

Elementary Forms of the Metaphorical Life: Tropes at Work in Durkheim's  
Theory of the Religious<sup>1</sup>

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Scholars have not infrequently called attention to the master metaphors in Durkheim's writing, those figures, typically drawn from biology, physics and chemistry, which structure his sociological thought. Less attention has been given to the work that metaphors do in Durkheim's texts, or to Durkheim's fundamental ambivalence about metaphor. This paper argues that Durkheim depends on metaphor to construct the building blocks, and not just the overall architecture of his argument in The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life (1912). His conception of the 'gods' of totemism makes the theory relevant to modern European religion, and in his construction of the concept of the sacred depends on electrical and epidemiological metaphors. I argue that Durkheim's theory of social representation (the central argument of the book) is a theory of metaphorical relations between social organisation and the organisation of the cosmos.

**Keywords:** Durkheim; Metaphor; Social Representation; Religion; Totemism

Durkheim is arguably the least poetic of classical sociology's holy-trinity, though this is much less true of his practice than it is of his aspirations. The thinker for whom la vie sérieuse excluded art and artifice—and to some degree he thought of these as synonyms—from properly sociological examinations (O'Toole 2002) does nonetheless have a marked, if repressed, poetic imagination. Here I argue that Durkheim's sociology of religion is in fact structured by the logic of metaphor, even if his attitude toward metaphor itself is fundamentally ambivalent. Durkheim seems unaware of how much his innovative sociological thinking owes its vitality to his use of metaphor; without metaphor, however, his argument loses much of its analytic power, and, at least as important for us, much of its contemporary relevance, as well.

Others have written about Durkheim's metaphors for society, particularly those drawn from physics, biology and chemistry (Levine 1995; Lopez 2003; Vatin 2005; Fernandes 2008). The argument, in each of these cases is that, at particular points in Durkheim's intellectual trajectory, particular paradigm-structuring metaphors predominate, and this has consequences for the way he thinks about society. In this paper, I leave aside Durkheim's paradigm-structuring metaphors (what Kenneth Burke (1969) calls 'God metaphors'). Instead, I show how metaphors are woven into the very fabric of Durkheim's late classic, The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life ([1912] 1995, 2001, 2005). I will show that not only does Durkheim think metaphorically about religion and society, but that social representation is fundamentally metaphorical (even as he is ambivalent about his own argument at this point).

Metaphor is essential to the project of Les formes élémentaires in three distinct but partially overlapping ways. First, Durkheim's analysis of totemism is premised on a metaphorical comparison between Arunta rituals and contemporary religion. This is what gives his argument contemporary relevance and it is therefore one of the major reasons why sociologists still find the book worth careful reading and rereading. Second, he conceptualises social representation as a metaphorical relation (even as he denies that this is the case). Third, Durkheim's central concept in the book, the sacred, is developed and elaborated by means of metaphor; he compares it with "other kinds" of force/energy, particularly heat and electricity (but also, mixing metaphors, with contagious disease). Thus Durkheim's research programme depends on the analytic use of metaphor (the first and third topics to be discussed here), and it argues that metaphor is essential to social representation (the second topic).

## THE ROLE OF METAPHOR IN INNOVATIVE THOUGHT

John Urry has argued that "sociology, like any other kind of thinking, cannot be achieved non-metaphorically" (2000: 21). Important work by scholars in a wide range of fields of inquiry shows that we are by no means alone in this respect. Far from simply decorative language, metaphors are indispensable for theory building and elaboration. Scholars have shown that this is the case not only in sociological thinking (Brown 1977; Urry 2000), but that it is no less the case in the fields of evolutionary biology (Gould 1983), economics (McClosky 1998) and physics (Kuhn 1979; Jones 1982), for example. Research by cognitive psychologists (Gibbs 1994; Gibbs, Costa Lima et al. 2004)

suggests that the use of metaphor in scientific practice is an extension of everyday speech and thought. We use metaphors more or less every time we speak (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), often without realising that we are doing so, and our actions are frequently framed by the metaphors through which we view the world (Lakoff 1996). We think, speak and act metaphorically; likewise do we do science.

No theorist of metaphor has been more influential than Max Black showing us how metaphors work and why they are important for scientific discovery. His systematic philosophical analysis has demonstrated that metaphor does not simply replace a proper, literal, or descriptive word with a different, more poetic one. On the contrary, metaphors work by translating between two semantic domains, shaping how we understand both of them. One of Black's simplest examples, "Man is a wolf"<sup>2</sup>, can be used to illustrate some important components of the domains of meaning in a metaphor. "Wolf" is the focus of the sentence, the key word that makes the sentence metaphorical. The rest of the sentence is called the frame; this is the context into which "wolf" is inserted, and is the principle subject that we want to understand by means of the metaphor. This is a (by now admittedly cliché) metaphor that associates "the wolf-system of related commonplaces" with "man". When we use this as a metaphor for thinking about "man", Black explains,

[a] suitable hearer will be led by the wolf-system of implications to construct a corresponding system of implications about the principle subject. But these implications will not be those comprised in the commonplaces normally implied by literal uses of "man". The new implications must be associated with the literal uses of the word "wolf". Any human traits that can without undue strain be talked

about in “wolf-language” will be rendered prominent, and any that cannot, will be pushed into the background. The wolf-metaphor suppresses some details, emphasises others—in short, organizes our view of man (1962: 41).

