examine its account of religion: 'The only question to which the pragmatist method has been consistently applied', Durkheim declared in his lectures on pragmatism, 'is that of *religion*' (1983 [1955]: 60).

The validity of this claim is questionable, given that moral, aesthetic, educational, and even political issues play a pivotal role in pragmatist thought. Durkheim's assertion does make sense, however, if one recalls that his main adversary, carefully read and studied since the late 1880s, was William James. In fact, James can be regarded 'as the true father' of the kind of pragmatism to which Durkheim refers in his genealogy (1983 [1955]: 7). In his article 'Individual and Collective Representations', first published in 1898 (2010a [1898]), Durkheim takes issue with James's psychological approach; yet it is, above all, James's study of religion, published in 1902 and entitled *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (1971 [1902]), which catches Durkheim's attention. Undoubtedly, the shadow of this study hangs over Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (see Stedman Jones, 2003). Durkheim broadly accepts the presuppositions of the pragmatist approach to religious belief, which James had described by alluding to the Gospel according to St Matthew, referred to by Jonathan Edwards: 'By their fruits ye shall know them, not by their roots' (James, 1906: 19; 1971 [1902]: 20).² Regardless of whether one takes a critical or a sympathetic stance, a serious stumbling block for research on religion is the focus on the *origin of beliefs* as a way of assessing their truth. The refusal to study religion by seeking to trace its origin is an indispensable preliminary step common to both Durkheimian sociology and pragmatism.³

Durkheim's explanation for this refusal to focus on origins, however, is entirely different from the one that can be found in James's work: according to Durkheim, it is the institutional nature of religion that undermines and invalidates the quest for an origin; '[l]ike any *human institution*, *religion* begins nowhere' (Durkheim, 2008 [1912]: 9). In this passage, one notices the influence of Fustel de Coulanges's *Ancient City* (1980 [1864]), which is completely unrelated to James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. In fact, James refers to a different criterion, which, he suggests, permits us to reject the two dominant interpretations of religious experience: on the one hand, the *dogmatic* interpretation, which seeks to identify the supernatural origin of religious forces; and, on the other hand, the *materialist* interpretation, which claims to uncover pathological origins of religious experience and its capacity to seize the oppressed subject. James references Maudsley, a strong defender of the second position, who admits that the realization of an *oeuvre* on the basis of its 'flawed nature' is less important than the *oeuvre* itself, understood as an accomplished result – '*the work that is done*' (Maudsley cited in James, 1971 [1902]: 19). According to James, this

view epitomizes one of the main purposes of empiricist approaches to religion: to study the *functioning* of religious belief and thus ‘*the way in which it works on the whole*’ (1971 [1902]: 19), in order to illustrate that ‘*[i]mmmediate luminousness, in short, philosophical reasonableness, and moral helpfulness are the only available criteria*’ (1971 [1902]: 18). Reconstructed with reference to its conditions of existence, it appears that the concept of religious experience takes shape in the blind spot of both dogmatism and materialism: *the truth of belief can be found in the truth of the believer*, that is, in the experience made by the believer of the truth of his or her belief. Durkheim agrees with this view, but he makes one point that is crucial to his critique of pragmatism:

... given the fact that, if you will, ‘religious experience’ is grounded in some way – and what experience is not? – it does not in the least follow that the reality that grounds it must objectively conform to the idea that believers have of it. The very fact that the way it has been conceived has varied infinitely at different times suffices to prove that none of these conceptions adequately expresses it. If the scientist poses as an axiom that man’s sensations of warmth and light correspond to some objective cause, he does not conclude from this that this cause is accessible to the senses. Similarly, if the impressions the faithful feel are not imaginary, none the less, they do not constitute privileged intuitions; there is no reason to think that they inform us better about the nature of their object than vulgar sensations inform us of the nature of bodies and their properties.

(Durkheim, 2008 [1912]: 312–313)

It seems that here we are essentially dealing with the idea of the *epistemological break*, understood as a rupture with the illusions of common sense. This epistemological break is based on a scientific approach to the world capable of taking existence to a different representational and ideological level, that is, to a level that serves as a foundation for the *construction of scientific knowledge*. Just as there is no such thing as an ungrounded form of subjective experience, there is no such thing as subjective experience capable of objectively reflecting upon its own foundations.

Yet, the epistemological break is not aimed at *denouncing* religious experience as an illusion; rather, it is aimed at *reconstructing* its truth value on another level. By uncovering the foundations underlying religious experience, sociology reveals to the believer the reasons underlying their beliefs and therefore affirms that, in a sense, they are right to believe as they do. As with his lectures on pragmatism, one key objective of Durkheim’s *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* is to reconstruct the foundation underlying subjective experience on the basis of a thorough sociological analysis. Now, to recognize that this foundation is social requires acknowledging that experience can take place only in relation to an external reality and that, as a consequence, belief cannot be reduced to some form of *internal* experience of the believer. In other words, experience is embedded in an external institutional framework. Because of this institutional framework, the individual experience of the believer coincides with other experiences of equivalent kind, at the same time that it finds its real object, namely the group as such, as it exists in reality.

What would a religious experience be that is not only socially grounded but also aware of its social embeddedness? From a Durkheimian perspective, this question is central to sociology, indicating that the sociology of religion does not consider religious experience as an obsolete, let alone irrelevant, process. On the contrary, one of the main aims of *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* is to return to the subject after having fully developed its scientific objectification. In some passages, the difficulty is resolved through a rough-and-ready synthesis, in which the ambiguities of positivism, not to say of scientism, subsist. This synthesis is expressed in the plea for a religion of society, for a belief in science, for a new form of belief controlled and nourished by science (1960 [1912]: 616 and 625; 2008 [1912]: 327 and 333). It is nevertheless open to question whether or not Durkheim's reflections can serve as a basis for a solution, as they seem to avoid confronting the central problem: that of explaining the form taken by society, the true object of cult and worship, within the realm of belief, that is, for the subject who still believes. What happens to religious experience once the sociology of religion is fully developed and once it is agreed that religious experience cannot be mistaken for sociology itself? To be sure, sociology cannot be an absolute demystification of religion, since it would run the risk of becoming knowledge for nobody. By and large, individuals, no matter what happens, are not aware of the social determinacy of their existence, and scientific enlightenment, because it is nothing but an analytical substitute, needs a final supplement, the one that religion has always provided (1960 [1912]: 298–299; 2008 [1912]: 156–157). In order for subjects to exist within a world in which sociology exists, belief must also continue to exist; even if its form cannot be the same as that of past religions, it must genuinely express itself as a belief.

It is striking that Durkheim, following James, brings up the issue of the *variations* of religious experience. In fact, the reflection on this problem leads him to develop an *anti-pragmatist* argument: the multiple forms of religious experience that we can find in history suffice to demonstrate that 'truth' cannot exist in any of these experiences and that, more importantly, if it can exist at all, it does so by breaking away from the empirical level. Such a break can be undertaken only on the basis of a well-conducted *comparative method*. Through comparison, sociology can grasp the objective structure of religion, which corresponds, in each case, to the *institutionalized* stabilization of beliefs and practices. According to James, by contrast, the 'complete series of variations of religious phenomena' (1971 [1902]: 22) can be reconstructed on a *psychological* level by reference to *pathological* cases. In fact, these cases play a pivotal role in James's analysis. He suggests that these pathological cases have an advantage derived from their 'anatomic' nature (1971 [1902]: 22), that is, from the fact that they allow us to isolate certain elements of mental life, scrutinize them, and thereby observe their constant transformations in everyday experience. The study of hallucinations, illusions, morbid impulsions, and fixed ideas provides normal psychology with useful insights (1971 [1902]: 22). Thus, 'medical materialism' needs to be overcome not because it remains attached to pathological phenomena but because it misinterprets them. The pathological point of view authorizes an objective understanding of subjective belief, without breaking with the level at which it manifests itself. The examination of pathological phenomena permits us to reach a level of experience that remains hidden, and thereby grasp a 'temperament' that everyday experience manifests only in a weakened, softened, and mutilated form.

