SPECIAL ESSAY

*Durkheim on Religion and Moral Community in Modernity**

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Durkheim's theory of religion is approached from the perspective of his lifelong concern with the question of meaning and moral order in modern society. This emphasis naturally leads to a consideration of wider themes informing Durkheim's sociology of religion than are usually found in analyses focusing exclusively on his treatment of primitive religion in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1964). Durkheim sees as the distinguishing feature of modernity the progressive emancipation of the individual from traditional sources of influence. The evolution toward greater individuation, culminating in the "cult of the individual" or "religion of humanity," is set by Durkheim within the context of the role of collective ideals in promoting social change and in the maintenance of moral order. Religion, the major symbolic expression of societal wide ideals, is identified as the key variable which enables Durkheim to reconcile the competing demands of individuals for freedom with the interests of society in collective welfare.

No one can help but notice that we are living in a time of great change and collective ferment. The collapse of Communism, resurgent nationalism, the birth of democracy and scramble to embrace a free market system in once totalitarian nations, the growth of voter indifference and crisis tendencies in advanced capitalist countries, the emergence of "backlash" movements seeking to resist, and the globalization and technicalization of everyday life are just some of the most visible expressions of this change. If the psychological effect of this upheaval can be located, perhaps it lies in the pervasive sense that the categories and oppositions which once rendered the world meaningful, if not secure, for the individual are now inadequate for a comprehension of the new order. Increasingly, the present changes are leading to a fateful reassessment of much of our nineteenth-century European legacy, including many of its Enlightenment-inspired assumptions about the nature of reason and progress.

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Nowhere were these assumptions better formulated in sociology than in the secularization thesis, the idea that modernization entails the inevitable and irreversible movement from the sacred to the secular. Indeed, secularization theory emerged, in part, as an effort to justify the belief in an emancipatory reason, one whose critical powers would progressively liberate humanity from all traditional and, therefore, irrational forms of thought and action.[1] Yet this characteristically modern conviction in Western culture as rational has always stood in stark contrast to the "irrational" persistence of religion.

It is the persistence of religion and related questions of meaning and moral order in the face of recurring cultural crises and change that makes Durkheim's sociology of religion particularly relevant for the study of contemporary issues and concerns. The majority of Enlightenment-informed sociologies view modernity as signaling an end to religion's influence over institutional and cultural life and thus as an end to the normatively unified sociocultural order of the premodern world. However, Durkheim's sociology evinces a deep appreciation of the permanence of religion in social life, especially the larger role played by religion in generating the overarching values and predetermined meanings around which the privatized, institutionally differentiated and culturally pluralistic societies of modernity are integrated and their national identity sustained.

Even before he wrote *The Elementary Forms*, Durkheim was convinced that religion had social and moral significance. In one of his earliest works, *The Division of Labor in Society* (1968), Durkheim describes the importance of religion for society in general:

> Religion is an essentially social phenomenon. Far from pursuing only personal ends, it exercises, at all times, a constraint upon the individual. . . . Offenses against the gods are offenses against society. (1968, pp. 92–3)

Defining religion as the predominant expression of the deep moral sentiments inspired by society in individuals, Durkheim writes:

> [Religious forces] dominate us; they are, so to speak, something superhuman, and, at the same time, they bind us to objects which are outside of our temporal life. They appear to us as an echo of a force which is foreign to us, and which is superior to that which we are. (1968, p. 100)

The Division of Labor is an important book for understanding the evolution in Durkheim's thinking since many of his arguments on the role of religion in securing moral order, social integration, and personal identity were to be extended and developed in subsequent writings (see the excellent paper by Wallwork 1985). In particular, Durkheim's later writings belie an increasing concern with the moral consequences of modernization, notably the threat that the growing emphasis on individual autonomy posed for social order.

One consequence of modernization was that individuals were no longer constrained by collective action and hereditary influences, and were left free to develop their intrinsic talents and differences. It was generally believed in Durkheim's day that this diversity of beliefs and values was threatening to destroy the moral consensus of society and lead to social conflict (Marske 1987). In contradistinction to such pronouncements, Durkheim would argue that the central threat facing societies in the modern world was not the fact of their increasing differentiation into highly complex and pluralized value spheres, for this, he argued, was necessary and inevitable, but the threat posed to society by an amoral, unbridled individualism, and the consequence of this negative ethic for collective well-being and identity. Crucial to Durkheim's later theory was the idea that religion—the symbolic expression of society's deepest moral sentiments and ideals—constitutes a vital, unifying force in modern society. Religion was the key concept by which Durkheim would eventually come to grips with the moral malaise affecting modernity, identified here as a "pervasive uncertainty and confusion" regarding the ultimate beliefs and values by which self and society should be organized and structured (Seidman 1985, p. 109). For Durkheim religion would serve to balance the competing, apparently irreconcilable interests of society in collective welfare with the ever greater demands of individuals for self-determination.

Thus modernization for Durkheim did not so much entail the dissolution of religion as it did religion's transformation. While Durkheim never doubted that religion would remain a fundamental and enduring feature of social life, one question still remained: What kind of religion was suited to the post-traditional, industrialized societies of modern Europe? The later Durkheim found his answer in the phenomenon of the "cult of the individual" or "religion of humanity." As Durkheim explains,

> [The] human person (*personne humaine*) is considered sacred in the ritual sense of the world. It partakes of the transcendent majesty that churches of all time lend to their gods. . . . Whoever makes an attempt on a man's life, on a man's liberty, on a man's honor, inspires in us a feeling of horror analogous to that which the believer experiences when he sees his idol profaned. Such an ethic is not simply a hygienic discipline or a prudent economy of existence; it is a religion in which man is at once the worshipper and the god. (1973, p. 46)

For Durkheim individualism encompasses among other things such values as compassion, rationalism, freedom, social justice and democracy (Bellah, 1973; Nyer, 1979; Seidman, 1985). However, such ideals as were proclaimed in the Revolution of 1789 had met with only partial acceptance in Durkheim's day. Indeed, many of the more conservative elements in French society still resisted their institutionalization on the basis that these ideals threatened to undermine traditional, religio-moral codes and create a condition of moral relativism and social anarchy. In response to such criticisms and in

light of his own fears about the consequences for society of a negative ethic of freedom, Durkheim developed an interpretation of individualism that would give cognizance to the reality of the individual's deep affective ties to society. Any account of the modern tendency to accord humans a sanctity traditionally reserved for more "higher" beings, urged Durkheim, must consider the evolution of contemporary society, of which the individual was both a moral and religious expression.

The remainder of this study examines Durkheim's sociology of religion within the context of his lifelong concern with determining an appropriate moral basis for post-traditional society. To this end, the author traces the relations between religion, morality, and society, especially as detailed in Durkheim's later, largely overlooked philosophical writings. Second, I consider Durkheim's distinctive brand of individualism for an understanding of modernity. This involves an analysis of the role of both structural and ideal factors in the evolution toward individuality and of religion's specific modern expression in the cult of the individual. The aim is to offer a different reading of Durkheim's sociology of religion than the standard summary usually given *The Elementary Forms*. By organizing Durkheim's thinking on religion around the concept of modernity, I consider themes informing Durkheim's work that are often overlooked when a too narrow emphasis is placed on his analysis of primitive societies. Appropriately, this study situates Durkheim's sociology of religion within the wider context of his major concern with understanding the historical dynamics of modern society and with carving out within this order a meaningful place for the newly emerging "individual." Finally, it is hoped that this exposition will leave the reader with a deeper appreciation of the practicality of Durkheim's sociology of religion for understanding current concerns and uncertainties over the meaning and direction of social life, which the emergence of a postindustrial, postcoldwar, postmodern world has precipitated.[2]