This description of cognitive interactions in metaphor makes the distinction between concepts, models, and metaphors fuzzy at best (Hesse 1965). Further, as Black argues, metaphors do not simply compare things that are already alike; rather, metaphors construct likenesses between the two domains, organizing our understanding of the frame. We learn to see men in terms of wolves, exploring and extrapolating a variety of implications, primarily in terms of how we understand “man”, but also in terms of how we think of wolves; “Metaphor”, as Richard Harvey Brown puts it, “drives its points home on a two-way street” (1977: 81).

## TOTEMISM AS A METAPHOR FOR CONTEMPORARY RELIGION

“Religion” is every bit as problematic as a cross-cultural category today as it was in Durkheim’s lifetime, with no clear consensus amongst sociologists (or other scholars interested in the area) about how to define the object of their inquiries (Beckford 2003; McKinnon 2002). Durkheim shows more sensitivity to these issues than many contemporary sociologists of religion, and he spends 35 pages at the start of the text ([1912] 2005: 31-66) grappling with the complexities of the problem. Noting the manifold problems with all of the substantive definitions (all in some way too narrow), Durkheim adopts a functional definition of religion, incorporating the notion of the ‘sacred’ as a substantive element. That is, he argues religion:

is a unified set of beliefs relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and surrounded by prohibitions—beliefs and practices that unite its adherents in a single moral community called a church (2001:46)

Few students of religion today are keen on Durkheim's functional definition (O'Toole 1984), but it is an important component not only of his theory as a whole, also but for the much more basic comparison he wishes to make between the elementary forms of Australian religion and the complex religion of modern Europe. Most of the substantive definitions Durkheim rejects, which focus on gods or spirits as essential to religion, would not have allowed such a comparison, as gods and spirits are, by Durkheim's account, inessential to aboriginal life, even as they are a key component of contemporary Christianity and Judaism.

Benson Saler (1993) and Talal Asad (1993), among others, have argued that western scholars have only understood certain kinds of beliefs and practices in other times and places as "religion" by extrapolating from our western concept. Our understanding is marked by the prototypical cases of Christianity, Judaism and sometimes Islam; it developed over the past half millennium, from a more practice-oriented concept, closer to the contemporary understanding of "piety" into a concept that could denote a set of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things (W.C. Smith 1978). It is certainly true that the early modern European explorers to encounter the inhabitants of faraway lands initially reported that the inhabitants of these lands had no 'religion'. Only slowly did they begin to recognise similarities between the rituals and beliefs of others and the pieties of home (J. Z. Smith 1998).

A consideration of Durkheim's Les formes élémentaires ([1912] 2005) would suggest that to conceive of western scholars understandings of "religion" elsewhere as mere projections of ethnocentric notions would be to take a somewhat lopsided view. While Durkheim studies the totemism of Australian Aborigines, he uses this examination as a means of understanding his own culture and its "religion". By his own account Durkheim is primarily interested in understanding "religion in general" rather than the Aborigines per se; in practice, however, he is really almost exclusively concerned with western religion, especially Christianity and Judaism—and these in a modern European context. The Aborigines provide the means for him to understand his own, turn of the century, European social context. Put differently, his understanding of his own social world is mediated through the attempt to understand Aboriginal society. Aboriginal society provides the frame through which social relations much closer to home. The means by which France and the Australian outback are compared is the metaphorical "two way street" described by, which Richard Harvey Brown (1977: 81). This road is built on the bedrock of another twofold comparison, to wit: 1) the totem is god; 2) the god is society.

What Durkheim understands of aboriginal life and religion is, of course, indirect. He drew on ethnographic reports written by a rather motley crew of western observers, including those of the English biologist W. Baldwin Spencer and his collaborator Francis James Gillen, postmaster of Alice Springs and colonial administrator of Central Australia, as well as reports from the German Lutheran missionary Carl Strehlow (Morphy 1998; Fournier 2006: 157). These writers had already created a certain

rapprochement between the “religion” of the Aborigines and that of the Europeans, and Durkheim’s conceptual apparatus served to bring them into even closer proximity. This is by no means to say, however, that Durkheim and his colleagues only learned from what they read of the Aborigines. Other significant influences undoubtedly include Sylvain Levi’s researches into the history of religions of India (Strenski 2006)—to be discussed further below with reference to religious ‘energy’—and also possibly Spinoza’s pantheistic philosophy (Nielson 1998), which may have made it easier to conceive of religion without reference to the gods.

Durkheim clearly meant for his book to be an analysis that had something to say of contemporary relevance to his immediate audience, and while he explicitly frames the aptness of his case in evolutionary terms, implicitly his comparison is much more direct. Durkheim’s direct comparison between “us” (modern Europeans) and “them” (Australian Aborigines) is one of the important reasons the book has withstood the test of time. Few scholars today find that they can accept the empirical claims about Aborigines made in the book, nor would very many want to swallow his evolutionary claims whole. Even for those inclined to thinking in strongly evolutionary terms, the suggestion that the aborigines are a primitive precursor to our own society is highly problematic.