No one organism can possibly yield to its owner the whole body of truth. Few of us are not in some way infirm, or even diseased; and our very infirmities help us unexpectedly. In the psychopathic temperament we have the emotionality which is the *sine qua non* of moral perception; we have the intensity and tendency to emphasis which are the essence of practical moral vigour; and we have the love of metaphysics and mysticism which carry one's interests beyond the surface of the sensible world. What, then, is more natural than that this temperament should introduce one to regions of religious truth, to corners of the universe, which your robust Philistine type of nervous system, forever offering its biceps to be felt, thumping its breast, and thanking Heaven that it hasn't a single morbid fibre in its composition, would be sure to hide forever from its self-satisfied possessors?

(James, 1971 [1902]: 25)

For James, the variations of religious experience are accessible on the level of the pure experience that the pathological cases allow us to reach. But then our judgement of pathology is turned upside down: it becomes the particular disposition of a mode of perception that turns out to be a powerful force, in the sense of a 'practical moral vigour' (James, 1971 [1902]: 25). The 'robust Philistine' or athlete ceases to be what one believes he or she is, or at least what he or she pretends to be when exhibiting his or her strength (James, 1971 [1902]: 25). Our criterion of assessment is no longer the self-satisfied individual, shut off from the world and impervious to an experience that exceeds his or her affective capacities.

James proposes a shift that, if taken seriously by Durkheim, should have obliged the latter to revise his claim that the former puts forward an individualist position. Religious experience is for James an enlarged experience, and the fact that it is often associated with infirmity or pathology merely reflects 'our difficulty in correctly conceiving this enlargement'.⁴ On the basis of a deliberate change in perspective, one has to go back to the 'vital attitude' through which believers establish contact with forces that, at once, exceed and sustain them in the course of their everyday actions. In other words, we have to move from the straightforward criterion of the 'non-morbid', brandished by 'the thick bourgeois',⁵ to a genuinely practical form of health, whose affirmative nature manifests itself in a religiously constituted life form.

James finds the privileged experiential sign of this new criterion in *saintliness*, which he distinguishes from the genuine renunciation of the stoic sage: '...the result of a higher kind of emotion, in the presence of which no exertion of volition is required' (James [1902]1971: 46). In his commentary, Durkheim highlights the meaning of the method used by James:

We should ... ask what the *products* of religious life are, and these should be considered at the point at which religious life is at its most intense, even if we wish to know what it can produce in average cases. In other words, we should study it in the *saints*.

(Durkheim, 1983 [1955]: 61)

This approach to religion seems to be fundamentally different from the one defended in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, in which Durkheim focuses on the experience

of the sacred, as an objective element marking some beings from outside, to the exclusion of others. Of course, Durkheim recognizes that he cannot limit himself to an approach to the (religious) phenomenon considered '*in foro externo*' and that he has to analyse the way in which individuals are inwardly committed (1960 [1912]: 606; 2008 [1912]: 319). He too, in his own way, will insist on the practical support, the growing of energy, the 'confidence' involved in religious experience (1960 [1912]: 299; 2008 [1912]: 157). The fact remains that the psychological starting point of James cannot be accepted, since the saint is, precisely, an individual. Durkheim claims that, in the study of religion, the saint and the sage are taken into consideration exclusively from the perspective of the sacred, that is, only insofar as they are regarded as sacred (1960 [1912]: 50–51; 2008 [1912]: 36–37). On this view, the experience of saintliness, however enlarged it may be, represents a form of personal religion, attested by the discourse of the subject about itself. Now, it is precisely this account of the saint's life, taken up by James through the quotations that form the very text of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, which plays a primordial role in his approach. In this context, the *intensity* of saintliness is crucial because the ordinary experience of belief needs this internal point of excess to reveal its truth. This does not mean that the truth lies in this excessive position, but James argues that it is possible to reconstruct the truth starting from this position, following the elements in their internal ordering. In this sense, for James just as for Durkheim, truth needs to be *constructed*. For James, the crucial point is that this construction process cannot take place outside the experience itself.

The sacred and the ideal

In the light of the above, the opposition is evident: for Durkheim, sociology takes hold of religion from the outside and reconstructs its real content by developing an external approach. The process of exteriorization consists, first and foremost, in the task of historicization and ethnographic analysis. The systematic comparison of different beliefs, considered from the outside, allows for sociological objectification, and hence for the reconstruction of the real object of our beliefs, which is essentially the same for every belief. Indeed, this is the way in which Durkheimian sociology seeks to overcome relativism (see Lukes, 1973: 488). In the case of pragmatism, by contrast, one remains on the subjective level of experience, but with the means to regard it from the point of view of pure experience, to which pathological cases afford privileged access. James's attempt to focus on the study of *personal* religion and his unwillingness to consider its *institutional* aspects, including its theological dimensions, are expressed in the following, preliminary definition: religion is about '*the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine*' (James, 1971 [1902]: 31). James adds that this definition is 'arbitrary'. Thus, he seeks to develop a more precise definition on the basis of a number of insightful reflections on the various ways in which the term 'divine' is given meaning through concrete experience. The emphasis lies on the *isolated individual*, that is, on '*individual men in their solitude*'. Durkheim's definition is diametrically opposed to this view:

... a religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and surrounded by prohibitions – beliefs and practices that unite its adherents in a single moral community called a church.

(Durkheim, 2008 [1912]: 46)

In emphasizing the solidarity of belief and practices in their unified relation to the sacred, Durkheim's definition of religion leaves room for many questions. Yet, this is not the crucial difference with pragmatism. James also conceives of religion in terms of both belief and moral practice. The difference lies mainly in the relationship between the experience of the sacred and the collective framework, referred to by the concept of the Church, in which this experience is embedded. If, from a sociological point of view, there is such a thing as religious experience, it can only be a *collective* experience within an *institutional* structure that makes it possible.

The view expressed above is based on a distinction between magic and religion which breaks with the derivative relationships established by British anthropology.⁶ Durkheim agrees that there are some similarities between the different types of taboos that correspond to the different domains of magic and religion (1960 [1912]: 430; 2008 [1912]: 222). The fact remains, however, that the analysis of magic sanctions discovers some underlying 'utilitarian maxims' that are different in nature from the categorical imperatives of a religious type. This is precisely what the experience of the sacred is about: in a strongly Kantian sense, it has a *moral* character excluding any hypothesis founded on consideration of the consequences of a given action. In this respect, it is completely different from the kind of magic that is defined in terms of its practical aspects, guided by material interests, and motivated by instrumental reasoning.

We have to note the fact that such a purification of religious experience is equally demanding in James's work. Yet, it leads to the opposite conclusion: it is precisely because of the fact that religion cannot be reduced to 'an *external art*, the art of winning the favour of the gods' (James, 1971 [1902]: 29), that James argues that its institutional character has to be considered as secondary. Thus, the common argument regarding the rejection of interpretation in terms of utility is used in two opposite ways: in the case of James, it prompts us to emancipate religious experience from its clerical and theological covering; in the case of Durkheim, it encourages us to mark the difference with magic and to stress the need to define religion in terms of its institutional framework. This framework is not, however, an arbitrary construction. It is intimately related to the concept of the sacred, which is absent in James's reflections. Using Durkheimian terms, one may say that magic, given its material embeddedness, distorts or misrepresents the concept of the sacred if brought back to its most fundamental meaning:

The religious prohibition necessarily implies the notion of the sacred; it comes from the respect that the sacred object inspires, and its aim is to prevent any lack of that respect. By contrast, magical prohibitions presuppose only the utterly secular notion of property. The things the magician recommends keeping separate are those that, because of their characteristic properties, cannot be mixed or brought into contact safely.

(Durkheim, 2008 [1912]: 223)

The sacred is of the order of the separate. It is defined by this very separation, as that *which is not* profane and as that which is forbidden. The taboo is indicative of a special kind of separation: not only a distinction between two spaces situated on the same level, because then the choice of the terms would remain arbitrary and could be reversed (Durkheim, 1975c [1917]: 64). On the contrary, here the polarity has a direction and is characterized by a dissymmetry that blocks any kind of reversibility.⁷ The sacred is negatively defined in relation to the profane, as belonging to another level of reality to which the profane is subjected. The sacred is also ‘ambivalent’, in that it is a source of attractive as well as repulsive forces, both of which are capable of imposing themselves upon the profane.