Religion, Morality, and Society

Numerous illustrations of social groups appear throughout Durkheim's writings but these material entities do not entirely capture what he means by the term *society*. This is because society is, first and foremost, an ideal phenomenon with its own distinctive consciousness over and above its material location in space and time (Bellah 1973). It is a consciousness that is emergent from but irreducible to the individual consciousnesses which comprise it. By continually uniting, acting, and reacting with one another, individual consciousnesses (*consciences particulières*) combine to create a new consciousness (*conscience collective*) which is society. As an ideal reality, society is constituted for Durkheim by the distinctive ways of thinking and acting of individuals

taken collectively. Society furnishes both the cognitive aspects of our social life (beliefs and ideas) and the practical ways around which our action is structured (rules, regulations, and mores). Thus society is both an intellectual and a moral reality whose existence is presupposed in every individual cognition and action (Wallwork 1972). Summarizing his "idealist" position, Durkheim writes:

> Society can neither create itself nor recreate itself without at the same time creating an ideal. This creation is not a sort of supererogation for it, by which it would complete itself, being already formed; it is the act by which it is periodically made and remade. . . . The ideal society is not outside of the real society; it is a part of it. . . . For a society is not made up merely of the mass of individuals who compose it, the ground which they occupy, the things which they use and the movements which they perform, but above all is the *idea which it forms of itself.* (emphasis added; 1964, p. 422)

For present purposes, however, it is as a moral rather than a cognitive ideal that society must be understood. By specifying and regulating human behavior, morality articulates the fundamental relationships on which social life is both secured and sustained. In this respect, society is synonymous for Durkheim with the sum total of its constitutive individual relationships, the specification and regulation of which depend on preestablished ideals or rules. Durkheim posits a reciprocal relationship between morality and society. Morality contributes to social order to the extent that solidarity is strong; and, to the extent that moral norms possess the authority to regulate individual relationships, solidarity and, thus, society is strong. In sum, morality and society are reflections of each other; morality forms the basis of social order and social order is the expression of this moral foundation (Tiryakian 1962).

For Durkheim the definitive moral characteristic of society is its constraining power. In his words, "the collectivity has its own ways of thinking and feeling to which its members bend but which are different from those they would create if they were left to their own devices" (1973, p. 17). That is, society is more than just an external, objective reality specifying standards of behavior; it imposes itself on individual consciousnesses and thereby operates as an internal regulator of behavior. Constraint is synonymous here with discipline, and every society requires a body of rules or moral organization that prescribes for individuals what their relations with other members of society will be. Durkheim writes,

> It is this discipline that curbs people, that marks the boundaries, that tells them what their relations with their associates should be, where illicit encroachments begin, and what they must pay in current dues towards the maintenance of the community. (1957, pp. 14–15)

Morality is the example *par excellence* of the constraining, disciplining

power of society since moral systems have traditionally demanded that individuals orient their behavior toward ends that are not entirely egoistic. All the great moral systems of the world have demanded to a greater or lesser extent that individuals "do violence" to their natural tendencies for the sake of the welfare of others. Only society, argues Durkheim, has the "moral reality" to demand this of individuals, namely to inculcate the requisite disinterestedness and devotion on which collective welfare depends.

Moreover, in modern societies, observes Durkheim, there exists a continuing need for individual "appetites" to be restrained by some form of moral authority. The reason is that the modern emphasis on self-actualization and the rational reflection on the means to achieve individual ends has increased the number of actual and imagined objects individuals have convinced themselves that they need. However, such needs "constantly and infinitely surpass" the availability of objects to satisfy them, with the result that individual appetites are left unsatisfied and demanding ever more (1951, p. 247). Individuals, adds Durkheim, lack the moral capacity to restrain such overwhelming egoism whose "inextinguishable thirst" and "constantly renewed torture" are a source of ongoing despair and the impetus for much destructive activity in modern societies. However, society has the "authoritative" power to impose moral limits on human desires, and by constraining them, to satisfy them. This is because society obliges us "to submit ourselves to rules of conduct and of thought which we have neither made nor desired, and which are sometimes even contrary to our most fundamental inclinations and instincts" (1964, p. 237).[3]

This is not to say that discipline is the sole property of society taken as a moral power. Indeed, morality for Durkheim is not entirely a question of discipline and duty, prohibition and restraint (Alpert 1961; Tiryakian 1962; Giddens 1971; Bellah 1973; Hall 1987; Mestrovic 1988, 1989a, 1991). As noted, society is as much constitutive as it is regulative of human conduct. Although embodied in ideals external to individuals, society is also internalized, to a greater or lesser extent, in every moral consciousness. As transcendent, society is external to the individual and represents a superior power to which the individual naturally defers; yet as internalized by the individual, society is also an object of attachment since it forms the deepest part of the individual's personality.

"Respect," maintains Durkheim, "is the emotion that we experience when we feel this interior and wholly spiritual pressure operating upon us" (1964, p. 207). For the "good is morality conceived as something pleasing, something that attracts our will, provoking our desire spontaneously. . . . (It) is a magnificent ideal to which our sensitivities aspire spontaneously" (1961, p. 96).

Hence while moral strictures

> bear down upon us, we nevertheless cling to them; they impose obligations upon us, and yet we love them; they place constraints upon us, and yet we find satisfaction in the way they function, and in that very constraint. (1982, p. 47)

For Durkheim, moral conduct must be understood primarily in terms of the underlying emotions that tie the individual to the group, and thus cannot simply be said to entail the passive cognizance of one's duty as specified by a set of equally abstract rules and regulations. Because morality originates in the positive regard and fellow feeling that individuals, *qua* social beings, have for one another, there is always a voluntary, irrational aspect to moral conduct that cannot be encompassed by our simple *a posteriori* rationalizations of human motives and behavior. Even rationally grounded duties exemplified, for instance, by Kant's "categorical imperative," which Durkheim argues reduce morality to a "sort of commandment that [humans] must obey without any discussion simply because [it is] a commandment," presuppose an "irrational act of faith and submission," a desire to act in accordance with them (1973, p. 47). In this respect, morality cannot be said to be composed of a simple succession of abstract propositions, definitions, axioms and theorems to which the individual defers out of fear of punishment or rational acquiescence through the "force of the better argument" (p. 47). Indeed, it has never been nor can it ever be proved that these cognitive moral formulations are what determine the conduct of individuals.

At the same time, the recognition of the affective element in morality does not imply the utilitarian position that moral systems can be reduced to motivations to satisfy purely individual or egoistic ends that these systems were designed to serve. Like Kant's moral individual, utilitarianism is an abstraction, that is, an autonomous individual without historical or social antecedents, essentially egoistic, whose objective is to maximize self-interest. The problem with these and similar theories, argues Durkheim, is that they deny the warm, spontaneous, affective elements in human conduct. For Durkheim these emotions constitute the true basis of communal life, being rooted in the reality of our fundamental need for and attachment to others, namely society. Indeed, Durkheim is at pains to stress the "higher," socially inspired motives underlying this relationship, notably the desire of individuals to identify with and orient their behavior in view of the welfare of others (what has been variously labeled as sympathy, compassion, charity, altruism). Durkheim places morality at the center of social life, as having its basis and necessity in human relationships, in those "multiple ties which link us to each other and to the group in which we take part," rather than in disengaged, autonomous rational individuals. Although moral beliefs, rules, and ethical

systems are the principle means by which duty, and thus one's relation to society, is cognitively grasped and understood, these conceptions rest on more basic sentiments expressive of the fact that we are fundamentally social beings. Recognition of this dual aspect of morality—desirability and duty, passion and reason, heart and mind—is essential if Durkheim's analysis of social life is to be appreciated in its true complexity.[4]

The Dual Relationship Between Religion, Morality, and Society

For Durkheim there is a profound similarity between the dualism of desirability and obligation which characterizes morality and the sacred-profane nature of religion. Like morality, religious phenomena have an authority that keeps the individual at a "distance" at the same time that they inspire in the individual a desire to emulate their example, thereby drawing the individual "closer" to them. As Durkheim remarks, "The sacred being is in a sense forbidden; it is a being which may not be violated; it is also good, loved, and sought after" (1953, p. 36).

