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The History of a Misreading: Emile Durkheim, the Categories, and the Origins of Social Constructionism

Few social theorists have been scrutinized as closely as Emile Durkheim. Yet while hundreds of commentators have vetted his ideas over the past century, only in recent decades have the epistemological dimensions of Durkheim's thought been extensively explored. As a number of new studies attest, this interest springs at least in part from the desire to assess an epistemological thesis so influential that few working in the social sciences have not grappled with it at some level: namely, the claim that reality is "socially constructed." Because Durkheim argued that the most basic concepts of human thought can best be explained sociologically, he has often been considered as the godfather of social constructionism. In *Rethinking Durkheim and His Tradition*, Warren Schmaus attempts to weed out all that is untenable in social constructionism through an examination of Durkheim's thought. Contrary to what the title indicates, Schmaus's book does not cover Durkheim's *oeuvre* as a whole, but specifically considers his argument that the categories of human understanding are primarily social in character. What makes this book of interest to historians of ideas is the fact that, while proposing an interpretative argument about Durkheim's theory of the categories and a normative argument concerning the tenability of social constructionism, Schmaus also makes an intriguing historical argument concerning the origins of Durkheim's views on the categories–or, to be precise, concerning the error that he perceives lying at the origin of these views. Schmaus's book is, in this sense, the fascinating history of a misreading. As readers of *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912) know, Durkheim, in his last major work, not only argued that religion is essentially a social phenomenon, but also that religion–and thus society?"are responsible for the very building blocks out of which human thought is formed. These blocks include such notions as time, space, number, causality, and substance, which philosophers have traditionally labeled "the categories of the understanding." (Unlike Immanuel Kant, Durkheim considered time and space to be categories, rather than what the German philosopher called "forms of intuition."[1]) Schmaus's first concern is purely historical: how did Durkheim come to think that the categories of the understanding were social in character?- Schmaus addresses this question in two steps. In the first place, he argues, we must see Durkheim, who was trained as a philosopher before founding sociology as an autonomous discipline, as responding to a longer philosophical tradition, which Schmaus considers in chapter 2. The first philosopher to theorize categories was Aristotle. His categories referred to the highest genera, that is, the most general attributes that could be predicated of an entity. Yet it was with Immanuel Kant that modern thinking about the categories truly began. For Kant, the categories referred to the preconditions that logically had to obtain for experience to be possible in the first place. However, as Schmaus explains in lucid and economical prose, Kant's theory is a response to the problem presented by David Hume's views on the nature of causality. According to Hume, we never actually experience one thing causing another: when we observe, for instance, two events occurring in rapid and regular succession, we infer a causal relationship that our senses have in fact never perceived. Kant responded to the challenge of Hume's skepticism by arguing, in a section of his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) known as the transcendental deduction, that for an experience even to occur, a number of concepts must be presupposed. He dubbed these concepts "categories of the understanding," and claimed there were twelve of them, among which was causality. While Hume had been right, Kant suggested, to say that we never perceive causes, he failed to realize that they are logical prerequisites of experience. In this way, Kant's categories were critical to the Copernican Revolution that he effectuated in philosophy: henceforth, the main epistemological problem would no longer be that of how the mind gains access to the external world, but

that of how the knowing mind shapes the external world. Schmaus readily acknowledges that Kant's thought harbored a number of ambiguities that would befuddle his readers. In chapter 3, Schmaus begins to examine the history of the confusion that Kant's arguments engendered. To connect Kant to Durkheim, Schmaus takes a detour through nineteenth-century French thought–territory that, while increasingly familiar to intellectual historians, remains largely uncharted in philosophy departments. According to Schmaus, most nineteenth-century French philosophers simply did not understand Kant: "many of Kant's subtle distinctions were lost upon his earliest French interpreters" (p. 52) who were "mystified by his notion of a transcendental logic" (p. 50). The source of this confusion lay in the exact meaning of Kant's transcendentalism: for many of his early readers, the contention that experience depends on necessary preconditions seemed to be an argument about the being in which those preconditions were presumably located, making it a psychological claim. Moreover, Kant's linking, in the transcendental deduction, of the categories to the essential unity of human consciousness, which he called the "transcendental unity of apperception," appeared to justify this conclusion. Yet this reading of Kant, as Schmaus makes clear, is demonstrably wrong. In the *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (1783) and the second edition of the *First Critique* (1787), Kant left no doubt that his was a purely logical argument concerning how universally valid judgments about experience are possible. However, as Schmaus explains, the accurate interpretation of Kant's transcendentalism as a logical claim lagged behind the inaccurate understanding of it as a psychological theory. Only with the German philosopher Hermann Cohen (1842-1918), in the latter part of the nineteenth century, did a better reading begin to prevail.