These forces of the sacred arise from separation, which creates taboos, and strong dissymmetry. Since the social constitutes the realm in which the experience of the sacred can be proven, human order is structured by a *dissymmetrical separation*. We must not mistake this feature for the one that defines magic. Magic leads to separation through prudential reasoning based on a judgement concerning the properties of things, substantially qualified. Magic thereby misinterprets the meaning of the sacred, or at least it distracts from its constitutive processes, not only because it replaces a positive definition with a negative one, but also because it rests on the idea that the things have a value due to their intrinsic ‘properties’. In this sense, magic subverts the first distinction on which the normatively binding reality of the sacred, raised above the ordinary and profane reality, rests. Manipulating the forces of the sacred, whose genesis it betrays, magic is linked to profanation.

Furthermore, separated from the profane, the sacred cannot be gradually reached as an objective is in magic. To be sure, within the realm of the sacred, differences in degree can and have to be made, but one is already situated in this other world, where sacred space has emerged on the basis of a first distinction, which can be regarded as *absolute*. The relationship between the sacred and the profane always involves a solution of continuity; the one secured by initiatory rituals or by rites of passage. This is where all the difficulties with the definitional criterion put forward by Durkheim lie: this criterion rests not on a substantial and positive definition of religious dimensions but on a *structure centred upon opposition*, which permits the religious realm to detach itself from the rest of reality. Durkheim does not minimize the importance he attributes to this opposition, whose ‘revelation’ he discovered, on his own admission, when reading Robertson Smith (Durkheim, 1975a: 404). Herewith, the level of morality is immediately surpassed, or rather included in a broader and deeper conception of the foundations of experience:

There is no other example in the history of human thought of two categories of things so profoundly differentiated or so radically opposed to one another. The traditional opposition between good and evil is nothing by comparison; good and evil are opposite species of the same genus, namely morality, just as health and sickness are merely two different aspects of the same order of facts – life. By contrast, the sacred and the profane have always and everywhere been conceived by the human mind as separate genera, as two worlds that have nothing in common.

(Durkheim, 2008 [1912]: 38)

It is worth highlighting the fact that in this passage the distinction between the sacred and the profane is treated as a mode of thought and that it acquires its meaning as *the only true generic distinction* the mind is able to make. Ultimately, the question of the sacred is a question of categorization. For Durkheim, it is the cornerstone of all research on the formation of categories. From this point of view, it seems entirely justified to study the elementary forms of religion and mind, of religious practices and beliefs, together with these permanent frameworks of mental life constituted as categories. What is at stake here, beyond the more *limited* spheres of morality and life – and thus beyond the questions of life and action – is the pure principle of conceptual distinction *as such*.

Durkheim's theory of the concept is based on his refusal to confuse the concept with a general idea. The fundamental argument underlying this refusal is that one does not rise gradually, by generalizing, to the conceptual level. This is what distinguishes human thought from animal thought, which, even in its most developed forms, is incapable of such conceptual transformation and remains at the level of generalization. To think conceptually means to transcend the level of sensations and images: it means to think *sub specie aeternitatis*, in a stable and impersonal way. It means to think on the basis of the subject's external forms of intelligibility, that is, on the basis of what Vincent Descombes (1996) refers to as 'the institution of meaning'. What follows from this is the 'universalizability' of this type of thought, implying that it claims to be potentially common and thus independent from the particular subject by which it is brought into existence in the first place (Durkheim, 1960 [1912]: 622–623; 2008 [1912]: 331–332).⁸

The previous point is crucial to Durkheim's positive assessment of pragmatism given in the lectures he delivered between 1913 and 1914. James is not wrong to interpret conceptual thought as breaking with the continuum of experience derived from the senses; in fact, as Durkheim remarks, he agrees with Bergson on this point (Durkheim, 1955: 78–79; 1983 [1955]: 30–31). Yet, James proves incapable of accounting for the very reality of the concept. According to Durkheim, it is pointless to link the concept to 'the interests of practice' if one does not explain how it can actually fulfil this role, since 'it has no common measure with reality' (Durkheim, 1983 [1955]: 32, quoting James). Durkheim's thesis of the sacred offers a solution to this paradox: what is fundamental to social experience, and what is distinctive about human order as a place for the realization of conceptual thought, is the emergence of a *radical dissymmetry*, of a realm that 'has no common measure with reality' (Durkheim, 1983 [1955]: 32), with all the things by which it is surrounded, of a reality that is *absolutely* different from what is usually described as reality. From an ontological point of view, therefore, religion and conceptualization derive from the same origin, that is, from the same epistemological break (the experience of breaking with experience, first instantiated by religion, then by science) – breaking with the flow of sense impressions, breaking with the particularized level of isolated individuals. It is precisely through this breaking, and through the same movement of extraction, that one thinks, believes, and worships. Neither religion nor thought can emerge outside this fundamental social experience, which is manifested by the religious fact, reduced to its core.

Now, this 'breaking' experience is also a transformation. The sacred is separated from, but always in relation to, the profane; it is distinguished from it in terms of what

is forbidden. A reality is ‘added’ to ordinary things, a reality that modifies these things and literally makes them change their level and inscribes them within the structural opposition we have described above. ‘To think in concepts ... is to project onto sensation a light that illuminates, penetrates, and transforms it’ (Durkheim, 2008 [1912]: 331). Only if we understand the meaning of this conceptual transformation can we comprehend the relationship between logical thought and religion in its entirety. This relationship does not mean that logical thought should be deduced from an obscure origin marked by a belief in some indistinguishable forces.⁹ On the contrary, it means that logical thought is essentially characterized by the capacity of making distinctions. Now, pure distinction – that is, separation – involves a transformation. To be exact, it requires a transformation ‘*totius substantiae*’, for which the emergence of the sacred provides the model; it therefore entails an integral transformation, through which a new reality appears. In a sense, which needs to be clarified, it is a form of *creation*.

The point is to find out where the ‘light’ that accomplishes this comes from, if it is true that, in principle, it exceeds the capacities of strictly individual understanding, regardless of how this may be defined – as the power of a logical operation or as a cerebral form of functioning (Ogien, 1994: 251). In the conclusion of *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim responds to this question by referring to the Platonic theory of participation of the *noûs* [the intellect] in transcendent ideas (1960 [1912]: 620; 2008 [1912]: 329). Even if this does not resolve all the problems, there is no doubt that this way of associating the sociological perspective with the most radical idealism needs to be taken seriously. This echoes various passages from *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* as well as the lectures on pragmatism. In these texts, social thought is presented as a power or capacity of *vision* exceeding the capacities of individual thought: social thought consists in seeing things in ways that are convenient to it, in adding and cutting out, in stigmatizing and making sacred. Social thought succeeds in this precisely insofar as it is a process of thought, as an action of the idea that, by permeating reality, adds a new dimension to it and, consequently, splits it into two:

So there is a region of nature in which the formula of idealism is applied nearly to the letter: that is the social realm. There, far more than elsewhere, the idea creates the reality. ... The object that supports the idea is trivial compared to the ideal superstructure that subsumes it, and, moreover, it has nothing to do with that superstructure.