Thus, moral and religious phenomena differ from other social facts in possessing a certain "separatedness" from the mundane lifeworld. This duality is particularly noticeable, observes Durkheim, when one analyzes religion. For all religious systems, "whether simple or complex, presuppose a classification of all the things, real and ideal, of which men think, into two classes or opposed groups . . . : the sacred and the profane" (1964, p. 37). Moreover, if we attend to the nature of societies in general, adds Durkheim, society can be understood to be "to its members what a god is to his worshippers . . . a being whom men think of as superior to themselves, and upon whom they feel that they depend" (1964, p. 206). Not surprisingly, Durkheim describes this divine reality in terms that echo those used to describe morality and religion: The individual is in awe of society and thus fears its authority and yet would literally cease to exist as an individual without it. Like the "believer [who] bows before his God, because it is from God that he believes he holds his being . . . We have the same reasons for experiencing this feeling before the collective" (1953, p. 73).

Although considered by individuals as an authorative and inspirational force, society exercises its influence in ways that are too "circuitous and obscure," it "employs physical mechanisms that are too complex," argues Durkheim, for individuals to grasp its true nature. The consequence is that individuals are led to project these social forces outside themselves and in forms contrary to and separate from their own human, material existence. Yet Durkheim cautions that this ignorance should not blind sociologists to the fact that all religious and moral systems symbolically answer to basic human needs and aspirations.

"The reasons with which the faithful justify them may be, and generally are, erroneous; but the true reasons do not cease to exist, and it is the duty of science to discover them" (1964, pp. 2–3).

We can now see more clearly why Durkheim stresses the relations and interrelations between religion, morality, and society. All three are by their very nature linked. So intertwined are they in his analysis that we can say that religion and morality are not only social phenomena for Durkheim but that society is a religious and moral phenomenon as well (Parsons 1949; Bellah 1973). And while traditional religious forms may be on the decline, society will never shed its elements in common with religion. For

> there has been between them so close a relationship for so long a time, it is impossible for them to be dissociated and become distinct. For this to happen they would have to undergo a complete transformation and so change their nature. . . . In fact, present moral [social] life abounds in the religious. (1953, p. 48)

For Durkheim, religious forces are essentially moral forces that lending symbolic form to the authoritative ties which bind individuals to society. It is for this reason that religion is destined to survive in some form or another in every society. Religion functions to give symbolic expression to the moral rules and ideals that specify the relationships on which social order rests.

The Religion of Individualism and the Role of Shared Religious and Moral Ideals in Social Change

Durkheim's rather abstract discussion on religion and morality has direct relevance for the kind of religiosity which characterizes the West, and Durkheim's social-moral-religious equation serves as a fundamental reference point for understanding modern social order (Parsons 1949; Bellah 1973). Every society for Durkheim creates ideals in its own image, the root of these moral values in contemporary Western societies being a unique dignity accorded human beings. It is in this fashion, writes Durkheim, that the individual in the modern world "incarnates something of humanity, each individual consciousness contains something divine and thus finds itself marked with a character which renders it sacred and inviolable to others" (1973, p. 52).

Hence despite material, mental, or physical inequalities, every individual embodies the same ideal and thereby is symbolically rendered equal. It is precisely the power of value ideals to compel individuals to perceive the world in hitherto uncharacteristic ways, argues Durkheim, which is responsible for creating and continually sustaining the modern cult of the individual. Although the source of this power is "irrational" in that it lies deep within the intensely emotional nature of group life, its effects on the world are nonetheless real because of it. Individuals are, by any logical consideration, unequal

in talents, capacities, and life chances; yet such differences in no way detract from the reality of their own fundamental moral equality. As Durkheim explains:

> How is it possible to justify egalitarian ideas by purely logical considerations? The role of logic is to help or oblige us to see things as they are. *But in fact we are unequal.* We have neither the same physical force, nor the same intellectual power, nor the same energy of will. . . . In spite of this, morality demands that to a certain extent we should be treated as though we were equal. It ascribes to us an equality which has no empirical foundation. Some powerful cause must therefore intervene which makes us see men other than what they are in tangible experience, which makes us see them in such a way that they appear equal to us, and which consequently transfigures them. (as quoted in Pickering 1979, p. 72)

Thus in the modern world the individual constitutes the essential core of social life, being the prime repository for society's most cherished ideals. As subject and object of worship, the individual symbolizes the moral ideals on which social order rests and "acts as the medium through which (these) ideal(s) become capable of being understood" (1953, p. 96). Note that by the term "individual" Durkheim means humanity in general, the ideals of which represent and celebrate the individual's commonality (equality) rather than particularity (differences). In Durkheim's words,

> The cult of which [the individual] is at once both object and agent, does not address itself to the particular being which he is and which bears his name, but to the particular human person [*la personne humaine*] wherever it is to be found, and in whatever form it is embodied. (1973, p. 48)

How are such collective symbols, ideals, or values generated? The answer for Durkheim lies in those moments of "collective effervescence" when the power of the group may be experienced so intensely by individuals that a new level of collective awareness eventually comes to "supersede the isolated, fragmented consciousnesses of everyday life" (Bellah 1973, p. xlviii). These would be times, he asserts, when the unity and identity of the social group is either reaffirmed, or has broken down to such an extent that the old system of beliefs and values no longer serves as a legitimate focal point for drawing individuals together (Bellah 1959). In such circumstances individuals may act in ways uncharacteristic of more mundane levels of social functioning, forsaking the impulsive dictates of their own natural egoism for the interests of the "higher reality," which is society. "At such moments," asserts Durkheim, "this higher form of life is lived with such intensity and exclusiveness that it monopolizes all minds to the more or less complete exclusion of egoism and the commonplace" (1953, p. 92).

Such "collective representations" may already fully exist, in which case they are simply reaffirmed, or exist in a semi-conscious form in the process of newly emerging from the group. With respect to the latter, Durkheim stresses that these new ideals reflect, as do all collective representations, the social

substratum from which they arise and represent in their composition a synthesis of various elements of previously crystallized representations.[5] At the same time, however, these collective representations are a qualitatively different mode by which society comes to articulate and conceive its constitutive relations. For it is only in and through them that society is able to furnish a new reality for social life, a new way of thinking and acting, internalized by individuals and realized concretely in forms familiar to everyone. According to Durkheim:

> In such a situation the ideal appears to be their most important common characteristic and overshadows their dissimilarities. In this way, collective thought changes everything that it touches. It throws down the barriers of the realms of nature and combines contraries; it reverses what is called the natural hierarchy of being, makes disparity equal, and differentiates the similar. In a word, society substitutes for the world revealed to us by our senses a different world that is the projection of the ideals created by society. (1953, p. 94–5)

Places, objects, rituals, events are just some of the many examples of possible concretizations of the ideals by which societies seek to understand and regulate themselves. These concretizations are accorded more or less value depending on the degree to which they embody such ideals. Moreover, whether a particular concrete form is deemed valuable is contingent on the circumstances that gave birth to the ideal and not exclusively on its particular characteristics. In the great democratic and socialist upheavals of the past two centuries, the ordinary individual has achieved the same value status once conferred exclusively by divine right; by embodying and expressing the same value ideals all individuals are moral equals now.