This particular misreading of Kant, Schmaus claims, had a decisive impact on Durkheim's thought, via the influence of two prominent French thinkers examined in chapter 3–Victor Cousin (1792-1867), the founder of a spiritualist doctrine known as Eclecticism, and Pierre Maine de Biran (1766-1824), who was retroactively associated with Cousin's school. That Schmaus takes Cousin seriously at all, rather than confining him to his role as an intellectual power-broker (as historians, until recently, have done), is in itself remarkable. More importantly, Schmaus demonstrates with considerable skill why we should see Cousin's psychological interpretation of Kant as something other than a "willful misreading" of him (p. 63). Like some of Kant's early German critics, Cousin believed that, rather than placing philosophy on a more secure basis, Kant had strengthened skepticism's hand. In Cousin's eyes, the apparent victory that the German thinker had secured in claiming that the preconditions of experience were not located in experience itself was won at the cost of declaring philosophy impotent to speak about what lay beyond the realm of experience–the hazy world of what Kant called the *noumena*, or the "thing-in-itself." In particular, Cousin feared the skeptical implications of Kant's claim that we even experience our own selves as mere appearances, rather than as things-in-themselves. "I am conscious of the power to resist to a certain extent the forces external to mine," Cousin insisted. "What are all the arguments in the world in opposition to a fact like this?" (quoted, p. 67). Thus Cousin, Schmaus argues, ignored Kant's transcendentalism, offering in its place an "apperception of willed effort" (p. 67), which maintains that the self, through effortful activity and a capacity to resist its surroundings, has immediate knowledge of itself. Another exponent of the self as willed effort was Maine de Biran, who invoked it to explain how the mind first comes to understand causality. For Maine de Biran, the spontaneous experience of the will's activity is what first teaches us to look for causes, in our minds as well as in the natural world. Thus in different ways, both Cousin and Maine de Biran mistook Kant's transcendentalism for a philosophical psychology and sought in the idea of "willed effort" a superior description of how the mind prefigures experience.

While Durkheim inherited the explanation of causality in terms of willed effort from Cousin and Maine de Biran, he turned, as Schmaus demonstrates in chapter 4, to Paul Janet (1823-99), Cousin's spiritual heir, to borrow another concept that would occupy a place of honor in his philosophical lexicon: that of representation. Cousin had subscribed to Scottish "common sense" philosophy, which maintained that we perceive external objects directly, rather than through the mediations of a mental picture. Janet, an influential thinker who also wrote a philosophy textbook assigned by Durkheim, rehabilitated the older view that, in addition to directly perceived objects, the mind is also inhabited by representations, which make general ideas possible. Rejecting realism (the belief that general ideas exist as beings in their own right) as well as nominalism (the claim that general ideas have no other concreteness than the particular objects to which they refer), Janet endorsed a form of conceptualism, the doctrine proposed by the twelfth-century philosopher Pierre Abelard, which holds that general ideas exist, but only as representations appearing in the minds of individuals. Janet's understanding of how general ideas work, according to Schmaus, inspired

Durkheim to appeal to the idea of representation to explain the function of collective beliefs.

The central contention of Schmaus's historical argument is that Durkheim appropriated the Eclectics' psychological framework for himself, yet transposed it onto the study of collective rather than individual phenomena. Schmaus identifies two moments in this process, each corresponding to one end of Durkheim's career. In chapter 5, Schmaus examines a lecture series that Durkheim delivered at the Lycee in Sens, where he taught philosophy in the early 1880s.[2] In these lectures, Durkheim simultaneously perpetuated the Eclectic tradition and outlined a program for a new philosophy founded on scientific principles. Schmaus places particular emphasis, however, on Durkheim's use of the concepts that he believes would nearly scupper Durkheim's intellectual project. In the Sens lectures, we find Durkheim endorsing Janet's conceptualist views on representations, which to Schmaus suggests "the shared concepts or mental entities to which Durkheim and Janet appealed in their accounts of the meaning of general terms could have served as the inspiration or model for Durkheim's later notion of collective representations or states of the collective consciousness" (p. 104). Moreover, Durkheim also lectured at Sens on the categories themselves. Following the Eclectics in misreading Kant, he derived the categories from a psychological rather than a transcendental deduction. Yet at the same time, he rejected, for complex reasons that Schmaus discusses, key components of the Eclectic account. According to the young Durkheim, the categories have necessary and contingent, as well as rational and empirical, dimensions; though the mind may be a blank slate prior to experience, once experience actually begins, reason kicks in, as it were, in a way that requires perceptions to conform to its logical strictures. Rather than searching for traces of Durkheim's sociological concerns in his early philosophical teachings, Schmaus asserts that the real continuity between the Sens lectures and Durkheim's mature thought lies in the twin demands that he placed on his theory of the categories, which must contain both "universal and necessary principles of reason" and "concrete representations, drawn from experience, that fall under these principles" (p. 117). In Schmaus's reading, Durkheim concluded that "the principle that every phenomenon has a cause may be universal, while the concrete representations of causality may nevertheless be culturally variable" (p. 117). By distinguishing the principles of reason from the ways in which they are represented, Durkheim partially freed himself from Eclecticism's hold, taking one step towards the true path of Kantian transcendentalism, and one step away from the incipient relativism of his psychologizing mentors.