(Durkheim, 2008 [1912]: 173)

Beyond the natural phenomena that are of a psycho-physiological order, sociology allows us to identify another ‘region of nature’, in which the power of ideas manifests itself as a creative force. Of course, it does not constitute a creation *ex nihilo*. To the pragmatist argument, concerning malleability and change, Durkheim stubbornly opposes a verb that lies at the heart of his conception of creativity: ‘to enrich’ (1955: 66, 144; 1983 [1955]: 24, 68). The very process of enrichment presupposes that an underlying reality, without which social thought could not exist in the first place, is posited or given. In this sense, the realism underlying Durkheim’s *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1982 [1895]), according to which social facts are to be conceived of as ‘things’, is

retained. The question that arises, however, is to what extent it is possible to know what things are once they have become *social* things. From the perspective taken in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, the question is how it is possible to know what happens when we form a concept, that is, when things are not only felt and imagined but conceived. Now, if this operation is, first and foremost, a form of *vision*, this is because it consists in a relation to things that, by making them visible, bestows on them a new reality they do not possess in themselves. In brief, social things, without ceasing to be things, contain a new reality by the mere fact that they are socially conceived. Creation, understood through the model of the sacred, is certainly an ‘addition’: it draws on a material structure in such a way that it is never completely unbridled or free from all support. Yet, the decisive point remains the fact that creation is not predetermined by what things are *in themselves* (the piece of wood of the Chruringa Arunta, the piece of fabric of the flag defended by the soldier, but also, and to the same extent, the lines of the triangle of which the mind forms a concept conceived by the mind), but that it is capable of freeing itself from these things to the point of constituting an independent level of reality, which obeys its own laws. From this point of view, it makes sense to speak of idealism, but only if we make clear that this sociologically grounded idealism is not an idealism of the idea, but an idealism of the *ideal*, or, even more precisely, an idealism of the *idealization* of things, as implied by their collective visualization.

In his practical reflections, moral and political, Durkheim uses the concept of ideal in a particularly emphatic way. Reading his essay from 1911 on reality judgements and value judgements, however, one understands that the concept of ideal has, first, an epistemological function and that, as a technical concept, it occupies a central place in his theory of knowledge (1996b [1911]: 128–129; 2010c [1911]). Distinguishing between the concept of ideal and the concept of idea, we can grasp the limits of the idealism – we may even say the realism inherent in this kind of idealism – with which the sociological perspective sees itself linked. What lies at the heart of reality – as a reality of belief and thought, indissolubly made up of the sacred and the conceived, that is, of *distinctions* – is not an intangible idea or an ideal power, capable of producing reality in its entirety, to the point that the postulate of a given reality independent of representations would become inconsistent.¹⁰ Rather, what is crucial to reality is a process based on the idealization of things, through which they change. Such a process is creative in a certain way, and it is creative to the extent that it is social. This is what we need to understand.

Delirium and action

According to Durkheim, it is due to its inability to conceive of the ideal that pragmatism is deeply flawed. Pragmatism has sought to be a ‘liberation of the will’. By reconstructing the malleable nature of the world, pragmatism, similar to sociology, has shown that ‘[t]hings are not chiefly important for what they are, but for what they are worth’ (Durkheim, 1983 [1955]: 64). Pragmatism has tried to attribute meaning to action. It has done so by linking action to the activity of thought, which implies, in turn, a redefinition of thinking itself, through a radical criticism of classical rationalism. And yet, from a Durkheimian perspective, real transformation is inconceivable in

pragmatist terms, since pragmatism makes no room for the concept of ideal, understood as a central element for the activity of thought. This is why pragmatism is a form of 'radical empiricism', rather than of idealism, which means that 'for pragmatism there are not two planes of existence, but only one, and consequently it is impossible to see where the ideal could be located' (Durkheim, 1983 [1955]: 64). It is clear that, by making this judgement, Durkheim rejects a whole dimension of pragmatist thought, namely the one that lies at the heart of Dewey's *oeuvre* and of his theory of inquiry: a redefinition of the notion of the ideal as a 'programme of reaction to what is happening' and an idealization of a reality inferred from the way in which individuals are invested in the world and relate to it (Dewey, 1920: 128–130). For Durkheim, however, it is the monism defended by James that is revealing. If we apply monist parameters, the key intentions of pragmatism are suddenly turned upside down: pragmatism no longer stands for an approach aimed at privileging action; rather, it represents a struggle against the hegemony of thought – an impatience of every rigorous intellectual discipline. According to Durkheim, James's own words summarize the essence of pragmatism: 'to make the truth more supple' (Durkheim, 1983 [1955]: 64). This basically means that pragmatism turns out to be something different from what it is supposed to be: a philosophy of action.

Whether or not we accept this appraisal of James's approach, it is important to take notice of what Durkheim's interpretation of James tells us about his own conception of sociology. As Anne W. Rawls has pointed out, the lectures Durkheim delivered between 1913 and 1914 can have the misleading effect of distracting us from recognizing the centrality of his reflections on the relationship between social practices and fundamental concepts, particularly with regard to the analysis he developed in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. The pragmatist approach is largely rejected in this study, but it is nevertheless imperative to acknowledge that the notion of action plays a pivotal role in Durkheim's work. If, by contrast, we limit ourselves to interpreting Durkheim's thought in terms of a theory of collective representations, as many have, we run the risk of ignoring the role the concept of action plays in his writings. It must be emphasized, however, that it is by taking up the idealist motif that Durkheim grapples with the concept of action, thus going beyond pragmatism itself. More precisely, we have just seen that it is in the form of an idealism of *the ideal* that the transformative dimension of social action is understood. Before assessing the validity of this claim, we need to uncover its underlying logic.

Let us, therefore, turn our attention again to *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. As we have seen, if the definition of religion through idealization can be accepted, it is because the ideal is linked to the sacred, which is necessarily produced within the conditions of social existence. It is by situating the individual in the context of this direct social experience that the aforementioned transformation process reveals its underlying force:

For what defines the sacred is that it is superimposed on the real; and the ideal answers to the same definition: we cannot explain one without explaining the other. Indeed, we have seen that when collective life reaches a certain degree of intensity it awakens religious thought, because it determines a state of effervescence that changes the conditions of psychic activity. Vital energies become overstimulated, passions more powerful, sensations stronger; there are even

some that are produced only at this moment. Man does not recognize himself; he feels he is transformed, and so he transforms his surroundings.

(Durkheim, 2008 [1912]: 317)

We know that the recurrent Durkheimian reference to these ‘states of effervescence’ bears the persistent mark of the psychology of the crowd: according to this view, it seems that collective experience constantly needs to be regenerated at the source of exceptional social conditions (see Pickering, 1984: 380–414 and 529–530). If one insists on this point, it appears that one reaches a barely surmountable limit, if not a dead end, when engaging in reflection in terms of a theory of action. Creativity would be confined to exceptional situations in which the individual mind is carried ‘outside itself’ – led to an *ecstatic* state which is not imaginary, since it corresponds to these moments of intensified social life that punctuate the existence of the group. We are thus brought back to what Joas calls the ‘sphere of extraordinary action’ (1984: 578; 1996 [1992]: 41; 1999 [1992]: 72), which breaks with social experience considered in its regular *course*. This extraordinary social action is characterized by ‘violence and trouble’, which usually ‘can last for only a very limited time’ (Durkheim, 2008 [1912]: 172). Thus, one may be inclined to conclude that there is no room for creativity in ordinary social interactions and that it comes about only in moments in which the regular unfolding of social action is interrupted or even transformed.

It is, however, important to point out that Durkheim lays out his perspective on this point not by distancing himself from pragmatism, but, on the contrary, by directly returning to the thematic focus of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. The sacred – that is, the separate, the additional – is indicative of the common nature inherent in *all collective representations*, which consists in transcending the individual representations of which they are composed and in bringing about a form of *delirium* for the individuals who are invested in these representations. In this view, James’s approach, in particular his detour via the pathological, is sociologically revived and confirmed:

It is true that religious life cannot reach a certain degree of intensity without involving a psychic exaltation that is in some way akin to delirium. For this reason prophets, founders of religions, great saints – men with an unusually sensitive religious consciousness – very often show signs of excessive and even pathological excitability. These physiological defects predispose them to great religious roles. ... it must be added that this delirium, caused in this way, *is well founded*. The images that induce it are not pure illusions, as the naturists and animists would have it; they correspond to something in the real world. ... Moreover, if we use the word ‘delirium’ for any state in which the mind adds to immediate sensation and projects its feelings and impressions onto things, perhaps there is no collective representation that is not delirious, in a sense; religious beliefs are only a particular case of a very general law.

(Durkheim, 2008 [1912]: 171–172)

Even if Durkheim’s starting point is diametrically opposed to James’s point of departure, it seems that the former’s conclusion, or at least the former’s analytical

perspective, is very close to the latter's stance. The pathological case permits us to reconstruct the conditions of normality in terms of certain aspects that cannot be uncovered through direct observation. Certainly, the origin of pathology is attributed to an external force that pulls individuals away from themselves, makes them foreign to themselves. Yet, this strangeness in relation to oneself can be understood only *from within*, as the intensification of a transcending process linked to the very act of thinking, that is, to the act of transcending the immediate data of sensibility. It needs to be highlighted that we are dealing with 'a very general law', not limited to the phenomena of religious exaltation.

