

AN EXAMPLE OF A RE-WRITTEN PAPER: THE REVISED DRAFT

The revision makes notable and noticeable changes. For one thing, the writing itself is sharper and cleaner. The section on Max Weber has been dropped, and the material on Durkheim correspondingly expanded. The criticisms are more acute and the conclusions less sweeping. As is typical, difficulties remain, less in the mechanics of writing than in the arguments themselves. Fixing the technical problems goes only so far; a perfectly written paper may still contain errors of fact or illogical arguments. Here, though, the student has taken the original comments to heart and rethought the paper's position. Grade changes of this magnitude are rare but always well deserved.

*The text retains the corrections I made on the original. ~~Strikeouts~~ indicate words or phrase to be eliminated, **boldface** words or phrases that should be inserted, and **[bracketed text in red]** marginal comments (usually on the essay's contents). The final paragraph in courier new type is the comment I appended to the original.*

The Elementary Issues of The Elementary Forms

In his well-known and ground-breaking work on the sociology of religion, Émile Durkheim asks the fundamental, important questions essential to the study of the sociology of religion, ~~opening the right line of inquiries to be investigated with his classical theory.~~ However, The answers that Durkheim presents, **however**, ~~to these questions~~ are flawed in that they draw from too narrow a scope **[you mean in terms of evidence or of conception?]**. In his theory of the sociology of religion, he searches for the basis of all religion, asking the question of where the roots of religion lie. In addition, **Durkheim is concerned to determine the origin of religion.** **To do so**, he applies his knowledge of sociology to the study of religion, asking how sociology can be used to study and understand religion. In ~~answering these questions~~ **the course of his analysis**, Durkheim creates an argument that, although well-defined, is supported by little **[evidence? more than his claims at the forefront of the argument]** and ~~has been accused of being~~ **may in fact be** circular in nature.

~~At the start of his discourse in~~ **Durkheim begins** *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim spends numerous pages by explaining the importance of **first defining ition** of religion: ~~at the head of an argument such as his.~~ "It is necessary to begin by defining what is meant by religion," he says, "for without this, we would run the risk of giving the name to a system of ideas and practices which has nothing at all religious about it, or else of leaving to one side many religious facts, without perceiving their true nature" (Durkheim, 37).²² ~~The His~~ definition is as follows:

"A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them (Durkheim, 62)."

Durkheim adds that the idea of **[?]** religion and the Church are inseparable, meaning that religion is an "eminently collective thing" (Durkheim 63).²² This definition excludes essential elements of other definitions (such as those of Tylor and James) in that there is no mention of the divine or the supernatural. In this **[what?]**, Durkheim rejects the idea that all religions must be defined by

belief in gods and spirits, **rather** asserting **instead** that the essence of religion is found in the community of believers—i.e., the Church (Durkheim 217). ✓

To explain religion and its essence in light of this definition, Durkheim used what he ~~found to be~~ **thought was** the most primitive form of religion, ~~Totemism~~, specifically, **in totemism as found among** Australian ~~amongst~~ Aborigine clans. *Elementary Forms*, then, is the investigation of a single people—the most primitive in social organization, culture, and beliefs, in order to understand the sociological basis for religion (Nisbet, 166). In using Totemism, Durkheim found a religion that clearly fit into his definition of religion: Totemism had concise [WC] ideas of the sacred and profane, which were part of its beliefs and practices, all of which united its social community into a Church. **[are you suggesting that he fit the definitions to his evidence, or found evidence to fit his definition?]**

Thus, Durkheim asked the questions: (a.) what is the most elementary form of religion, **is** and (b.) what makes Totemism **[I think he assumed this rather than thought it through]** the most elementary. These questions probe into the source of religion and what lies at its heart in terms of social interaction and community experience. Because major religions have become too involved to reveal their true selves **[or, their origins]**, Durkheim found and used the most uncluttered and accessible microcosm of all great faiths (Parkin, 42) and built from it his theory of the sociological origins of religion.

However, in choosing one religion upon which to base his claims, and doing so on criteria that are merely sociological, Durkheim reveals a weak thesis that is narrow in scope and **prone open** to criticism. In addition, although Durkheim searches for the most elementary religion, the reality remains that even the most elementary, archaic form of religion is still a process of social evolution by the time it is formed.

To the question of the most elementary form, many of Durkheim's contemporaries agreed with him **in** that Totemism was indeed most elementary religion (Nisbet 167). It **[what?]** was based upon a simple society that formed clans centered on a symbolic totem and was very well studied by the time Durkheim decided to base his theory upon it. Unfortunately, he studied ~~the~~ Totemism as an armchair sociologist. Durkheim had never visited the primitive people **of whom** he spoke ~~of~~, nor had he in fact ever visited Australia ~~in his lifetime~~. In addition, he worked to draw a concise, simple theory based on the studies of many ethnographers (especially **[first names]** Spencer and Gillen) **that who** had come before him, giving him filtered information which could be interpreted in whatever way he saw fit (Pals, 116).

Problems of interpretation were secondary, though, to problems of the aforementioned narrow scope. If the reports on Totemism come into question, upon what evidence does Durkheim's theory lie? E.E. Evans-Pritchard, ~~in addition to~~ Gaston Richard and Arnold van Gennep, ~~has~~ harshly criticized Durkheim's work as being dangerously temporary **[?]** and simplistic (Pals, 117). Evans-Pritchard asserts that although Durkheim is a brilliant sociological theorist, his theory should be built on a more strong and comprehensive foundation, ~~for~~ as new evidence **[which was?]** comes about, the foundation of his theory crumbles (Pals 221). Thus, in trying to find the essence of religion **in by using** second-hand information ~~on~~ **gleaned from** one culture, Durkheim's intention of building a concise [WC] theory is reduced instead **[awk. – the “intention” is not reduced, the “theory” is]** to a weak theory when held up to critical analysis.