Hence there is nothing intrinsically sacred to the "individual." For Durkheim the sanctity and respect accorded the individual in the West is the product of a long evolution in society. The individual, who represents the highest moral value in modern Western societies, has emerged from the deepest levels of collective life and is representative of this sociohistorical emergent value consensus.[6] By continually creating and recreating itself, society has given birth to new collective ideals that express its altered awareness and changing aspirations. New ideals are created at those historic moments in the process by which old ideals "transfigure the realities to which they relate" (Durkheim 1953, p. 96). While reflecting the morphological basis that gave them birth, stresses Durkheim, these ideals also constitute a new collective consciousness, a *sui generis* reality, capable of influencing subsequent social evolution. This whole process—the constant formation and reformation of value ideals and the concomitant transfiguration of the real by the ideal—underlies social change and has given birth to the great civilizations of the world:

> It is, in fact, at such moments of collective ferment that are born the great ideals upon which civilizations rest. The periods of creation or renewal occur when men for various reasons are led into a closer relationship with each other, when reunions and assemblies are most frequent, relationships better maintained and the exchange of ideas most active. Such was the great crisis of Christendom, the movement of collective enthusiasm which . . . gave birth to Scholasticism. Such were the Reformation and Renaissance, the revolutionary epoch and the Socialist upheavals of the 19th century. At such times the ideal tends to become one with the real, and for this reason men have the impression that the time is close when the ideal will in fact be realized and the Kingdom of God established on earth. (1953, pp. 91-92)

It is only in those rare moments of collective effervescence that the two worlds —the "ideal" world, or utopia, articulated by society's highest aspirations and valuations and the "real" everyday world in which these ideals are either realized imperfectly, or are struggling for realization—come in contact. Note that this event is as short-lived as it is rare, because the emotional intensity required to sustain such heightened collective intercourse quickly dissipates, and social life returns to its more mundane level of functioning.

Social Differentiation and the Rise of Individualism

Durkheim's sociological aim is to articulate the changing forms of the individual's relation to society while still accounting for individualism as a moral and religious phenomenon in modernity. So far it has been established that religious and moral ideals articulate and give symbolic expression to society's conception of itself and thereby create society and make its continued existence possible. Although the focus so far has been on the priority Durkheim gives to ideal factors in social evolution, this should not be taken to imply that he simply discredited material influences. Ideal forms are prominent in Durkheim's theory but they are always considered in relation to the material substratum from which they emerge. Individuation is for Durkheim an historical process that has not only depended on changing religio-moral conceptions of the individual but on specific morphological developments in society as well. Only by tracing both sets of changes within Western societies up until the present, argues Durkheim,

> will it be known with some precision whether we will be able to definitively qualify the principles of 1789 and say whether they constitute a pathological phenomenon or, on the contrary, simply represent a necessary transformation of our social conscience. (1973, pp. 41-42)

Having outlined the general process of this evolution within the context of Durkheim's moral-social-religious equation, attention should now turn to a discussion of the key morphological and ideational developments responsible for the rise of individualism in modern Western society. In the final discussion I discuss how Durkheim came to elaborate the importance of religion for

individuality. In addition, the consequences for social life of individualism's various interpretations are also examined.

For an understanding of the morphological changes in the normative order of society we must consider *The Division of Labor in Society* (1968). In this important and early work, Durkheim sets forth the thesis that the growth of individualism was consonant with the shift from mechanical to organic solidarity or from homogeneity to differentiation.

According to Durkheim, societies characterized by mechanical solidarity possess a collective consciousness which is high in volume, intensity, and determinateness (1968, p. 152). The existence of this form of solidarity depends on a homogeneous and extensive system of beliefs and practices; conflict and dissent are virtually unknown and repressive laws and religio-moral sanctions provide a most effective means of social control. Moreover, collective beliefs and sentiments dominate over the individual to the extent that the collective consciousness is coextensive with individual consciousnesses. Although analytically distinct, they are

> linked to one another, since in sum, they are only one, having one and the same organic substratum. They are thus solidary. . . . This solidary does not consist in only a general and determinate attachment of the individual to the group, but also makes the details of his movement harmonious. (1968, p. 106)

Durkheim stresses that it is not on account of their being "restrained or artificially suppressed" that individuals are indistinguishable from the collective consciousness at this stage; it is quite simply because at this moment in history the notion of the autonomous individual does not yet exist (1968, p. 194).

However, in the transition to organic solidarity, social differentiation has given rise to new and complex forms that place a high premium on individual talents and differences. As society has expanded in territory, and population has become denser, individuals have found new opportunities to specialize in their economic activities and to develop their unique capacities (Seigel 1987). The result of this increasing economic complexity is to undermine the original homogeneity on which solidarity once depended and replace it with a new, higher type, generated and perpetually maintained by the division of labor. Durkheim writes

> In effect individuals are here grouped, no longer according to their relations of lineage (i.e. similarities), but according to the particular nature of the social activity to which they consecrate themselves. (1968, p. 182)

Under pressure from these structural changes, the collective consciousness gradually loses hold over the individual, specifying in only very general and abstract ways the rules and regulations around which social life is structured. New patterns of thought and action emerge, new institutional and cultural

opportunities for greater individual expression and self-determination. "To be an individual now," asserts Durkheim,

> is to be an autonomous source of action. The individual acquires this quality only in so far as there is something in him which is his alone and which individualizes him, as he is something more than a simple incarnation of the generic type of his race and his group. (1968, p. 403)

Yet, while becoming more abstract and secularized in its conception under pressure of these changes, the collective consciousness also retains some of the deep (religious) sentiments and beliefs characteristic of collective life under mechanical solidarity. These are sentiments that are "strengthened and made more precise" with respect to that place in the collective consciousness reserved for conceptualizing and making sense of the changing relations of individuals to society.

> As all the other beliefs take on a character less and less religious, the individual becomes the object of a sort of religion. . . . It is thus, if one wishes, a common cult, but it is possible only by the ruin of all others. (1968, p. 172)

In short, rather than destroy solidarity, the division of labor gives rise to a new sociocultural order characterized by institutional differentiation, a high level of specialization, and a plurality of competing value and ideational spheres, with the individual constituting the primary source of communal ties.

The Moral Role of the Division of Labor

At this stage, individual autonomy for Durkheim depends on the extent to which the division of labor makes possible the expression of individual differences through specialized activity. At the same time, individuals develop through their specialized roles a growing recognition of their dependence on others with respect to those functions they are unable to perform. Social and individual progress is furthered because the division of labor leaves each individual free to pursue his or her specialized vocation. Thus reciprocity and exchange, obligation and interdependence, are as much characteristics of organic solidarity as are difference, autonomy and freedom. As Durkheim explains,

> [the individual's] progressive emancipation does not imply a weakening but a transformation of the social bonds. The individual does not tear himself from society but is joined to it in a new manner, and this is because society sees him in a new manner and wishes this change to take place. The individual submits to society and this submission is the condition of his liberation. (1953, p. 72)

Appropriately, the rights and liberties of every individual derive their meaning and force from the collective recognition of the right of all individuals

to freedom and democratic self-determination. This recognition, in turn, provides the basis for the formal specification of rules and regulations which are responsible for directing the differentiation of society along further lines of specialization. In this respect, the division of labor creates a new type of solidarity, one based on an extensive and explicit system of individual rights and duties designed to enhance the efficient operation of society's various functions at the same time that it promotes an ethic of justice in social, especially economic relationships. For Durkheim the enshrinement of rights, duties, and obligations in formal legal and ethical systems represents an attempt to articulate in cognitive form these historically changing relations of individuals to society. Durkheim adds that an objective criterion for this new relation is expressed in the modern emphasis placed on restitutive as opposed to retributive law. The material expression of these changing relations is, of course, the modern industrial society.