Applying the mental transformation underlying the act of thinking to all collective representations *as collective representations*, we are entitled to develop a radical version of Durkheim's thesis: to think means, to a more or less perceptible extent, to be *delirious* – indeed, the very process of thinking is nothing but a *well-grounded* delirium. This account has obvious Leibnizian undertones. It echoes the concept of 'well-grounded phenomenon' through which Leibniz, in opposition to Descartes, rehabilitates the notion of knowledge derived from the senses by incorporating it into a theory of expression that is opposed to correspondence theories of truth (Belaval, 1976: 118–119). To be exact, the well-grounded phenomenon differs from simple appearances in that it results from the concordance between two isomorphic dimensions, one intelligible and one derived from the senses, which, according to Leibniz, express a common order whose ultimate foundation can be found in God. It is on the basis of this idea that Leibniz manages to explain that different points of view can converge when perceiving one and the same physical object, considering them to be governed by the laws of mechanics.¹¹ In the same way, the well-grounded delirium is not simply an autonomous mental production that corresponds to an objectively existing reality, in an external and static way, but it is an act of the mind that, in connection with other acts of this type, makes its foundation apparent, in a context and form that can only be collective. Belief is not a mere construction, for it possesses a stable foundation outside itself, not because of social agreement as such, but because this agreement is the expression of an order that exists in things.¹²

Thus, we are confronted with the premises underlying the critique of correspondence theories of truth, one of the common points between sociology and pragmatism according to the 1913–1914 lectures (1955: 52–53; 1983 [1955]: 15–16). Yet, this criticism leads Durkheim to defend an extreme position according to which all intellectual operations can be brought back to the excessive state of the delirium, which becomes for this reason an analytical tool for understanding mental functioning in general. The specific delirium that constitutes thinking, whether religious or scientific, is a regulated delirium, and it is in light of this regulation process that one should approach the subordinate question of the link between thought and reality. Now, according to Durkheim, this regulation can only be social, that is, founded upon an external order. In other words, the mind is projected outside itself; and this is precisely what the model of the delirium seeks to express. By being projected onto the social level, the individual mind joins an order in which it can stabilize itself and in which it can find an objective reality. Thus, only if we are prepared to accept the social nature of cognition can we explain that thought is both delirious and objective.

The position is thus the following: to think is to be delirious, but it is a deliriousness that is socially, and therefore objectively, constituted. If one is prepared to admit that genuine rationalism is a form of sociological rationalism, then the notion of ‘well-grounded delirium’ can be regarded as a rationalist concept. Within this mental activity, which does not represent a merely cognitive process, there is always an additional element, a creation which delirium makes visible and which constitutes the fabric of everyday experience. In this sense, ordinary experience is not overlooked, but measured against the yardstick of exceptional circumstances. Far from representing an unquestionable assessment criterion, the concept of ‘the normal’ is re-evaluated. Ultimately, ‘the normal’ is a weak expression of ‘the pathological’. Rediscovering certain overtones of Taine’s psychology, Durkheim claims that ‘our representation of the external world is no doubt also just a tissue of hallucinations: the smells, tastes, and colours that we attribute to bodies are not there, or at least not the way we perceive’ (2008 [1912]: 172).¹³ Here, it is worth emphasizing that we are dealing with an *individual representation* whose structural constitution can be understood only in light of the intrinsically pathological functioning of collective representations. To put it bluntly, all representational forms and all mental operations are permeated by processes of sacralization and idealization. Yet, if we accept this claim, we have to reject the separation between the ordinary and the exceptional. In other words, we need to consider social experience as deeply immanent in the inner – and, hence, personal – experience of actors.

Towards a new dualism

In light of the previous considerations, it makes sense to employ the term ‘actor’, rather than the term ‘subject’, and thereby turn our attention to the level of social action. The practical implications of the Durkheimian perspective – that is, of his idiosyncratic idealism – are expressed with great clarity in a passage which we find in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* and which is concerned with the continuing presence of religion in modern societies, in which scientific knowledge succeeds, to a large extent, in asserting its legitimacy. Durkheim seeks to go beyond an interpretation that focuses merely on the persistence of rituals and on the eternal necessity of the ceremonial, and by definition the extraordinary, experience of the cult. If we were to satisfy ourselves with such a narrow view, the challenge faced by modern societies would simply consist in finding a congruence between the object of cults and scientific theories. In this case, our task would be limited to looking for justifications of faith and appropriate objects of cult in the established sciences; and the object of cults *par excellence* would be provided by sociology, namely ‘Society’ (Durkheim, 1960[1912]: 615; 2008 [1912]: 326). Durkheim goes further than this. He is not satisfied with the idea of finding an immediate common ground between science and religion precisely by virtue of the withdrawal from action implied by scientific knowledge as such:

But as important as these borrowings from the sciences might be, they would not suffice; for faith is above all an impulse to act, and science, even pushed to its limits, always remains at a distance from action. Science is fragmentary, incomplete; it progresses slowly and is never finished; life cannot wait. Theories that are meant to promote living and acting are therefore

compelled to run ahead of science and complete it prematurely. They are possible only if the demands of practice and vital necessities, such as we feel without any clear perception, push thought ahead of what science allows us to confirm.

(Durkheim, 2008 [1912]: 326)

This passage is surprising in that it seems to detract from the assertion that theory is irreducible to practice, which is a view that Durkheim strongly defends in other of his writings, notably in this critique of pragmatism. Yet, he takes issue with the pragmatist assumption that conceptual knowledge can be reduced to a flux motivated by and integrated in action, a *beginning action* [*action commençante*] (Durkheim, 1955: 165; 1983 [1955]: 79). The pragmatist critique of the specular and speculative conception of thought is rejected as a form of practical reductionism that is blind to the specificity of conceptual knowledge. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim's view is different, because a distinction is made within speculative thought between active and passive thought, between one form of thought oriented towards action and another form of thought that remains at distance from action. What is, according to Durkheim, fundamental to religious faith – and here we are certainly dealing with *faith*, not with cult – is a form of representation in which theory and practice are inextricably linked: the very fact of thinking presupposes a *disposition to act*.

This dimension of thought through which it turns out to be in a position to undertake an act, and necessarily to undertake it, may be described as 'practical certainty' (Durkheim, 1983 [1955]: 101–102) and thus distinguished from 'theoretical certainty' (Durkheim, 1983 [1955]: 102):

There are two kinds of concepts to which certainty can be attached. These are: (1) concepts which express given, achieved states, whether it is a matter of internal or external estates; and (2) those which express states to be achieved, movements to be carried out and ways of acting.

(Durkheim, 1983 [1955]: 100)

In order to explain the full power of the second kind of state, it is not enough to stick to the representation of a purpose, 'the movement itself being this representation expressed as an act' (Durkheim, 1983 [1955]: 79); for, in this case, one subordinates concept to action, of which it is nothing but a 'substitute' (Durkheim, 1983 [1955]: 79). The Durkheimian position is based on recognition of the fact that every action presupposes *a certain form* of thought: that is, not a mode of thought that is detached from vital, organic, and active processes, but a mode of thought that is involved in these processes, a mode of thought without which these processes could not emerge or develop in the first place. It is in this context that religious speculation – the 'mythological and religious representations' situated in the heart of 'practical certainty' (Durkheim, 1983 [1955]: 101–102) – proves to be essential: its primacy over scientific representations is due to the fact that religious speculation constitutes an inherent and coextensive element of vital experience in the course of everyday life. Yet, this is not to suggest that they are the same. It simply means that religious speculation cannot be reduced to the exceptional moments that occur in the intense situations of social life; rather, its existence is a precondition for the

very fact that individual subjects can act, that is, that they can continue to act and continue to live.