It is the metaphorical structure of Les formes élémentaires establishes the basic framework for what remains of Durkheim’s classic contribution. That is to say, the book is not, and probably never has been, a state of the art discussion of aboriginal totemism, an idea that had begun to pass from the anthropological literature even as Durkheim wrote his treatise. As an empirical study of the “religious” life of the Aborigines, very

little that Durkheim wrote is worth much today (Jones 1986). On the other hand, as an analysis of religion in “our” (contemporary western) societies, Durkheim’s analysis is still one of the greatest contributions to the sociological study of religion. Although it is nearly a hundred years old, it continues to challenge readers and to provide new insights into the study of religion; for this reason, it is rightly seen as a ‘classic’ in the sociology of religion (O'Toole 2001).

Durkheim’s explicit argument for why we should examine the “religion” of the Aborigines in order to understand contemporary religion is undoubtedly evolutionary. Thus, he argues, with more than a hint of tautology, “All are equally religions, just as all living beings are equally alive from the humblest unicellular organism to man” (Durkheim 2001:5). If we can accept that all religions are instances of the same thing, then why privilege the study of the “humblest unicellular organism” for the study of life?

Durkheim’s arguments here are fairly standard socio-evolutionary fare, with occasional references to Cartesian principles thrown in for good measure. Totemic religion, like the unicellular organism is the subject under the microscope in its purest form. By understanding that purest, simplest, earliest form—its “elementary form”, it casts new light on the more recent advanced forms of the same phenomena. The complexity of later religion, Durkheim argues, makes it more difficult to distinguish primary and secondary elements. Further, the division of labour in religious practice makes it difficult to see the religion as a whole but for the parts: priests, prophets, laity, etc. Durkheim argues that “we can only achieve an understanding of the most recent religions by following the way that they develop historically” (Durkheim 2001:5).

The Elementary Forms does not follow the historical development of religion, however. Rather, the elementary and the complex sit side by side, compared with one another explicitly and implicitly at every turn. His introductory remarks aside, Durkheim does not show too much interest in “religion in general” [Introduction, I], either, except for the purposes of definition. Rather, he confesses, “like all positive science, [his] goal is first and foremost to explain a current reality, something close to us and consequently capable of affecting our beliefs and actions. The reality is man, more specifically, man today” (Durkheim 2001:1). Indeed, Durkheim does not seem particularly distracted by the evolution of particular religions, “religion in general”, or even in comparisons between religions in different social contexts. The primary exception, of course, is North American First Nations, who provide some clues for better comprehending the Aborigines. For Durkheim, totemism is important because it helps us to understand contemporary French religion, even as it is also clear from his analysis that some understanding of the “advanced” or “complex” facilitates his comprehension of the “primitive” as well. Nonetheless, the two contexts largely sit side by side, regularly compared, both implicitly and explicitly, with little attention given to anything between the two, or the means by which the primitive became advanced.

Durkheim uses numerous metaphors to describe Australian totemism, and all of these serve to bring into association the world of the Aboriginals and our world—they are the basic means by which the two societies are compared. He says that the totem is “not simply a name; it is an emblem, a true coat of arms, and its resemblance to the heraldic coat of arms has often been commented upon” ([Book 2, 1, II] Durkheim 1995:111). In

making this comparison, we understand perfectly well the relationship between the symbol and the group, through an example that is part of “our” history. Elsewhere, Durkheim says that the totem is the clan’s flag [Book 2, 7, III]. Given the upsurge in nationalism in the years leading up to World War I, this better indicates the emotional intensity with which a totemic symbol can be invested, and the absolute seriousness with which totems are regarded. These metaphors seem to have played a role in Durkheim’s conception of the religious world of the Aborigines; they are certainly decisive for communicating this conception to his readers, as anyone who has taught The Elementary Forms to undergraduate students knows full well. The light-bulb usually flickers and comes on when we come to explain the totem in these terms. All of a sudden, “I am a frog” doesn’t seem quite so strange when it is compared to “I am a McKinnon” (the family name and crest) or “I am Canadian” (the flag).

If the totem can be understood as the family’s heraldic emblem and the flag of modern nation-states, then the vocabulary of contemporary religion is of no small significance in illuminating the meaning of this otherwise obscure set of beliefs and practices. Durkheim’s descriptions of the totemic rituals are told as if they were a Roman Catholic Mass; the prohibitions read like Jewish kosher laws; the effervescent gatherings recall the French revolution (Hunt 1988), and so forth. This may be Durkheim’s extrapolation from his own experience and context, but it is these implicit and ongoing comparisons keep the book alive. They would have caused considerable concern on the part of Durkheim’s earliest readers, some of whom were deeply offended at the suggestion that there was so much similarity between primitive, ‘pagan’ practices, and

the services at the Notre-Dame de Paris, or the national celebrations of le quatorze juillet (Pickering 1984) As we read the text, however, we understand more about how contemporary religion works; the description of Aboriginal religion modifies our understanding of contemporary religion.