Against all those who would condemn the modern economic order for polarizing society into workers and producers and for generating class conflict through mutual competitiveness, Durkheim argues that the development of specialized labor and industry contains the potential to promote a unique interdependence among individuals and groups within society. As noted, this development forms the basis for a "higher" form of solidarity than was the case in traditional societies. While acknowledging that the division of labor has still not produced the social harmony he had expected, Durkheim cautions that if the present social distress is ever to be overcome, individuals must understand what their true rights and duties are in the new division of labor. Accordingly, knowing so would enable them to see themselves in relation to the larger context which is society, and thereby to appreciate the consequences of their actions on others. Ideally, stresses Durkheim, the newly emerging ideals of justice and fairness engendered by, and in turn influencing, the division of labor, should force the individual

> to take account of other men . . . to regulate his conduct through something other than the striving of his ego. . . . Far from serving to emancipate the individual or disengaging him from the environment which surrounds him [the division of labor should have] on the contrary, the function of making him an integral party of a whole. (1968, p. 398)

Thus the normal division of labor is a moral force precisely because it is through such economic cooperation that individuals come to recognize their obligations and duties to one another. At the same time, the integration of individuals to society is ensured through the mediation of decentralized occupational groups that define additional rules governing behavior in the economic sphere. Unlike the state or the family, the occupational group is able to mediate effectively between the demands of the individual and those of the

economy. Because they consist of individuals who both share the same values and are dedicated to the same goals, Durkheim views occupational groups as having the potential to establish an economy based on the participation of workers organized around the common good rather than for private profit.

Finally, the moral role of the division of labor in modern society is the focus of Durkheim's attack on the utilitarian model of society. For the utilitarians, social harmony and solidarity are automatic consequences of an economic system based on a contractual agreement formed by the mutual consent of equal individuals freely pursuing their own interests. Accordingly, all social interaction in this model is perceived as taking place through the medium of free exchange. And the natural competition of individual interests is assumed to concur spontaneously with the overall interests of society (identified as the maximum good for the maximum number of people).

Durkheim argues that if we make self-interest the only guarantor of social solidarity, individual desires and wants, being inherently insatiable and unpredictable, will go unregulated and violence becomes a real possibility. "There is nothing less constant than interest," argues Durkheim. "Today it unites me to you; tomorrow it will make me your enemy" (1968, p. 204). Durkheim adds that what the utilitarian vision of society essentially comes down to is a question of power. Far from creating a harmonious social order, mutual competition encourages that conflicting needs, interests, and values be resolved in favor of the most powerful individuals or groups, typically the most economically powerful. Moreover, it equates the ideals of individualism with a "crass commercialism which reduces society to nothing more than a vast apparatus of production and exchange" (1973, p. 44). In this model of society, individual freedom is perceived to be synonymous with the right to hold private property, and justice is simply a contractual license guaranteeing this right. This is a situation, warns Durkheim, that can only lead to great material inequality and exploitation. Indeed Durkheim goes so far as to equate utilitarianism with a conception of society based primarily on an abnormal division of labor. For, when material desires and wants increase too quickly without a corresponding moral ideal to direct their application to the service of collective goals, the result is an anomic state in which social relationships are mediated strictly by instrumental considerations of private profit and success.

According to Durkheim, it is the expansion of economic interests into the other spheres of social life such as the family, school, and culture, that is chiefly responsible for the erosion of those moral values (sympathy, respect, charity) on which public morality and, by extension, the common good depend. However,

> social interaction is not a question of money or force, it is a question of moral agents. What *dominates it is* not the state of our economy, but, much more, the state of our morality. (1959, p. 204)

Lacking proper, or moral, restraints, human aspirations and desires become infinite and insatiable, and an economy oriented around their satisfaction can have only amoral consequences for society as a whole:

> It is this anomic state that is the cause . . . of the incessantly recurrent conflicts, and the multifarious disorders of which the economic world exhibits so sad a spectacle. . . . That such anarchy is an unhealthy phenomenon is quite evident, since it runs counter to the aim of society, which is to suppress, or at least to moderate, war among men. . . . A form of activity which has assumed such a place in social life evidently cannot remain in this unruly state without resulting in the most profound disasters. It is a notable source of general demoralization. (1968, pp. 2–4)

Although modern capitalism has ushered in unprecedented material progress, it has, in its unregulated state, had anomic consequences that have become all too pervasive features of modern life: restlessness, discontent, social conflict, an anarchic system of overproduction, normless materialism. Driven by egoistic interests in the guise of market forces, the modern economy, observes Durkheim, has become separated from the real human ends and purposes of the society it was created to serve, a situation which has led to recurrent long-term stagnation and even economic collapse, not to mention the social polarization and conflict it generates along the way (Bellah 1975; Mestrovic 1985, 1989b, 1991; Ingram 1990). Thus the system is progressively incapable of meeting the ever increasing material aspirations which invariably ensue when individual appetites are left unchecked and multiply indefinitely.

What is Durkheim's moral solution to the anarchy and anomie sweeping society? Although he broaches the topic of the "cult of the individual" in *The Division of Labor*, at this stage he fails to equate it with the newly emerging moral ideals of justice and freedom which promote and regulate economic cooperation. Individualism is viewed in purely egoistic terms and for this reason has little integrative value; the division of labor, with its emphasis on justice and fairness, is solely responsible for curbing self-interest. A more sophisticated theory of individualism possessing meaningful integrative value for the individual would have to await Durkheim's elaboration of the centrality of religion in the maintenance of modern social solidarity. As many commentators have noted, after *The Division of Labor* Durkheim would no longer indiscriminately sanction the kind of unbridled economic progress that occurs at the expense of the detriment of those moral influences which could direct its development toward beneficial ends (Parsons 1949; Bellah 1973; Marske 1987). As noted above, many of Durkheim's comments at this early stage reveal a deep awareness of the fragility of a social solidarity whose moral-juridical legitimacy rests solely on the structural differention engendered by the division of labor. Realizing that simple rules and regulations were themselves inadequate to ensure a democratic community in which individual needs and interests would be compatible with the well-being of all, Durkheim

would eventually come to an understanding of the deeper, that is, religious, nature of the ties binding autonomous individuals to society. However, before turning to Durkheim's later thoughts on religion and modernity, a brief discussion should be given to his understanding of the role of "ideal" factors in social evolution.

Religion and the Rise of Individualism

While Durkheim views the division of labor as providing the morphological foundation for the rise of individualism, it is important to reiterate that he does so in order to stress the dynamic interplay between ideal formations and their material structures (Giddens 1971). For Durkheim, the progressive differentiation of society into institutional and cultural spheres, which marks the transition from traditional to modern societies, is accompanied both necessarily and inevitably by ideational changes in the collective consciousness, especially with respect to conceptions of ultimate beliefs and values, existential meanings, and individual identity (such as religious representations). By tracing the changes in religion with respect to the growing division of labor, Durkheim hopes to demonstrate the fundamental permanence of the sacred in modern life. In contrast to those who would maintain that there is a direct and irreversible relationship between increasing modernization and the decline of religion, Durkheim puts forth a view of modernization that stresses the cultural continuities and transformations in collective life. To do this he draws attention to the fundamental historical reality of religion's evolutionary, symbolically changing forms. Religion, and for that matter, society and morality, is not a static entity in which humans play a passive role. It is continually created and recreated by humans throughout the course of history. In this respect, argues Durkheim, the new ideals of individualism should not be understood to entail an end to religion's hold over social life, but rather, to represent secular transfigurations of Christianity's emphasis on the intrinsic sanctity and autonomy of the individual person.