The problem that remains, however, is the relationship between concept and action. What conclusions can be drawn from the study of religious forms of speculation as regards speculative activity *in general* and especially the conceptual knowledge that lies at the heart of all science? Is conceptual knowledge fundamentally, as distinguished from faith, an interruption of vital flux so radical that thought, in this form, has to be conceived of as absolutely heterogeneous to action? This seems to be the view that Durkheim defends in his lectures on pragmatism. Drawing upon Ribot's *Psychology of Attention* (1890 [1889]), Durkheim claims that one essential condition for the very possibility of consciousness is the suspension of action. According to this perspective, consciousness emanates from the withdrawal from processes of vital experience, as determined by the ordinary conditions of a relative adjustment between individuals and their social environment. From this point of view, the flow of existence is to be understood in terms of automatic movement. It is important to note, however, that Durkheim refuses to regard this automatic movement as a mere routinization of previously existing and conscious forms of practice:

... when there is an equilibrium between our dispositions and the surrounding environment, our vital movements occur automatically, and pass so quickly that we have no time to know them, since they merely skim over consciousness. Consciousness does not therefore move off-stage like an actor whose part is over. It disappears because the conditions for its existence have not been met.

(Durkheim, 1983 [1955]: 80–81)

Here we find again a typical Durkheimian principle: life cannot wait. When the movement stops and consciousness emerges, there is no need for something to replace what has disappeared, since it is 'the suspension' that has made such an emergence possible in the first place. Thus, contrary to the pragmatist position, there is no intimate connection between thought and action. Dewey deserves to be given credit for having tried to free himself from the criteria of 'satisfaction' and 'convention', allowing him to appreciate the true value of knowledge (Durkheim, 1955: 120–123; 1983 [1955]: 54–56). According to Durkheim, however, we need to challenge the view that life can be portrayed as a continual rhythm of disequilibria and of the restoration of equilibria and that thought can be seen as a result of people's confrontation with problematic situations. From a Durkheimian perspective, we have to conceive disequilibrium as an interruption of movement that conditions the emergence of thought, rather than treating thought as the starting point of a balancing movement (1955: 164–165; 1983 [1955]: 79–80).¹⁴

It has been tempting to interpret this objection to pragmatism as a limitation inherent in Durkheimian intellectualism. After all, the Durkheimian approach appears to restore the classical view that pragmatism had already turned upside down: the self-enclosure of the sphere of mental representations, in the mode of *retention*, based on the principle '[t]o think is to refrain from ... acting' (Ribot, quoted by Durkheim, 1983 [1955]: 80). From this point of view, human action constitutes a merely physical exercise, which can

be reduced to an organic fixation of movements and thus to a form of automatism. As a consequence, we seem to be confronted with a classic aporia: in light of the attempt to separate mind and body strictly from each other, the unity between them becomes inconceivable, as does the fact that action is steered by a representation.

Nonetheless, on closer inspection it becomes clear that the dualism advocated by Durkheim is far from Cartesian; rather, it is based on Spinoza. This is not surprising, given the importance of the idea – commonly attributed to Spinoza but whose origins are, in fact in Leibniz (Macherey, 1997: 72–73) – of a psycho-physical parallelism in Ribot's theories (Ribot, 1890 [1889]: 167–168). In his lectures on pragmatism, Durkheim takes up the Spinozist definition of the soul [*âme*] as the idea of the body (Spinoza, *Ethic*, Part II: proposition XIII; referred to in Durkheim, 1983 [1955]: 129 n. 3). According to this definition, the soul is immediately related to the body, the object [*idéat*] of an idea to which all our ideas, from the most concrete to the most abstract, are inextricably linked. This definition is illustrated in the role played by kinaesthetic [*coenesthésiques*] sensations, understood as the core element of personal consciousness. To assume that consciousness is an organism aware of itself means to suggest that the primary function of consciousness is not its ability *to direct the body*, but its capacity to know it. In other words, to link consciousness to the body does not mean to relate it to corporeal action; rather, it means to introduce *a relation to action that is different from that of directing*. It is only insofar as one isolates in its purity this moment of the body knowing itself, thus making room for a capacity to know the body within the body itself, that the novelty of movements becomes thinkable. On the contrary, seeking to limit consciousness to the role of a directing capacity, we remain caught up in routine, without being able to understand how disequilibrium can be overcome through practical creativity. In short, contrary to the pragmatist view, Durkheim's solution to Cartesian intellectualism is to be found not in an immersion of consciousness within movement, but in an increase of spiritualization through the positive evaluation of interruptions to, and gaps in, action – that is, through the spiritualization of the body itself – through the 'idea of the body' itself.

From this point of view, pragmatists and Cartesians, through their very opposition, have committed the same mistake: namely, that of converting the mind into a mere tendency to direct the body. Indeed, the pragmatist critique of Cartesianism has merely made the directing function of consciousness more internal, to the point of transforming consciousness itself into an action. Now, by contrast, for Durkheim consciousness is a form of contemplation, a '*vision*'. And it is this reluctance towards all movement, its being recalcitrant towards any directing function, which constitutes not only its specificity but also *the nature of its link to action*, in a way that is really challenging. Following this perspective, we are led to challenge Joas's interpretation: it is not when he is closer to pragmatism, but, on the contrary, when he moves away from it that Durkheim puts himself in a position that allows him to account for the creativity of action.

This is why the argument about the suspension of action is aimed less at downplaying action than at stepping back from it in order to better account for it. In this sense, Durkheimian sociology promises to be a genuine sociology of action. His aim is to approach action *differently*, in such a way that it can be conceived of as what Durkheim calls, using a deliberate oxymoron, a '*psychological activity*' (1983 [1955]: 83), that is,

an activity which through interruption or suspension can allow us to understand the end of automatism and the innovation of movements.

Durkheim does not deny the practical functions of human thought. Rather, he claims that, in order for it to be embodied in practice in a way capable of changing it, thought needs to stand in a rebellious and, from a certain point of view, antagonistic relation to practice. How does this antagonism manifest itself? It does not manifest itself in the form of the confrontation between two competing spiritual and physical forces. In all rigour, the antagonism springs, on the empirical level, from the temporal phenomenon of the interruption of action.¹⁵ The split presents itself as a split within time, through the appearance of a way of expecting inherent in practice.¹⁶ And one can form the hypothesis that it is precisely this specific, temporal mode that Durkheim sought to define under the notion of *faith*, or *belief* – themes that cannot, in any way, be removed from his theory of action. What we need to understand is the peculiar practice of thinking, as the practice which interrupts practice.

It is true that, as Dewey points out, in problematic circumstances we need to rely on our consciousness. Yet, in order for the triggered movements to be *new*, freed from old automatisms, the power that conceives these movements needs to be an autonomous capacity, yet *within the body itself* as the capacity that the body has of going beyond itself, of raising itself above itself, and *separating* itself from itself – which means, more particularly, overcoming its inertia, marked by the mechanical repetition of movements. In this context, Durkheim talks about ‘spiritualization’. His very first expression, on the physiological level, is the distinction between organ and function introduced in *The Division of Social Labor*. The result of an emancipation from the organic determinations that manifest themselves inside the organism itself, the functional development renders the organ ‘more flexible and freer by making it more complex’ (Durkheim, 1984 [1893]: 275). Durkheim interprets this as a mark of the mind, not as acting upon, or being acted upon, but as transcending the body, as the body transcending itself. On this point, however, cerebral physiology is incapable of accounting for the transformation process taking place; it is only on the social level that the spiritualization of the organ, by which the function is defined, can be understood. Thus, social existence would be a process of emancipation, which individual organic existence could not achieve by itself. In light of the lectures on pragmatism and the analysis of action they contain, we can add that this emancipation is inscribed in the body itself, insofar as it thinks: that is, insofar as, because of its social existence, it has the phenomenon of conceptual thinking in it.