The Elementary Forms of Religious Life, the magnum opus of Durkheim's late career, marks the second moment in Durkheim's partial appropriation of Eclecticism. In this work, Schmaus contends, Durkheim borrowed the Eclectic argument that the category of causality originates with the will's internal experience of its own efforts. At the same time, to strengthen this theory's problematic validity claims, he reconfigured it in sociological terms, claiming that the idea of causality originates with the experience of the collective rather than the individual will. The two demands that Durkheim imposed on the categories in the Sens lectures–to explain the universality as well as the variability of human reason–resurface, Schmaus argues, in *The Elementary Forms*. At times Durkheim suggests that social forces invariably generate the same set of categories in all societies, while at others he implies that particular categories are unique to specific societies. At this point, Schmaus's historical argument becomes an exegetical one. How, Schmaus asks, can Durkheim simultaneously claim that the categories are universal, and assert that different cultures construct reality differently? Durkheim appears to want it both ways, though by the time of his lectures on pragmatism (1913-14), he seems to have favored the relativistic argument. The more Durkheim sides with the latter, the more he endorsed the tenet of social constructionism that Schmaus finds most objectionable, namely the claim that different cultures are incommensurable from one another.

To resolve these problems, Schmaus distinguishes–as he believes Durkheim himself did in the Sens lectures–between the categories proper and the ways in which they are collectively represented. According to this reading, the categories are universal, yet different societies represent them in different ways. All humans, for instance, impose causal relations on their perceptions; yet what to some might appear as the result of divine action will be seen by others as the interplay of purely mechanical forces. Moreover, Schmaus believes that this distinction clarifies what Durkheim meant when he says that the categories are social in character. This claim can be interpreted as meaning either that they have a social origin or that they have social function. For Schmaus, only the latter is coherent, a point the he illustrates in his analysis of what Durkheim says about causality. The term causality contains within it two distinct ideas: that of power and that of a necessary connection. For Durkheim, the idea of power originates in totemism, understood as a crystallization of collective moral forces. Yet this con-

tention leaves itself fully exposed to the Humean charge that "no impression, either of sensation or reflection, implies any force or efficacy" (quoted, pp. 127-128). In other words, if causality is born of social causes, then it must be either contingent (since those particular social causes might not have happened) or unjustified (because we never experience causes, only successions of events). The idea of necessary connection, however, rests on much sturdier ground, as its validity derives from the social function that it fulfills, rather than from the social conditions through which it was engendered. Without the recognition of "a logical relationship between an intentional state and an action" (p. 133), Schmaus would have Durkheim say, no form of moral obligation would exist; without moral obligation, society would not exist. Schmaus writes, "Where Kant saw the categories as necessary for there to be universally valid judgments about the objects of our experience, it seems that Durkheim was implying that the category of causality and perhaps the other categories also, are needed for there to be universally valid moral judgments as well" (p. 132). Consequently, Durkheim's claim that the categories have a social character should not be read as a foundational claim about their origin, but as a functional claim about their moral purpose. This point clinches Schmaus's argument: if the social character of the categories lies in their functionality, then they are protected from Humean skepticism concerning arguments from origin, in addition to being safe from the social constructionist claim that each society has its own categories, since identical social functions can be found spanning otherwise radically different societies.