For Durkheim, the evolution of religion is viewed as a process in which the sacred becomes increasingly transcendent and universalistic in its representation. With respect to primitive religion, for instance, the divine is conceptualized as confined to this world, concretized in various objects and operating in a determinant manner in all human activities. Increasingly, however, "religious forces are detached from the things of which they were first only the attributes, and become hypostastized," writes Durkheim (1968, p. 288). Thus emerges the belief in the ubiquity of spirits and of gods; "who, while residing here or there . . . nevertheless exist outside of the particular objects to which they are more specifically attached . . . [and] by that very fact . . . are less concrete" (1968, p. 288). With the advent of polytheism, the divine begins to

take on a transcendent quality, as expressed in the form of personal gods who intervene only intermittently in human affairs. As representations become even more general and indeterminate in nature, polytheism gradually gives way to monotheism. The collective consciousness conceptualizes the latter development in dualistic terms as one that sets up an opposition between a human, immanent world and a transcendent world of divine influence.

Finally, with the emergence of Christianity, the transcendent realm is conceptualized as being complete in its "contraction" and thoroughly separate from the immanent or mundane world. No longer felt by individuals as a force "bearing down" on them, religious sentiments turn progressively inward to the point that the individual person becomes the ultimate repository for society's transcendent ideals. As Durkheim explains,

> God takes leave of space; his Kingdom is no longer of this world. The dissociation of nature and the divine is so complete that it degenerates into antagonism. At the same time, the concept of divinity becomes more general and more abstract . . . [becoming ultimately] . . . the God of humanity. (1968, p. 289)

Thus unconscious sentiments and agitations deep within the collective consciousness combine and recombine to form new patterns of identity and meaning that articulate this newly emerging value consensus, culminating in the modern instance in the formation of the cult of the individual or religion of humanity. Appropriately, the dissolution of a once normatively integrated sociocultural order, in which meaning and identity derived solely from one's location in a divinely legitimated hierarchy, has given rise to a new kind of society in which the individual and associated ideals of justice and freedom are now themselves the highest moral values society cherishes and upholds. As such, these ideals can no longer be conceived of as the moral expressions of a higher (divine) subjectivity; for it is the individual which is the supreme subjectivity now. To deny this moral development, asserts Durkheim, is to go against the "essential interests" of society itself. The transfiguration of Christianity into the religion of humanity is reflected in the ever greater differentiation of society into various institutional spheres and in the growing economic demand for specialized individuals. These developments, adds Durkheim, could not help but sanction individual expression and diversity. At the same time, this move to a highly generalized conception of religion is expressed in the progressive loosening of religion's hold over all the cultural forms of collective life—art, science, morality—and culminates in the value pluralism and privatization of meaning and identity, which are distinctive features of modernity.

While there may be some doubt as to the accuracy of Durkheim's religious-evolutionary schema (some may object that Judaism, not Christianity,

represents a more thorough separation of transcendent and immanent spheres), what is important for our purposes is to note the importance of Christianity for an understanding of contemporary religious phenomena. For it was Christianity, argues Durkheim, that turned the conditions of moral life inward and thereby sanctified the individual person. In this respect, Christianity represents a unique cultural-historical complex, one different from all preceding religions where the emphasis is on communal rather than individual moral life. Durkheim summarizes the changes wrought by Christianity with respect to the individual in the following paragraph, taken from an often overlooked but highly insightful essay titled "Individualism and the Intellectuals":

> [Christianity] taught that the moral value of acts had to be measured according to the intention, a pre-eminently inward thing which by its very nature escapes all external judgments and which only the agent could competently appraise. The very center of moral life was thus transported from the external to the internal and the individual was thus elevated to be sovereign judge of his own conduct, accountable only to himself and to his God. (1973, p. 52)

Thus it is an error to view the new emphasis on the individual as constituting a break from religion; far from being antithetical to Christianity, the ideals of individualism retain all its transcendence, ethical universalism, and individualistic ethic (Seidman 1985, p. 115). This transfiguration of previous religious forms into a new cult of humanity underscores Durkheim's conviction of the permanence of the sacred in society, and leads him to assert with great confidence that:

> Individualism, free thought, dates neither from our time, nor from 1789, nor from the Reformation, nor from scholasticism, nor from the decline of the Graeco-Latin polytheism or oriental theocracies. It is a phenomenon which begins in no certain part, but which develops without cessation all through history. (1968, p. 171)

The sacred's ultimate basis lies in collectively shared experiences, constantly open to historical interpretation and reinterpretation. Only if this collective life ceases to exist, argues Durkheim, will the sacred disappear. For it is the collective need to make sense of and give direction to these sociocultural changes which is that "something which is eternal in religion," writes Durkheim, and "destined to survive all the particular symbols in which religious thought has successively enveloped itself" (1964, p. 427).

Religion and Modern Social Order

A central theme of *The Division of Labor* is that of the progressive emancipation of the individual from traditional, pre-interpreted patterns of thought and action and the sociocultural evolution toward new forms of collective identity and meaning, a process which culminates in modernity with the

individual representing the symbolic locus for society's deepest ideals and values. However, as noted, at this stage Durkheim does not consider the cult of the individual to be an integrative force in modern society. Indeed Durkheim appears more concerned with how its associated ideals of justice and freedom could affectively regulate behavior in the functional specialization of labor than with the question of how the individual can be linked to society in ways compatible with public morality and welfare. However, his scattered remarks on the subject at this stage, in particular his attacks on the utilitarians, do belie a fear of the consequences of a too narrow (self-interested) emphasis on individual liberty. In his words, the cult of the individual

> is common insofar as the community partakes of it but it is individual in its object. It turns all wills toward the same end, [but] this end is not social. It thus occupies a completely exceptional place in the collective consciousness. It is still from society that it takes all its force, [but] it is not to society that it attaches us; it is to ourselves. Hence it does not constitute a true moral link. [Indeed] . . . all social links which result from likeness progressively slacken. (1968, pp. 172–3)

Durkheim does not believe that the religion of humanity is capable of providing social solidarity since he views it solely as a subjective morality upholding the rights and freedoms of individuals in isolation from society. Moreover, it is this version of individualism, notes Durkheim, which the utilitarians have so crassly interpreted in materialistic and egoistic ways. Durkheim traces its formulation to the Enlightenment conviction in the power of reason as the means whereby individuals could free themselves from "the political shackles" that impeded their development:

> The freedom to think, the freedom to write, the freedom to vote were therefore placed by [the Enlightenment] in the ranks of the primary benefits to be obtained, and this emancipation was certainly the necessary precondition of all subsequent progress. However, quite completely carried away by the fervor of the struggle toward the objective [it] pursued, [the Enlightenment] ended by no longer seeing beyond [itself] and by erecting as a sort of final goal this proximate term of [its] efforts. (1973, p. 55)

Thus, the model of enlightened individualism, which once served as the critical impetus for the deconstruction of traditional institutions and values, has now outgrown its negative purpose. What is worse, observes Durkheim, is that it is in danger of being used as an ideological weapon in the battle to legitimate and institutionalize the most extreme (anarchical) forms of individualism; that is, as a "means of disguising (one's) egoism and of more easily escaping (one's) duties to society" (1973, p. 49).

On the grounds that they inhibit human growth and potential, Enlightenment reason has destroyed the established cultural frameworks that once provided meaningful referents for human action but without furnishing any constructive, meaningful goals to replace them. But just as the cumulative

effect of the pursuit of individual self-interest is runaway production and consumption, ending in economic stagnation and collapse, "moral and intellectual anarchy" is the social effect of a cynical, critical reason in which all opinions are free and morality is simply a matter of giving reasons for one's private preferences. However, without some socially agreed on goals or collective consensus, namely the creation of a community in which people care about whether their interests, actions, and opinions might affect others adversely, these hard-won rights and freedoms (now reduced to instrumental manipulation by power and money mechanisms) are undermined and become resistant to human needs.