Of course, this phenomenon occurs in it because of *its social existence*. In other words, emancipation, as it is understood in this context, presupposes that a level of reality be socially stabilized, thereby providing the act of thinking with an exterior reference point without which it would be deprived of meaning. The fact that individual thought can be generated in the first place and the fact that it can be a vehicle for novelty are conceivable only in relation to a logical context which is socially consolidated. To be sure, this is not a matter of rejecting social realism; rather, it is a matter of redefining it from a different perspective, based on the creation of thought at the very level of concrete individuals. On this level, one has to advocate a spiritualist position, indeed a *hyper-spiritualist* position (Durkheim, 1996a [1906]: 48; 2010b [1906]). Yet, such a

spiritualist position does not permit us to ignore the external and social consolidation of meaning, which in turn produces new habits and repetitions, different from the ones inscribed in bodily automatisms. We arrive at a spiritualism, which is not simply a revival of the Cartesian gap between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, but a split of the body itself, within its idea, that is, on a level that reflects the social existence of the individual.

Thus, to emphasize the irreducibility of thought to action does not mean to return to an intellectualist position based on the idea of an individual capacity to think that would belong intrinsically to the human subject. Rather, it is a matter of shedding light on its profound duality, that is, on the fact that human subjects, because of the very act of thinking, exist always already outside themselves. Obviously, this has major consequences for intelligibility and the coherence of the peculiar 'dualism' whose existence is presupposed here. If we reflect on the nature of collective existence as a whole, it becomes clear that this dualism does not imply a rupture between exceptional situations characterized by the creation of values and ordinary social interaction. And one has to recognize what is to be gained from returning to Durkheim, who *distinguishes himself from pragmatists*, within a framework of a sociology of action considered in its regularity and continuity. For the ordinary course of action is constantly driven by this inner split of thought, which renders it modifiable. Ordinary action is sustained by forms of creation that transcend the pure and simple repetition of movements, recomposing and regulating themselves on a new level. Put differently, the sociological perspective never abolishes the tension between creation and institutionalization, and it is from this angle that it can account for practice. The gap is not between exceptional innovation and habitual repetition, as a form of self-reproduction; it makes more sense to talk about a repetition that differentiates itself by the mere fact that the body 'thinks itself' by living, since it contains an organ in which the kinaesthetic sensations are the object of an elaboration which is of an epistemic order, the only possible source of a new reality. In order to think this way, it is not necessary to refer to exceptional moments of regeneration of collective representations; we only need to understand that the very fact of thinking is a social act of transcendence inherent in the body's life. As such, it allows the human body to innovate itself through practice and hence to act.

This also means, however, that one has to be careful not to deprive this conception of action of all idealist connotations. The 'socio-empiricism' that Rawls attributes to Durkheim succeeds in restoring its originality, against both empiricism and idealism in its classical forms, and also against pragmatism. Yet, it seems to presuppose that 'direct social experience' is resolved on an entirely practical level. This is precisely what Durkheim objects to when insisting upon the need to conceive of action in terms of its social constitution. It is worth pointing out that this is not simply a question of exegetical accuracy. It is also a question of knowing in what direction a sociology of action is likely to be deployed, and under what angle ordinary social action is likely to be described following a Durkheimian inspiration. In fact, the invocation of the primacy of practices is pointless if these practices do not prove to be analysable. If practices cannot be examined, one may fear the emergence of an undefined zone, under this name, lacking a real heuristic scope. We can draw one central conclusion from the above study: it is only by distinguishing within practice itself what does not derive from practice that one is in a

position to attribute relevance to the Durkheimian approach as a theory of *ordinary* action. In other words, returning to social action in terms of its regular unfolding, this can be accomplished only if one acknowledges the irreducibility of this particular notion [figure] that Durkheim calls idealization – a notion which one may call ‘idealist’, but which is the basic principle of the intelligibility of practices.

Conclusion:

The person as a category in the sociology of action

In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim locates processes of idealization in the realm of faith (1960 [1912]: 615; 2008 [1912]: 326). The previous analysis has illustrated the importance of the distinction between faith and knowledge, between a form of thought based on, and essentially oriented towards, action and a form of thought that stays at a distance from action. Yet, while this distinction is useful, it seems that religion and science, faith and knowledge, communicate again in a certain way: if religiosity is immanent in everyday interactions, which enable them to go on – that is, to change constantly and imperceptibly – this is because *thought in general* occurs through the very transcendence of the given of which faith is the most direct expression. The distinction becomes clearer. Ordinary life, in order to unfold, presupposes the effectiveness of belief, because it has to avoid two extreme positions: on the one hand, pure speculation, absolutely inactive – that is, scientific thought – cut off from action, and separated from religion; on the other hand, mere bodily activity, which remains on one single level, that of automatism, understood as the rigorous repetition of movements. Between strict repetition and inertia, ordinary life can unfold under the condition of *religiosity*, of the production of the sacred, of idealization. Knowing, or thinking, is possible only because we have beliefs, in the sense that we transcend the data of sensibility through a process of sacralization, thanks to the mind’s capacity to add its own production to the given. Pushing this thesis further, we may say that *representation* itself is an act that can be explained only in religious terms. Thus, the idealist notions of faith, belief, and representation must not be regarded as insignificant, concealing the primacy of social practices. On the contrary, one can return to practices only by drawing upon the original sense that Durkheim attributed to these practices.

So why insist on faith? What can we learn from making sociological reference to a religious element? In this case, we have to guard against a *non-theoretical* comprehension of the phenomenon we seek to define. What justifies the priority given to faith in relation to rational knowledge has nothing to do with its less abstract nature, with the fact that it appears to be closer to bodily determinations, or with its affective nature, which makes it more homogeneous to action, as one may be inclined to conclude. The problem should be posed in a different way: if we need faith in order to be able to act, *and act on a daily basis*, this is because thought can split action only insofar as it is, in its core, belief. It is belief that allows not for an action of thought on the body, but for the fact that one lives not *alternatively*, in a discontinuous manner, as mind and body. It is belief that permits us to be, simultaneously, thinking and acting individuals, who constantly participate *in two lives*, which is the only way of living *continuously*. Here we are confronted with the pragmatist problem of the articulation of thought through action, but here we also find

an entirely different solution to the problem: it is wrong to assume, in a radically empiricist fashion, that experience contains only one level. Paradoxically, it is because we live on two levels that existence can have a certain degree of continuity. In other words, there is, indeed, a dualism, but it does not have the meaning that is usually attributed to it. It is not a dualism of the mind and the body, which would then pose the problem of connection; rather, it is a dualism that is refracted through the mind and the body: in the mind, between believing and knowing; in the body, between the body and the organ of thought. Hence, it is by doubling the dualism that Durkheimian sociology claims to be a sociology of action, that is, a sociology of the everyday and ordinary dimensions of social action.

This is the philosophical position on which a thorough confrontation with pragmatism allows us to shed light. To conclude, however, we should also stress its genuinely sociological aspects, in particular the insight that the emancipation of the mind through the production of reality is a profoundly social affair. It is because society thinks within us that we can think. Our delirium, our liberation from the physical order of reality within a new order, which must indeed be called ideal, is 'well grounded' only because it is socially constituted. This point is forcefully made in a very peculiar passage of Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, concerned with the concept of the person:

From the preceding analysis it emerges that two sorts of factors produced the notion of person. One is essentially impersonal: the spiritual principle that serves as the soul of the collectivity. This is, in fact, what constitutes the very substance of individual souls. ... On the other hand, another factor must intervene that fragments this principle and differentiates it into separate personalities: in other words, there must be a factor of individuation. It is the body that plays this role. Since bodies are distinct from one another and occupy different points in time and space, each of them constitutes a special setting in which collective representations are refracted and coloured in different ways.

(Durkheim, 2008 [1912]: 199–200)¹⁷

Thus, the body creates a perspective, a situation understood as *situs*,¹⁸ that is, a point of view on the same reality, which constitutes the mental unity of the group. Again, Leibniz is relevant: all monads have the same content, although it is expressed in different ways from various points of view. Yet, this physical perspectivism involves a distinction between two concepts that are often confused with one another, namely the concept of the individual and the concept of the person:

A person is not only a singular subject distinct from all others. Above and beyond that he is a being to which relative autonomy is attributed in relation to the setting with which he is most immediately in contact.