Durkheim regularly refers to the totemic group as a “church”, consistent with his definition of religion developed in Book 1.1, and this metaphor insistently facilitates comparison of the Aboriginals beliefs and practices with the religious lives of turn of the century France. He could, of course, have used a different metaphor: a “temple” would do the trick, but this would have made implicit comparison with other (faraway) religious groups, and reinforced orientalist visions of the exotic ‘other’, which was not his agenda. He could have used any one of a number of indigenous terms instead (as he does when discussing other Arunta phenomena), or else, he could have used a different secular term drawn from a French historical context (“guild”, perhaps). The effects of such comparisons, however, would have been quite different, and to chose one of them would have meant construing the totemic group differently. “Church” is a metaphor with an important purpose in the argument as a whole. To call a totemic group a “church” associates the world of 20th century France and the beliefs and practices of the aborigines; putting them into such association metaphorically makes each into a means for understanding the other.

Of course, unlike Muslims, Jews and Christians, the beliefs and practices of the aborigines are not really concerned with a God, gods, or even spirits. The totemic principal, Durkheim informs us, is not a god, but a “force” or “energy” (an idea that may

derive from Sylvain Lévi's researches on Brahman sacrifice (1898)), comparable to the ideas in different cultures of mana, wakan or orenda. But there is nonetheless, Durkheim claims, something “godlike” about the totemic principle, and in fact, he tells us, it is the precursor to the idea of the gods. The totemic principle is a “semi-divine entity” (2001: 141). It is incarnate in every totemic species, and in particular in those “holy” things that are set apart by ritual prohibitions. Durkheim goes on to make the connection between the totemic principle and the gods of later religious traditions. Knowing that the aborigines do not really have “gods”, Durkheim (shifting somewhat uncomfortably) acknowledges the way in which his comparison depends on metaphor. “So”, he writes, the totemic god—to use the metaphor we have just adopted—is in them, just as it is in the totemic species and in the people of the clan. Since it is the soul of such different beings, we can see how it differs from those beings in whom it resides” (Durkheim 2001:141).

This is not just a one-off description of the “totemic divinity” as a metaphorical construct. When Durkheim comes back to make the same comparison much later, in his discussion of the positive cult, he writes that the totemic species “is a sacred thing. It incarnates what I was led to call, in a metaphorical sense, the totemic divinity” (Durkheim 1995: 345). Totemism only has a god by virtue of its metaphorical relation to modern western theistic religion, by its semantic comparison with the Christians and Jews of early 20<sup>th</sup> Century France. In this way totemism becomes Durkheim’s analytic metaphor for contemporary religion, the lens through which he interprets the churches and synagogues—as well as the national effervescence—of France.

## CONCEPTS AND THE FUNDAMENTAL CATEGORIES OF THOUGHT AS METAPHORICAL RELATIONS

If there is a central argument to Elementary Forms, it is Durkheim's contention that concepts (including the fundamental categories of perception) are anthropomorphic metaphors, or —more accurately— socio-morphic metaphors. Durkheim, however, is not entirely at ease with his own assessment of the importance of metaphor, and we find him providing several less than convincing objections to the radically constructionist conclusion of his own argument. This is something of an aporia in Durkheim's late thinking on the topic, but it is an extremely fruitful contradiction that allows him to develop an argument that has implications fundamentally at odds with the theoretical-methodological positions that he has defended in earlier writings.

In The Elementary Forms, Durkheim argues that concepts, and even those most fundamental concepts that the Western philosophical-scientific tradition since Aristotle has seen as fundamental to subsequent thought, the categories of understanding, have socio-religious origins. Thus, even science itself traces its ancestry back to religious belief and ritual. This argument is obviously of some considerable importance for Durkheim. He gave the argument a dress rehearsal (writing with Marcel Mauss) nine years earlier (1903), and then the argument is developed at length three times in the formes: at the beginning, roughly in the middle, and again in the book's conclusion, highlighting its centrality in the overall architecture of the research program: scientific

concepts stand in metaphorical relationship to the conceptual organization of the social world (Lukes 1972; Pickering 1984).

Durkheim introduces this analysis with the “categories of understanding”, those “essential notions that dominate our entire intellectual life” (2001:11); his argument can be presented somewhat more easily if we begin with concepts in general. Like William James, who famously argues that the perception of an infant before they have learned to conceptualise their world is nothing but a “Bloomin’ Buzzin’ Confusion” (James 1983: 462). Durkheim likewise argues that

perceptions are in perpetual flux; they push each other like currents in a stream, and while they last they are constantly transformed. Each one is a function of the precise moment it takes place. We are never certain of finding a perception again as we first experienced it; for if the thing perceived has not changed, it is we who are no longer the same (2001:328).

While perceptions are individual and ephemeral, the concept is “outside of time and becoming”. It is an anchor because it is social: “To think conceptually is not simply to isolate and group together qualities common to a certain number of objects; it is to subsume the variable to the permanent, the individual to the social” (334). That our concepts are social should be fairly self-evident, Durkheim argues, because concepts come from our shared language; language is a “collective elaboration” that expresses the way society as a whole experiences the world, or as Durkheim puts it, the way it “imagines the objects of experience” (330).