It is for this reason, Durkheim insists, that the "individual of the enlightenment" must now be "completed, extended and organized" in ways that would give concrete shape to the realization of those social and political aspirations for which it stands—the creation of a humane and just society. What is needed, he urges, is a morality in which individuals could affirm their autonomy in relation to communal interests such that all citizens are assured the equality requisite for true freedom and self-actualization. As noted, Durkheim does not believe that such emancipatory aims could be fulfilled philosophically through a simple appeal to reason. What is needed, he argues, is a corrective to the Enlightenment project of reconstructing morality along rational lines and in accordance with purely negative ideals which simply procure the individual's right to pursue freely his or her own interests without interference from others. What is required is a morality in which individual freedom and communal welfare would mutually coexist, reinforcing each other and spontaneously enjoining individuals to uphold them. In the final analysis, this would be a morality which accords the warm, "irrational" side of social life a central place in moral conduct.[7]

Thus, enlightenment, and its offshoot, utilitarian individualism, are negative moralities; they specify a set of rules and regulations for human conduct but neither enjoin individuals to the group nor empower them to overcome their natural egoism and isolation. Denying the multiple ties that bind humans to each other, they reduce the "individual to an autonomous power which depends only on itself" and thereby make society out to be nothing more than "a simple framework of relations of . . . independent forces" (1973, p. 38).[8] However, if "morality is truly this way," writes Durkheim,

> it becomes entirely impossible to reintegrate the individual into the social milieu in which he nonetheless takes part. If the individual is essentially a whole, an individual and egoistic being—no matter whether a material or moral egoism—if he has no other objective than the development of his moral personality . . . or the satisfaction of his needs with the least possible effort . . . society appears as something against nature, as a violence wreaked upon our most fundamental propensities. (1973, p. 39)

It is not until such later works as "Individualism and the Intellectuals" (1898) and "The Dualism of Human Nature" (1914) that Durkheim explicitly elaborates a role for individualism in the maintenance of modern social solidarity, a role articulated after he had worked out the interconnections between religion, morality, and society noted earlier (Bellah 1973; Seidman 1985; Marske 1987; Seigel 1987). What characterizes individualism for the later Durkheim is its deep, heart-felt, or inviolable, character—a position reflective of the fundamentally religious nature he ascribed to social and moral life. Durkheim terms this latter form of individualism "moral individualism" and opposes it to "egoistic individualism," which he equates with the utilitarian model of morality so prominent in his day. Accordingly, moral individualism is not the glorification of the self, the particular individual (egoism, narcissism), but the "individual in general," the ideals of which have their roots in the ties which bind us together by virtue of our commonality. Its ideals, Durkheim writes,

> spring not from egoism but from sympathy for all that is human, a broader sympathy for all sufferings, for all human miseries, a more ardent need to combat them and mitigate them, a greater thirst for justice. (1973, p. 49)

Moreover, these values are altruistic precisely because they empower individuals, as do all religions, to transcend their natural egoism or self-centeredness. As social expressions of society's deepest moral sentiments, the ideals of 1789 are at once religious and moral, commanding respect while emanating a desirable quality that evinces a deep-felt attachment and leads individuals to want to obey them.

Arguing that only society has the moral power to create a new value consensus, Durkheim envisions the day when a social order will emerge in which individuals find meaning and purpose in a commitment to the service of public ends rather than to the single-minded pursuit of private gain. He insists that the true meaning of the ideals of individualism will be understood only when people realize that it is society (with all its connotations of warm, voluntary attachment and commitment) and not some cold-hearted rational contract, that forms the condition of their present freedoms. True to the ideals of moral individualism, it will be a society in which the utilitarian rationality of individual wants will not take precedence over an ethic of altruism and compassion.

Conclusion

Durkheim's analysis of modernity is intended to demonstrate that the breakdown of the old normative order is both an inevitable and necessary outcome of the historical differentiation and individuation of the collective

consciousness engendered by the growing division of society into ever more complex forms. By pursuing their own specialized functions, individuals have become the sole bearers of society's moral ideals and understandings. This is a development which, in sanctioning individual freedom and autonomy, has encouraged the pursuit of ever more specialized vocations. In this sense, the cult of the individual and its associated ideals must be understood to be symbolic representations whose role it is to articulate and make sense of the changing relations of individuals to society at the same time that it creatively influences the direction of these changes.

Durkheim seeks to demonstrate that individualism is neither one more philosophical construction in the long history of attempts to frame the ontological question nor an ideology in the service of the unbridled pursuit of self-interest. Rather, individualism is a set of collective valuations deeply tied to the conditions of existence and functioning of the social system. In this respect, "the individual" is but one more idealism in the long history of socially constructed valuations by which societies throughout history have sought to confer meaning and define order. As Durkheim observes,

> this taste for the absolute is not peculiar to the Revolution. It is found in all centuries of new and hardy faith. . . . Every time we undertake some great enterprise, we like to believe that we work for eternity. (1973, p. 41)

However, the transition to modernity which swept aside the old normatively unified sociocultural order ushered in a whole host of problems for modern societies which the reality of their own increasing differentiation gave prominence. Durkheim maintains that the social problems associated with modern life—rising suicide and crime rates, economic crises and inequality, the dissolution of family life, the emergence of pessimistic philosophies, growing cynicism and despair—have their basis in the fact that the expansion of individual liberty has led to an anomic situation in which individuals "no longer know the limits of legitimate needs or perceive the direction of (their) efforts" (1951, p. 386). Specifically, the source of these problems lay in an "alarming poverty of morality" generated by the consequences of an adherence to a too narrow view (derived from the Enlightenment) of the individual as atomistic, egoistic, and rationalistic. The radical defense of individual ideals which crystallized in the revolutionary fervor of the eighteenth century has been vulgarly promoted by intellectuals in ways which would seek to diminish the reality of the individual's fundamental attachment to and dependency on society. In Western democracies, the predominant interpretation of these ideals has been that which Durkheim calls egoistic individualism, namely the view that the individual is prior to society and thus the supreme reality. Motivated purely out of the pursuit of private gain, this individual enters into

relation with others not out of any interest in them (except insofar as rational considerations dictate that others be treated as a means to the satisfaction of private wants), but strictly on the basis of a voluntary contract of similarly minded agents. For Durkheim this model amounts to an attempt to undermine the intrinsic obligations individuals have, *qua* social beings, for one another. As noted, these responsibilities arise first and foremost out of the fundamentally emotional nature of group life, and only later find their rational formulation in moral codes, religious precepts, and ethical systems.

As Durkheim predicted, the one-sided emphasis on the pursuit of profit and the rationality of the means to satisfy individual wants, has, in our own day, created a society in which individuals no longer consider themselves bound by anything higher than their own immediate self-interest. The consequence is that modern social life has become increasingly oriented toward ceaseless production, material self-preservation, and insatiable consumption. Egoism has joined with consumerism in reinforcing dependency on impersonal structures which service the individual's insatiable material desires at the same time that they reinforce (in the name of the service of individual freedom) the isolation and fragmentation of individuals from one another. The purposive-instrumental values of efficiency and success underlying this one-sided ethic are readily apparent in the corporate and technocratic structures around which our social life is so ruthlessly structured (Bellah 1975; Mestrovic 1985, 1989b, 1991; Ingram 1990).

Yet, while the modern social order this form of individualism shaped and legitimated becomes increasingly problematic, the rest of the world struggles in varying degrees to embrace Western-style, consumer capitalism in all its decadence and in-built destructiveness. The ceaseless consumption of natural resources, growing environmental pollution accompanied by global warming and the depletion of the ozone layer, urban crime and poverty, increasing social inequalities, anomie, cultural impoverishment, and alienation attest to the increasing failure of liberal capitalism to address collectively even the most basic human needs. There is no doubt that, for the developing world and the newly emerging nations of Eastern Europe, the social and environmental costs of this way of life will prove to be higher than, and the prosperity just as empty as, our own. Indeed in the final analysis, corporate despotism and self-serving materialism will offer little in the way of the kind of viable, purposeful collective life these countries so earnestly hope to establish when they look to the West as their example.