In addition, as Durkheim actually points out in Book Two of chapter one **[?]** in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, the ~~€~~cult of the ~~ƒ~~totem does not necessarily correlate with groups that form the critical life experiences **[which are?]** of the community—but rather with the matrilineal marriage classes of the Aborigines. He asserts that without the Totem, the matrilineal

cults would lose their essential identity. The totemic cult, then, is not necessarily associated with those groups that hold a prominent place in the community. This [what?], he says, is because the day-to-day social groups do not necessarily need this support. Again, this [what?] is an example of Durkheim building a concise [WC] argument, but one that could easily be attacked if placed under a concise [WC], ex post facto [WC] analysis.

Another question that Durkheim raises in his theory of religion is that of how to study religion under the scope of sociologically. This question is important because (a.) religion serves a social purpose and (b.) that social purpose is determined by society (Pals, 117). He would assert that this study of religion as a sociological phenomenon clears away the veils that such a heavy [?] subject creates. Because religion searches for the meaning of life and even existence, it is natural that its essence would be clouded by appearances (Parkin, 41). However, by studying religion through the lens of sociology, Durkheim claimed that he could find the essence of worship of [?] a society, which, of course, is represented in the Totem.

The first problem of with Durkheim's decision to study religion as a social phenomenon lies in the room for personal interpretation. In trying to clear away that those passions, feelings, and search quests for meaning that define religion, he defined a system that was based on his ideas [?] and concepts of social norms. For example, Durkheim himself was not a believer, which created a theory that left little room [explain] for differentiation of beliefs at an individual level (Fenton, 204). His theory also excluded comprehensive discussion of doctrine and asserted that religion has only a social function—which is, arguably, too narrow a scope to draw from [too narrow a conception of how religion operates]. In asserting his sociological basis for the Totem as the source for moral life of the clan (Durkheim, 219), Durkheim clears aside the metaphorical veil [?], but also reveals personal notions and preferences that cloud his theory.

The second problem with interpretation based solely on sociology is that the criteria he uses to establish the definition of “elementary” as it applies to Totemism is based on social phenomenon, not religious ones. For example, Durkheim asserts that “we see society creating sacred things out of ordinary ones,” with men and society consecrating things and ideas (Durkheim 243). Loose social organization [?] is cited, with the cult having a social life made possible by vast symbolism (Durkheim 264). These assertions, although they establish Totemism as “elementary,” are neither falsifiable nor are they strongly linked [?] to religion, which again demonstrates the weakness of Durkheim's answers to important questions of religion based on his sociological interpretation.

In Durkheim's exposition of religion, flaws come about in the specific arguments listed and detailed above. Holistically, The argument is dangerously shaky in its circular nature. By referencing his own definition through *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, he Durkheim becomes “too inclined to offer definitions” that most easily accommodate the theory he is working to defend. In other words, the analysis begins where it ought to end. He builds from a chain of causation that can be drawn from his definition in which the sacred is equal to the social and the religious is equal to the sacred, which means the religious is equal to the social. Creating this chain at the start of his argument means that ending the argument with the religious equating to the social could be interpreted as no forward progress [awk.] in his work. In other words, his theory is based on a self-created definition that accommodates his work suspiciously well (Pals, 115).

In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim demonstrates that he is capable of raising the right questions and direction for the study of religion from a sociological perspective. However, in limiting the scope of what and how he studied religion, he came up with what many

have asserted are answers that should be viewed with, at the least, suspicion (Fenton, 217-218). Thus, Durkheim has laid out a **flawed** theory ~~that is flawed~~, but ~~has~~ provided his successors with both mistakes to learn from and questions to answer.

(Course Material) Works Cited

Durkheim, Émile. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, pp. 37-63, 121-49, 216-72.

Pals, Daniel L. *Seven Theories of Religion*, pp. 88-123.

(Outside Material) Works Cited

Steve Fenton. *Durkheim and Modern Sociology* (Cambridge, 1984), pp.202-218.

Robert Nisbet. *The Sociology of Émile Durkheim* (New York, 1974), pp. 156-186.

Frank Parkin. *Durkheim* (New York, 1992), pp. 8-25, 41-58.

You have improved the paper in every way. The writing is clearer (though not, as the marginal comments suggest, entirely without flaw), the source base larger (you have gone out of your way to obtain non-class materials), the thinking deeper (you've renounced some of your more sweeping claims) and the argument more persuasive. You set Durkheim a bit more securely into his intellectual context while summarizing his theory, though oddly you never directly state his most prominent claim: that the worship of the totem (hence religion) is the worship of society. You make a number of criticisms. His data was based on the work of others, which is true, but you never quite grapple with the implications of his choosing the aborigines: Durkheim assumed that they constituted the most primitive form of social organization because they organized themselves into clans, but he never established that such a "loose structure" was necessarily the most elementary, assuming that "looseness" (whatever that meant) correlated with "elementary." This assumption was critical for his theory, since if he had not found the most elementary social organization, he could not claim to have discovered the origin of religion. The two questions you claim on p. 2 that he asked might be reduced to one, since he assumed that totemism was the most elementary form of religion. You criticize him for eliminating discussion of doctrine without explaining why he needs to do so; the fact that he himself was not a believer does not itself explain why he downplayed it (cf. Otto, avowedly a believer, whose discussion essentially omits doctrine entirely). In arguing that religion plays only a social role Durkheim may well have argued too narrowly, as you suggest, but, again, you need to explain in what ways his concentration on social functioning leaves something out. Nevertheless, raising the paper more than a full step is an excellent achievement.

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