Durkheim has clearly learned some important lessons from the Kantians (Stedman Jones 2000). To think conceptually, he emphasises, is “not simply to see the real through the most general; it is to project onto sensation a light that illuminates, penetrates, and transforms it” (331). Our concepts allow us to make sense of our experience. It should already be abundantly clear that Durkheim is by no means a vulgar empiricist—he is highly critical of empiricism, especially in his later work (see Durkheim 2005). We do not, he argues, mould concepts out of the elements of our experience. While we may be able to vaguely sense certain similarities in the raw material of experience, Durkheim argues, we still need concepts to structure and form experience. Thus, he argues,

The feeling of similarities is one thing and the notion of genus is another. Genus is the external framework, whose contents include objects perceived as like one another. The contents cannot provide their own framework. They consist of vague and shifting images, the superimposition and partial fusion of a fixed number of individual images found to have common elements. By contrast, the framework is a definite form with firm boundaries that can be applied to an indefinite number of things, whether visible or not, whether actual or merely potential” (Durkheim 2001:113).

Concepts make perceived similarities possible in the first place. Genus concepts, among others, are too complicated to be based on the similarities of perceived experience since a genus may include an unlimited number of elements. Thus, similarities are not simply perceived—they are constructed. Put into the terms of metaphor, metaphor does not

simply recognise already existing similarity, but rather creates similarity (for particular purposes).

But where does the capacity for generating concepts come from? We will not be surprised by Durkheim's answer. If they do not come out of thin air, nor from the objects being conceptualised (the empiricist response), nor from an innate capacity for structuring perception (very roughly speaking, Kant's answer), then they must come from society:

Because men formed groups, they were able to group things; they classified things simply by placing them into the groups they had already formed... The unity of these first logical systems merely reproduces the unity of society (2001:112).

The most basic form of classification is the division of the society into phratries and clans, the members of which are not only people, but also plants, animals, weather, seasons-- in fact everything in the aborigine's world. Everything is pre-categorised; it has its place in the group. Such classification and conception is not optional for a social group, but rather, society and its classifications are coextensive. In the conclusion to the Elementary Forms, Durkheim writes:

Society is possible only if the individuals and things that compose it are distributed into different groups, that is, classes, and if these groups themselves are classified in relation to each other. Society presupposes, therefore, a self-conscious organization that is none other than a classification. This organization is naturally communicated to the space it occupies (2001:339).

Durkheim notes the metaphorical implications of his own argument, using terms that anticipate those that would later be developed by Max Black. The sociological advantage of Durkheim's conception over that of Black, however, is that Durkheim understands metaphors as both reflecting and constituting social relations. It is the conceptual organization of the social group that is "communicated" to something else. So, for example, the spatial organization of the tribe is communicated to the spatial organization of the cosmos, and the social classes into classes of things.

Even if he has made an important breakthrough in his sociological conception of metaphors, Durkheim is clearly somewhat ambivalent about thinking of the categories of perception as metaphorical:

But if the categories at first translate only social states, does it not follow that they can be applied to the rest of nature only as metaphors? If their sole purpose is to express social things, they could be extended to other areas only by convention.

Insofar as they serve us for thinking about the physical or biological world, they would have only the value of artificial symbols, practically useful, perhaps, but with no connection to reality. This would return us to nominalism and empiricism by another route (Durkheim 2001:20, emphasis added).

On the one hand Durkheim clearly acknowledges that he has configured the relationship between the social category and the concept as applied to nature as a metaphorical relation—he is also quite evidently not happy about the logical implications of doing so. If a concept, applied to the natural world (rather than to its original use in the social world), is a metaphor, is it therefore nothing more than metaphor? Durkheim here shows

that he maintains a commitment to (or, perhaps it would be more accurate to say, an aspiration for) realism. Even if Durkheim might not be entirely happy that the “strong programme” in the sociology of science has taken his argument at this point as one of its sources of inspiration and programmatic statements (Bloor 2000)—but they are nevertheless quite justified in the strand they pull from his argument.

Durkheim finds this idea, that scientific conceptions of the natural world are metaphors drawn from the social world troubling; his attempt to solve the problem is, however, much less than compelling. Durkheim writes that to consider natural concepts as mere metaphors of their social counterparts would only be necessary if the social world were not part of nature, “indeed its highest embodiment” (20). In other words, these are not really metaphors at all, because they participate in the same semantic domain. In so arguing, however, Durkheim is jeopardy of undoing his whole argument—and this in the introduction to the book, before he has had a chance to spell out the argument as a whole. “The social realm”, Durkheim writes,

...is a natural realm that differs from others only in its greater complexity. Now, it is impossible that nature at its most basic should be radically different in other areas. The fundamental relations that exist between things—which these categories are designed to express—should be essentially similar in different realms. If they appear more obvious in the social world—for reasons we shall investigate—they must certainly be found elsewhere, if in more veiled forms (20).

If the social categories correspond to those in the natural world, however, what response can Durkheim give those who would claim that concepts emerge from nature itself? Why

should we make the long, treacherous journey through the social world, when the concepts and categories that emerge from the social world already ‘correspond’ to those of the natural world? An empiricist critic could at this point simply object that Durkheim is making a several hundred-page digression into the social origins of concepts, when the more direct route—from the objects of our perceptions to the concepts—ends at the same destination.