Intellectual historians will appreciate Schmaus's conviction that the history of ideas can elucidate philosophical arguments. By using the thought of the French Eclectics (particularly their positions on Kant and the categories) to throw Durkheim's epistemology into relief, Schmaus appears to subscribe to Quentin Skinner's vision of intellectual history as the study of the various "moves" that thinkers make within the conventional languages that they inhabit. Yet Schmaus also uses history to show how Durkheim was led astray. Implicitly, he makes Eclecticism shoulder the blame for social constructionism, at least insofar as Durkheim is its most important conduit. Most of the views that Schmaus finds untenable in Durkheim are those that he claims Durkheim borrowed from the Eclectics. In addition to finding Durkheim's derivation of causality (understood as power) from the experience of social forces wanting on Humean grounds, Schmaus also objects to Durkheim's understanding of collective representations–handed down, he maintains, from Janet. Durkheim's conflation of the categories with their collective representations marginalizes psychology from the sociology of knowledge (since psychology is allegedly concerned only with individual thought processes). Moreover, it underwrites the view that the categories of the understanding are culturally variable, leading to "an unacceptable incommensurabilism and cognitive relativism" (p. 138). Furthermore, Schmaus suspects that the excessively functionalist tendencies of the French sociological tradition might also be *la faute a Cousin.* Because the Eclectics saw the connection between the will and human action as a causal relationship in which the will initiates action, rather than, following Kant, as a justificatory relationship in which the will provides reasons for action, the French sociological tradition following in their wake has often remained indifferent to the meaning of social action. Schmaus concludes that "it is perhaps no accident that interpretive sociology that focuses on the meaning of actions developed and took hold in Germany rather than in France" (p. 119). So while Schmaus demonstrates an appealing interest in the background to Durkheim's thought, the role that history plays in his argument is mostly negative. He presents history as a nightmare from which philosophers must awake rather than as the tinder in which philosophical inspiration is sparked. Durkheim only gets it right, in Schmaus's view, when he unburdens himself of tradition.

One reason why Schmaus views the relationship between history and philosophy in this way is that he is exclusively focused on the internal history of philosophical thought. In his account, the roar of battle is distant indeed: we hear nothing of the chronic social and political turmoil that rocked France in the century following the 1789 Revolution, or even of how philosophy became a terrain upon which competing political visions confronted one another. Though Schmaus deserves credit for taking a serious interest in often neglected thinkers like Cousin and Maine de Biran, it is a shame that he does not engage recent scholarship which considers the role played by the Eclectics in post-revolutionary France's quest for a stable political order.[3] Granted, intellectual historians have already explored many of the political vistas onto which Durkheim's work opens.[4] And it is also true that to ask for more political context is to invoke one of the stock grievances of intellectual history against philosophy. All the same, Schmaus's observations that "Cousin held that people have a need for fixed, immutable principles" (p. 62), or that Durkheim started "from the premise that the nature of the mind is such that it has a need for unity, order, and simplicity" (p. 112)

seem to cry out for an analysis of the relationship between philosophy and the tumultuous politics of a revolutionary age. Similarly, Schmaus acknowledges the popularity of August Comte in Durkheim's time, without mentioning the ideological reasons for his appeal, such as the role positivism played in legitimating the Third Republic's struggles with the Catholic Church. In some instances, greater sensitivity to context might have helped Schmaus push some of his own insights further. For instance, when discussing the problem of the universality and validity of the causality, he notes that Cousin "had no better solution to this problem than to assert that God is the source and foundation of this and other categorical principles" (p. 74). Yet he fails to notice how much this claim resembles Durkheim's contention that the categories are born in the experience of religious rituals–with the critical difference that Durkheim roots them not in a personal god but in a sociological understanding of religion. A greater awareness of how non-philosophical concerns (such as the belief that religion might stabilize a restive society) impinge on philosophical discourse would, in places, have strengthened Schmaus's historical argument.

More emphasis on context might also have led Schmaus to place greater weight on the most important historical problem that the study of Durkheim raises: how did he come to think that a new science of sociology could answer questions that philosophy could not? Or, to calibrate the question to Schmaus's specific concerns, why did Durkheim think that a social theory of the categories was superior to a psychological one? Schmaus's claim that Durkheim believed that his sociological account had greater universal validity than those put forth by his Eclectic predecessors seems to be only part of the story. When Schmaus defends a Durkheim purged of the claims that the categories have a social origin (rather than just a social function) and that the categories themselves (and not just their collective representations) are culturally variable, his triumph over Durkheim's latent social constructionism has something Pyrrhic about it. The Durkheim Schmaus has gained, whose categories are as strictly universal as Kant's, save for the occasional dash of local color, seems decidedly less original than the one we have lost, who postulated that reason was indelibly marked by its origins in human social practices.