(Durkheim, 2008 [1912]: 200)

Here the link between personality and freedom is justified in terms of extraction, emancipation from the body. Strangely, our uniqueness as persons depends on our deindividuation. It is constituted by the only 'part of ourselves that is not immediately subordinate to the organic factor' (Durkheim 2008 [1912]: 201): that is, precisely, social

representation. Society projects itself upon us in order to emancipate us from our bodies.¹⁹ And it is essential that society projects itself upon us as a mind. If this is the case, however, it is difficult to understand what makes us unique. How is this possible given that the body is the only source of individuation? This is where Durkheim's distinction turns out to be crucial:

So it is hardly the case that the more individualized we are the more personal we are. The two terms are not in the least synonymous: in a sense, they oppose more than they imply one another. Passion individualizes and yet enslaves. Our sensations are essentially individual; but the more we free ourselves from the senses, the more capable we are of thinking and acting through ideas, the more we are persons.

(Durkheim, 2008 [1912]: 201–202)

Thinking and acting through concepts makes us persons: it is, therefore, within the concept, on the speculative level of the concept, that the question of the link between thought and action is supposed to be resolved. The solution, as we can see, is based on the distinction between individual and person, understood as a distinction between passion and action, between passivity and activity, between individualization/constraint and personalization/freedom. From this perspective, it seems that Durkheim revives the theme of 'predilection' present in French post-Kantianism (Collins, 1994: 60–61); yet, this leads him to emphasize a central experience of dispossession, since he inscribes at the heart of the person an extreme experience of deindividuation. The person would be nothing but the result of the direct experience of the social, the first of all 'social things'. It is for this reason that acting and thinking can be described as personal processes: they proceed correlatively from the same experience and manifest on two different levels the same separation of the individual from him- or herself. Thus, the classical idealist thesis of free will is taken up again by integrating a contradiction that we should not try to overcome, but rather accept as such: the one according to which we are all the more free as we become more strange to ourselves and follow an order which does not owe its existence to us. Now, such a separation appears in its purest form as the separation of the concept, that is, speculatively or ideally. It is because we think – and, as we should add, because we think with others – that we can act, and act uniquely, that is, in a way that differentiates us from others. Acting as a thinking being – as a person, and not as an individual – we become unique entities through a process which, through the same movement, differentiates and reunites us at the same time; for only the concept, the act of thinking, is creator, can produce something new, and thereby generate a new order of reality.

These passages from *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* may seem paradoxical, but it is precisely their paradoxical nature which reflects the complexity and originality of the position. They express Durkheim's most ambitious reflection on the theme towards which his entire *oeuvre* is oriented: the presence of society in ourselves, and the way in which it is really part of each of us. One will notice that the movement is not a process based on internalization, as if the individual were driven by a force, first external and then incorporated into his or her existence and shaping it like an automaton. On the contrary, this force is created by us, *because of the very fact*

that we form concepts. Its strangeness in us is real, but it is a strangeness of which we are nevertheless the authors, because of the mere fact that we are thinking beings. It is transcendence, but a transcendence within immanence. Society is we ourselves as thinking beings, that is, we ourselves *spiritually*. The interest of reading Durkheim's confrontation with pragmatism does not lie simply in identifying points of convergence between his and pragmatist views; rather, it is about recognizing, through the contrast with pragmatism, Durkheim's radical originality and the significance of his capacity to overcome Kantian and post-Kantian forms of intellectualism – that is, it is about acknowledging the importance of the renewal of idealism, which only sociology seems to be capable of achieving.

Notes

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1. Note that this insistence upon the importance of the ritual for interpreting Durkheim's epistemology can be found in Gellner (1970). From this perspective, it seems entirely justified to establish a link between Durkheim and the late Wittgenstein. Albert Ogien (1994) also supports this line of argument, which he considers to be the basis of his ethnomethodological approach. On the legacy of the Durkheimian tradition, see Garfinkel (2001).
2. James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* was translated into French by Frank Abauzit and published in a volume prefaced by Émile Boutroux (James, 1902 [1902]). Unless otherwise indicated, I shall quote from the original text.
3. According to certain contemporary thinkers, such as the psychologist Henri Delacroix, this convergence was a sign of the profound affinity between pragmatism and sociology. Durkheim rejects this view, which he regards as a major source of confusion: 'Between pragmatism and myself, there is a huge gulf which separates rationalism and mystical empiricism from one another' (1975b [1913]: 39).
4. On the notion of enlargement, see James's critical commentary on the psychological thesis of Havelock Ellis (James, 1971 [1902]: 48–49).
5. This is the translation chosen by Abauzit in the French edition (Joas, 1999 [1992]) for the idea 'robust Philistine type'. However vague this translation may appear, it reflects the political nature of this apologia for religious experience, based on a critique of the liberal view that the individual constitutes a physically and morally self-sufficient entity.
6. For a critical discussion of the relationship between religion and magic in Durkheim, see Gurwitsch (1963: 81–86). This point is important in that it permits us to compare Durkheimian and Weberian perspectives on religious phenomena. It is widely acknowledged that Weber regarded the magician as an essentially religious agent, whose existence is fundamentally different from, yet intimately related to, the existence of both the priest and the prophet.
7. Understood here as a 'focused polarity'. Robert Hertz gives a canonical presentation in his essay on the Right and the Left (Hertz, 1970 [1909]).
8. On the concept of universalizability, which is to be distinguished from the concept of universality, and on the difficulty of providing a sociological foundation for objective knowledge on the basis of the concept of universalizability, see Paoletti (2002: 442–444).

9. This is the crucial point of the debate concerning the hypothesis of pre-logic formulated by Lévy-Bruhl (see Karsenti, 1998).
10. Here I do not intend to examine the gap between Durkheim and Renouvier and Hamelin's post-Kantian idealism. Let us nevertheless remember that Renouvier's work was also central to James. For a defence of the idealist position against pragmatism, see Durkheim (1955: 86; 1983 [1955]: 34–35).
11. The most revealing text on this point seems to be Leibniz's letter to Rémond written in July 1714. I owe this point of clarification to André Charrak.
12. The question of Durkheim's notion of the objectivity of representations obliges us to take into account a self-referential element, but without therefore invalidating the assumption that there is an external reality. On this point, see Paoletti (2002).
13. For a critical analysis of the issues arising from the concepts of delirium and hallucination, see Paoletti (2002: 444–449).
14. For a comparison between Dewey and Durkheim in relation to this point, see Deledalle (1959: 496–497).
15. In this context, it seems necessary to reflect upon two dimensions: first, upon Pierre Janet's theses formulated in *Psychological Automatism* (1889); second, upon the Bergsonian conception of the brain as a kind of waiting zone, which can be found in his *Matter and Memory* (2010 [1896]). We need to remember that these two works, just like James's *The Principles of Psychology*, are the background to Durkheim's article 'Individual and Collective Representations', published in 1898 (2010a [1898]). In addition, we need to take into account that the temporal dimension is essential to the formulation of the Durkheimian thesis regarding the independence of the social in relation to the biological, in terms of the psychological phenomena themselves. It is within this perspective that Joas insists on the fact that, as pointed out by René König, the relation between Durkheim and Bergson cannot be reduced to the opposition between positivism and idealism (Joas, 1996 [1992]: 51; 1999 [1992]: 59).
16. In fact, we are dealing with a germinal intuition uncovered by pragmatism. It seems to me that the theory of 'waiting' is one of the most fruitful developments of the Durkheimian school. It plays a pivotal role in Marcel Mauss's *The Gift*, in François Simiand's works on money, in Emmanuel Lévy's studies of the law of responsibility and contractual law (see Karsenti, 1997: 405–406; and 2004).
17. This passage is well known amongst ethnographers of Kanak. Facing the rejoinder of his informant, Maurice Leenhardt recalls the Durkheimian distinction and its significance in terms of a principle of individuation: 'You have not given us the spirit, but you have given us the body' (Leenhardt, 1963: 263).
18. '*Situs*' means situation. The use in the original Latin, in which the link with the body is more explicit, underlines what it means for a body to be always immersed in a situation.
19. One will notice that this view differs fundamentally from Bourdieu's notion of habitus. The affinity between the two perspectives, however, manifests itself in the fact that both thinkers are concerned with the stabilization of collective representations, with the instituted nature of human thought, and with the bodily nature of the habitus.

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