This empiricist response is certainly not an argument that Durkheim would be willing to accept, especially not by the time he wrote the Elementary Forms, but it is difficult to see how it could be countered effectively. Durkheim’s intellectual honesty is not exactly above reproach at this point, either, because it is difficult to imagine that he believed his own assertions on this point. His explorations in comparative ethnology had shown him how differently different cultures imagine the world, and he regularly draws on these differences for making his arguments, especially in the earlier version of this argument (Durkheim and Mauss 1903).

Durkheim’s second answer, developed only at the end of his book is much more interesting and provocative. Here he suggests that an emerging global consciousness, where the mutual interactions of different societies and their conceptions of the world, would serve to make socially derived concepts even more ‘impersonal’ than they could be derived from a single society, and hence more ‘objective’. This is a highly suggestive argument, full of interesting implications for thinking about science in the global world (see Inglis and Robertson 2008). It is also less than fully satisfactory, because it does not solve the problem as we find it here—rather, he simply leaves it to be sorted out by future

global scientists. A hundred years into Durkheim's future, in our much more globalised world, the philosophical problem of the concepts seems no more immediately or easily resolvable.

Durkheim is not merely insisting on the unity of the sciences, he is also trying to dispense with what he recognises is potentially "just a metaphor" — mere metaphor often being seen as a threat to the scientific enterprise (at least for those with empiricist leanings). While Durkheim clearly recognises (with Nietzsche, Max Black, Mary Hesse and others), that if the concepts and categories translate from one semantic domain to another (from the "social" world to the "natural"), then they are metaphors. If they are concepts that are wholly appropriate only in one domain (the domain of unified science), then they are not metaphors.

By insisting that the social and natural world together constitute one semantic domain, Durkheim tries to distance his argument from the implications that stem from seeing the relation between the two as metaphorical. But the unintended consequences of this conclusion would be to acquiesce to the empiricist claims that he thinks are untenable. This resistance to metaphor may derive from Comtean aspirations for a unified science, with sociology as the Queen of the sciences—after all it is society that is the "highest embodiment" of nature. More likely it stems primarily from Durkheim's aesthetic ambivalence (O'Toole 2003). Until Max Black's seminal publication, it was not widely recognised that metaphor was fundamental for the practice of science itself. Durkheim clearly wrestles with this problem, but in 1912 he is not in a position to solve it.

## METAPHORS IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE SACRED CONCEPT

If metaphor plays a key role in Durkheim's socio-morphic theory of perception, including in that of the sciences, metaphors drawn from the natural sciences also play a vital role in his thinking, even after his research programme has taken a decisive turn towards what we would now identify as 'cultural sociology' (Alexander 2005). Durkheim often draws on concepts and ideas from the domains of natural science, and he uses them to describe aspects of the social world. So natural do these metaphors, drawn from physics, biology and sometimes chemistry and public health seem to contemporary readers, that they are often missed. They seem have made themselves so much at home in Durkheim's texts that they are often passed over in silence, except by critics—or advocates—of his more positivistic tendencies. But champions and critics of Durkheim's scientism typically miss the mark by taking Durkheim at his own word when he advocates understanding terms like "social forces" as literal expressions, rather than as metaphors (Takla and Pape 1985). Durkheim clearly thought of social "forces" as like other (physical) "forces", but there are tensions and differences here that cannot simply be ignored. A metaphor constructs and marks both the likeness and unlikeness. By literalising Durkheim's metaphors (much as Durkheim himself sometimes tried to do), the comparison is gone: all "forces" can be studied scientifically, despite their differences and divergences, by the same methods. (It hardly needs to be observed that, whether sociology be counted among the sciences or not, the sciences are hardly unified in their methodology!)

Durkheim's sociological examinations of the sacred are premised on two key metaphors, both drawn from the natural sciences, though both having more proximate origins in the study of religion: the sacred as energy, like electricity, and sacredness as a kind of contagion. It is difficult to see how Durkheim would think about the sacred, let alone explain it, without regular recourse to these two natural scientific metaphors.

Durkheim is not the first, however, to use either metaphor: both appear in the works of the great Aberdeen theologian and anthropologist William Robertson Smith (1889; Jones 1986). Until recently, Durkheim scholars have not given adequate due to the influence of Sylvain Levi (1898), the great historian of Indian religions that Marcel Mauss described as his 'other uncle' (Strenski 1998: 121; Strenski 2006). The metaphor of contagion is not readily apparent in the work of Sylvain Levi, but the metaphor of sacred electricity appears with at key moments in his texts.

The Ninth Century medieval philosopher-monk John Scotus Eriugena argued that most language about God and God's attributes was metaphorical, and hence improper for talking about the divine essence. Whereas these metaphors relate our experience to the divine essence, God is simply above and beyond comparison with mundane experience (Kenny 2005: 285-88). For parallel reasons, Durkheim has something of this same reticence when it comes to defining the sacred. When he introduces the concept in Book 1 (chapter 1, section III), he in fact says almost nothing about what the sacred is. Instead, he takes us down John Scotus Eriugena's via negativa to knowledge of divine things. Durkheim's road is somewhat different than that of the 9th century theologian, even if the comparison between the two is useful.