Schmaus's desire to correct Durkheim's errors and to inoculate his thought from charges of social constructionism distinguishes Schmaus's work from other recent efforts to grapple with Durkheim's theory of knowledge. Anne Warfield Rawls has, in a recent study, argued that Durkheim's epistemology elaborated in *The Elementary Forms* should be read as a theory of how mutual intelligibility is achieved through enacted social practices.[5] Durkheim, she maintains, did indeed believe that the categories have a social origin, because only through the intense emotional experience of ritualistic practices can moral forces imprint themselves on individuals, providing them with the practical know-how needed engage in social interaction. As Rawls explained in an exchange with Schmaus in the *American Journal of Sociology* (1998): "As far as Schmaus is concerned, the central argument of Durkheim's magnum opus was never written; Durkheim remained to the end a rationalist in the classical sense to the end, who did not criticize the inherent universal 'givenness' of reason." Yet, Rawls insists, "Durkheim was *not* talking about social content filling universal rational containers," rather, he argued "that the social created the container, the framework, the category itself, not only the contents." Durkheim did not argue for reason's social origin to undermine reason's claims to universality, but because he believed that it was precisely its social origin that *made* it universal.[6] Donald A. Nielsen makes a comparable argument in another recent book. Whereas Rawls grounds Durkheim's epistemology in a theory of practice, Nielsen roots it in his social metaphysics. Interpretations of Durkheim's work along positivist lines have overlooked "the metaphysical dimensions of Durkheim's work," namely an obsession with totality, philosophical monism, and religious pantheism that owes as much to Spinoza as it does, say, to Auguste Comte.[7] Durkheim's theory of the categories, Nielsen argues, essentially serves this metaphysic, providing "the bridge, so to speak, between totality and actually existing society."[8] Rawls's and Nielsen's respective efforts to locate Durkheim's categories in a theory of social practice and a social metaphysics are no doubt vulnerable to Schmaus's Humean objections. Yet by emphasizing, albeit in different ways, the vast claims that Durkheim made for adopting a sociological perspective on human knowledge, they nonetheless offer compelling descriptions of what Durkheim's project actually was–even if Schmaus, in his well argued study, makes it clear that there are solid philosophical reasons for finding this project deeply problematic.

These reservations aside, Schmaus has accomplished a considerable feat. He has made an important contribution to the history of Kantian thought, demonstrating that the most persuasive accounts of his thought are out of sync, as it were, with his historical reception. Through a close study of often neglected French philosophers, Schmaus has explained the centrality of the derivation of causality from willed effort to nineteenth-century French

thought, and presented convincing evidence that this tradition shaped Durkheim's view of the categories in *The Elementary Forms.* He also offers a thoughtful critique of social constructionism. Schmaus's work should remind intellectual historians of all that they have to learn from philosophers–especially those, like Schmaus, who grapple with history.

Notes

[1]. Emile Durkheim, *Les Formes elementaires de la vie religieuse* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1960 [1912]), 12-13.

[2]. Notes taken on these lectures by one of Durkheim's students, Andre Lalande, were discovered in 1995 by Neil Gross.

[3]. In this vein, see Patrice Vermerern, *Victor Cousin: Le Jeu de la philosophie et de l'etat* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1995); and Agnes Antoine, *Maine de Biran: Sujet et politique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1999). Also relevant, though appearing after Schmaus's book was published, is Jan Goldstein's *The Post- Revolutionary Self: Politics and Psyche in France, 1750-1850* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005). Jerrold Seigel's *The Idea of the Self: Thought and Experience in Western Europe since the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) addresses Cousin, Maine de Biran, Janet, and Durkheim in a national but not exclusively political context.

[4]. There are two influential intellectual biographies about Durkheim: Dominick LaCapra, *Emile Durkheim: Sociologist and Philosopher* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1972); and Steven Lukes, *Emile Durkheim: His Life and Work: A Historical and Critical Study* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972). Important monographs that place Durkheim's thought in historical context include: Robert Alun Jones, *The Development of Durkheim's Social Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Ivan Strenski; *Durkheim and the Jews of France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Ivan Strenski, *Contesting Sacrifice: Religion, Nationalism, and Social Thought in France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); and Judith Surkis, *Sexing the Citizen: Morality and Masculinity in France: 1870-1920* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

[5]. Anne Warfield Rawls, *Epistemology and Practice: Durkheim's* The Elementary Forms of Religious Life (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2004).

[6]. Anne Warfield Rawls, "Durkheim's Challenge to Philosophy: Human Reason Explained as a Product of Enacted Social Practices," *American Journal of Sociology* 104, no. 3 (November 1998): 888. See, too, Schmaus's critique of Rawls's position: "Rawls, Durkheim, and Causality: A Critical Discussion," *American Journal of Sociology* 104, no. 3 (November 1998): 872-886.

[7]. Donald A. Nielsen, *Three Faces of God: Society, Religion, and the Categories of Totality in the Philosophy of Emile Durkheim* (Albany: Sate University of New York Press, 1999), 5.

[8]. Ibid., 203.

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