However, as sociologists reassess our nineteenth century cultural and political legacy and contemplate the possibility of a new emancipatory ethic for modernity, or for that matter, postmodernity, they might do well to consider that Durkheim offered his own solution to many of the same social

concerns facing contemporary postindustrial societies. For Durkheim, this was an ethic of individualism that grounded human freedom in communal solidarity, an ethic which affirmed the rights of the individual in relation to the well-being of all citizens rather than to individual achievement in the pursuit of self-interest. It was an ethic that represented the true expression of the ideals of individualism, and for Durkheim was the only solution to the problem of how the individual could remain "more solidary while becoming more autonomous." Upholding individual freedom, its ideals, he urged, would encourage the development of individual differences and capacities which the differentiation of society first made possible, while inspiring individuals to apply their new-found talents out of compassion for, and always in view of their solidarity with, others. Ignoring the intrinsic differences in talent and merit among individuals, its ideals would

> begin where the domain of charity begins. Charity is the feeling of human sympathy that we see becoming clear even of these last remaining traces of inequality. It ignores and denies any special merit in gifts or mental capacity acquired by heredity. This, then, is the very acme of justice. (1957, p. 220)

ENDNOTES

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[1]For a contemporary exposition and defense of these "modernist" assumptions, see Habermas (1987). Perhaps the most serious and sustained criticism of these assumptions has come from the postmodernists, who explicitly attack the "myth" of modernity as a project made possible by the critical and reflective transformation of society. Far from emancipating humanity, Enlightenment reason must be indicted for its complicity in all the bureaucratic and technological horrors of the twentieth century. In this respect, see Lyotard (1984).

[2]I will not attempt to give an empirical rendering of the issues and concerns currently facing postindustrial, postmodern societies which a Durkheimian analysis is particularly suited to understanding. It is sufficient merely to note that what makes Durkheim's sociology so relevant for the present age are the similarities between the period in which Durkheim wrote and the concerns with which he wrestled and the current problems facing humanity. Much of our political and cultural inheritance is being critically reassessed as we approach the end of the twentieth century just as late nineteenth-century intellectuals debated the cultural legacy of the Enlightenment in an effort to shape and entrench its social and political assumptions into a coherent program. For an application of Durkheim's sociology to an understanding of the *fin de siècle* themes and concerns conjoining the two periods see Mestrovic (1991).

[3]See Mestrovic (1985, 1989b, 1991) for a discussion of Durkheim's theory of anomie and its application to contemporary social life.

[4]It is, unfortunately, a characteristic often overlooked by commentators who interpret Durkheim's sociology of morals as exclusively concerned with formal rules and regulations, and the straightforward consequences for society of the individual's conformity to or deviance from them. By stressing the affective elements of morality, Durkheim wishes to highlight the fundamentally irrational nature of social life as rooted in the basic human need for belonging and affirmation. Sympathy, care, solidarity, the desire for acceptance or to be ethical—are the emotions which Durkheim sees as appropriate to the moral attitude. Of course, this is not to imply that humans always act out of altruistic motives, that egoism is not conjoined with compassion in the individual personality, or that all social rules and norms are capable of inspiring respect or are willingly followed. It means, only, that if an action is to be moral for Durkheim it must be devoid of all egoism and evince true self-abasement. That is, it must evince a willingness to suspend gratification of one's own desires for the sake of others and society as a whole. For a comprehensive exposition of this very important and largely neglected aspect of Durkheim's sociology of morals, see Hall, 1987; Mestrovic, 1989a, 1991.

[5]Durkheim adds that there are always, over and above the specific value ideals which constitute a given society at any particular point in time, new ideals constantly in the process of formation. In his words,

> The moral ideal is not immutable: despite the respect with which it is vested, it is alive, constantly changing and evolving. The future will have a different ideal from that which obtains now. New ideas and aspirations appear which modify or ever revolutionize existing morality. (Pickering 1979, p. 81)

[6]One contemporary and certainly fruitful application of these ideas is that put forth by Robert Bellah (1967) in his civil religion thesis. By the term civil religion, Bellah refers to that collection of symbols and ideals through which Americans understand and define themselves as a nation. Bellah locates the source of these ideals in the fundamental American conviction in individual equality and freedom. The ideals of individualism stand over and against (transcend) American society but they are also the essential preconditions for (immanent in) this society, for it is only in and through them that the nation is able to understand itself and regulate its activities.

As historical-cultural products, the individual ideals which comprise this faith have been the object of varying interpretations over the course of American history. Bellah identifies two forms of individualism whose underlying assumptions derive from two central philosophical traditions which have shaped American life since its inception: civic republicanism and liberal utilitarianism. The former, or modern individualism, rests on the Lockean view of the individual as prior to the state, freely pursuing his or her self-interest and entering into relations with society only on a contractual basis. In contrast, the latter tradition emphasizes the republican model of the civic-minded individual with moral and religious obligations which serve as a link to the larger community, tradition or society. It thus upholds an active concern for collective well-being over the pursuit of private interest. Both interpretations recall Durkheim's distinction between moral and egoistic individualism, respectively (Bellah, p. 29).

[7]For an analysis of the influence of German Romanticism on Durkheim's attempts to formulate an ethics based on passion as opposed to purely rational duty, see Mestrovic (1989a, 1991).

[8]Durkheim adds that both "see something forced, artificial, monstrous in society such as it actually exists with its traditions, its hereditary prejudices, and the limits it imposes on the individual by placing on him the weight of public opinion, of mores, of customs, of laws, and so on. . . . They understand thereby a social life which [is] different from the one we have before our eyes, one where there would be no traditions, no past, where everyone would live on his own without worrying about others, where there would be no public action except to protect each individual from the encroachments of his neighbor, and so on" (1973, p. 40).

It is interesting to contrast Durkheim's remarks with those of more recent commentators on contemporary American society. Robert Bellah and colleagues (1985, 1991) blame the degeneration in republican virtue and values and a declining sense of moral obligation on the dominance of modern (utilitarian) individualism in American society. Drawing on Tocqueville, who had singled out family life, religion and participation in local politics as inculcating those necessary "habits of the heart" which curbed American individualism's potential for "excessive and exclusive well-being," Bellah et al. argue that the republican tradition of participatory democracy is all but dead in a society where individual freedom is interpreted as the right to pursue one's own interest without interference from the state, anyone, any cause or any tradition. Accordingly, it is this negative ideal of individual freedom that threatens to destroy those "social integuments" that Tocqueville saw as moderating individualism's more "destructive potentialities" and engendering an interest in the larger community (Bellah et al. 1985, p. viii).

Christopher Lasch (1980) makes a similar indictment on American society. Lasch decries the atrophy of older traditions of support, the kinship and community contexts, and historical resources on which meaningful identity patterns were once forged: self-reliance, moral responsibility, the ability to ground one's needs in the experience of satisfaction and contentment. Both Bellah and Lasch argue that while modern American society upholds the individual's right to choose and to be liberated from outmoded traditions and values on the grounds of personal well-being and self-actualization, the possibility of genuine freedom is thereby steadily undermined not enhanced. The loss of "older traditions of self-help" has led to individuals surrendering competencies to larger bureaucratic structures like the state, the advertising industry, and the corporation. For Lasch, the expression of this psychological dependence is narcissism: Dissatisfied, plagued by anxiety, depression, vague discontents, and boundless unsatisfied cravings, self-absorbed in a superficial, "pseudo-aware" way, in constant need of recognition from others for a sense of self-worth, the narcissistic individual recalls Durkheim's depiction of anomie as a state of unlimited and unsatisfied desires, inner emptiness, moral corruptability, and egoism. In Durkheimian fashion, both Bellah and Lasch await the day when American society will generate the necessary moral resources to overcome its current malaise.

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