In his introductory chapter, while Durkheim tells us nothing about what the sacred is, he does have a great deal to say about what it is not, that is: it is not profane. This basic division, Durkheim insists predominates in “all religions”, and is present in every culture—a self evident fact that in retrospect has become one of Durkheim’s more contentious claims. While Durkheim lists potentially sacred things, things that have sometimes been considered sacred, this does not help clarify what the sacred is, because his point is in fact that anything may be, or may become, sacred. What is “essential” for Durkheim is that the sacred is not the profane, a distinction which, he says, is “absolute”. Expounding on this claim, he writes:

There is no other example in the history of human thought of two categories of things so profoundly differentiated or so radically opposed to one another. The traditional opposition between good and evil is nothing by comparison; good and evil are opposite species of the same genus, namely morality, just as sickness and health are merely two different aspects of the same order of facts—life. By contrast, the sacred and the profane have always and everywhere been conceived by the human mind as separate genera, as two worlds that have nothing in common. The energies at play in one are not merely different in their degree of intensity; they are different in kind (Durkheim 2001: 38, emphasis added).

This passage both indicates the extent to which Durkheim stays on the path of a negative theology of the sacred, and shows the point at which it becomes impossible to tread. Thus, the division between sacred and profane is so significant and the distance between the two poles is so great that it can only be explained by negative reference to other

opposites—good and evil, sickness and health. The division between sacred and profane is so much greater that there is no contact between them, such that they are different “planets”. Here, obviously with comparison to astronomical bodies, the will to resist metaphor has reached its limits, and Durkheim begins to hint at one of the metaphors that will become essential for positive thinking about the sacred: the sacred is a certain kind of energy.

Having adequately separated the sacred and profane (although not without having broken the prohibition against metaphor), this distinction becomes the essential element in Durkheim’s definition of the sacred:

Sacred things are those things protected and isolated by prohibitions; profane things are those things to which such prohibitions apply and which must keep their distance from what is sacred (Durkheim 2001: 40).

This “definition” still says nothing about what the sacred is, however, and Durkheim’s supplemental discussion only serves to further clarify how the sacred is different and opposed to the profane.

Durkheim does eventually discuss the sacred in positive terms in The Elementary Forms, though it takes him until Book II, chapters 6 and 7 before he does so at any great length, or with much precision, coming back again to a positive conception again at length in Book III, chapter 1. Durkheim is keen to show that the totemic symbols are not themselves the object of the cult’s worship: “totemism is the religion not of certain animals, men, or images, but of a kind of anonymous and impersonal force that is found in each of these beings though identical with none” (2001: 140). The “totemic god” is

defined in purely negative terms: not only impersonal and nameless, but having no history or transcendence, and inhabiting no particular location. In positive terms, it can only be understood as an “energy” which is the “true subject of the cult”. The “[s]pirits, demons, genies, gods of every rank are merely the concrete forms that capture this energy, this ‘potentiality’ as Hewitt calls it,” (148).

In Lectures on the Religion of the Semites, Robertson Smith uses strikingly similar terms. There, he writes:

...the mysterious superhuman powers of the god—the powers which we call supernatural—are manifested according to primitive ideas, in and through his physical life, so that every place and thing which has natural associations with the god is regarded, if I may borrow a metaphor from electricity, as charged with divine energy and ready at any moment to discharge itself to the destruction of the man who presumes to approach it unduly (1889: 141).

Smith’s conception of this sacred electricity, though used in much the same way Durkheim will later do, is perhaps too tied to the gods as the source of such power, and only explains the prohibition against improper handling of the dangerous power. Sylvain Levi, on the other hand, also conceptualised ritual energy as akin to electricity in La doctrine du sacrifice dans les brâhmaṇas (1898). In that book, Levi prioritises ritual over myth, arguing that in the Brâhmaṇas, ritual sacrifice (Prajâpati) is Lord of Creation and father of the Gods. Levi repeatedly compares the creative energy released by ritual sacrifice to electricity; for example, he argues, at the beginning of the chapter on the mechanisms of sacrifice:

Sacrifice is a combination of skilful and complicated ritual acts and sacred words, or rather it is intangible and irresistible power that emerges from their merger, as the electric fluid born of the elements brought into contact (Levi 1898:77 my translation).

Like Lévi, Durkheim argues that this electricity-like force is a ‘real’ power (intangible though it may be). Thus, he writes:

When we say that these principles are forces, we are not using the word in a metaphorical way: they believe like real forces. In a sense, they are even material forces that mechanically generate physical effects. If an individual comes into contact with them without taking the necessary precautions, he receives a shock that can be compared to an electric charge (2001: 141-2).

While Durkheim insists that he is not using a word from one semantic domain and applying it in another, in so doing he protests too much. Thus, he argues, these are forces that behave “like” real forces; “in a sense” they are even (real) material forces; the shock that one can get from handling the sacred inappropriately “can be compared to” an electric shock. In sum, the only way he can avoid using a metaphor is to use a simile—a weaker, more cautious form of metaphor—before reverting once more to metaphorical language.

The electric charge of the sacred helps Durkheim to make sense of particular characteristics of the sacred to which Durkheim turns in his section on religious rites. The power flows not so much from the “contact” of sacred words with ritual acts (as in Lévi’s analysis), but the same sparks fly when the sacred is allowed to come into contact with

the profane. This contact is ritually important: on the one hand, carefully bringing the profane into proper contact with the sacred can “consecrate” it “just as today a body is put into contact with a source of heat or electricity in order to warm or electrify it” (2001: 314). It also helps him to explain the “extensive and important system of religious interdictions that separates, not different sorts of sacred things, but all that is sacred from all that is profane” (2001: 224) exemplified “first and foremost” by the prohibition of contact. While we can handle profane things, if we do not take adequate precautions, sacred things have the capacity to give us quite a “shock”. It is the capacity for the sacred to “flow” from one object to another necessitates rituals keeping the sacred confined, as well as defining the safe means by which they can be connected. So, Durkheim explains:

When a force or a property seems to us to be an integral part, a constituent element, of the thing it informs, we have trouble imagining that it can detach itself and transport itself elsewhere. A body is defined by its mass and its atomic composition; and we do not imagine that it can communicate any of its distinctive features through contact. But on the other hand, if we are speaking of a force that has entered the body from the outside, something that is not attached to it, something alien to it, it is not unthinkable that it might escape. So the heat or electricity any object has received from an external source can be transmitted to the surrounding setting. The mind readily accepts the possibility of this transmission. The extreme case with which religious forces radiate and become diffused is therefore not in the least surprising if they are generally conceived as

external to the beings in which they reside. And that is indeed implicit in the theory we have proposed (2001: 240).

This is the elaboration of Durkheim's chosen metaphor. Thinking of the sacred in terms of electrical energy shapes how we conceptualise its characteristics, its causes and consequences. It provides a means of thinking effectively about the sacred as a force that flows through objects without being an inherent part of them; objects can be charged, drained, and they can shock those who handle charged objects without sufficient ritual caution.

In discussing the sacred, Durkheim mixes his metaphors, and his talk of sacred energy alternates with a different metaphor with overlapping, but by no means identitical implications. Following William Robertson Smith, Durkheim also theorises about sacred contagion (see Smith 1889:427-435). Like the energy metaphor, the bio-epidemic metaphor stresses that the sacred is not inherent in the sacred objects which are merely its symbols, but rather than is a force that incarnates them. Such is its contagiousness that elaborate rituals are required, and ascetic disciplines imposed, in order to keep the sacred in its proper realm.

Why is sacred electricity not a sufficient metaphor on its own? The electrical metaphor depends on transfer of sacredness, or profanation, through contact. The sacred contagion metaphor, on the other hand allows Durkheim to think about the ways in which the sacred may spread not by contact, but by semantic contiguity. Things that are "associated" with other sacred things in the imaginations tend to catch the sacred: commuters who share a semantic subway car for a few stops, and arrive home with the

same cold. They may never come into contact, but their proximity provides a means for them to incarnate the sacred virus.

If this sounds a bit trivial, in fact it is not. The construction of semantic proximity is for Durkheim the fundamental building block for conceptual thought, and ultimately of science itself. This contagion is how crows, tea-trees, springtime and smoke all come to share the same clan—and Durkheim argues that this is the fundamental beginning of our socially developed capacity for forming concepts and categories. Durkheim's description, at the end of Book 3, chapter 1 is instructive not just for his conceptualisation of the sacred contagion, but also for the theory of metaphors insofar as it applies to his own work. Does genus

not mingle and fuse disparate beings, despite their natural differences? But we have seen that these fusions and participations have played a logical and highly useful role: they have served to connect things that sensation leaves quite separate. It is far from true, then, that contagion, the source of these yokings and comminglings, is marked by that fundamental irrationality which one is at first inclined to attribute to it. It opens the way to future scientific explanations (Durkheim 2001).

Durkheim's description here of the cultic origins of conceptualisation also provides a good account of metaphors—even his own metaphors—about which Durkheim himself has such a deeply ambivalent attitude. Metaphors yoke and commingle semantic domains in potentially fruitful ways, opening the way to scientific explanation—not least in the

social-scientific explanation of religion: the totem has a god; the god is society; the sacred is a kind of energy.

## CONCLUSION

In the same way that the worshipper is invigorated by their gods, who in turn are empowered by a society that the worshipper cannot see directly, Durkheim gains analytic power from his metaphors but he is unable to fully accept them for what they are, or acknowledge their role in his thinking. His conception of the totem as a figure for modern religion, his theory of the social production of the categories of thought, his construction of the sacred as a social “energy”, and the analysis of the gods as representations of society all belie a profoundly metaphorical imagination. Not only is metaphor important for the construction of Durkheim’s argument, it also provides a theory of metaphor as something essential to social representation—itself the fundamental building block of societies in Durkheim’s late conception.

Durkheim is ambivalent about metaphor, and this causes him some difficulties. Only with great reluctance does he acknowledge some of his metaphors, such as the “totemic god” but he is in fact the progenitor of many others—some of which he seems unable, or at least unwilling to recognise. His remarkable capacity to think metaphorically, however, seems unconstrained by his reservations about metaphor, and this is partly what makes him such an innovative thinker. He not only coins new metaphors, but since he tends to take his own metaphors so seriously, he analyses and examines the implications of each one thoroughly.

This is perhaps Durkheim's strength, but also his weakness. When we recognise that the metaphors that we use, we can maintain a healthy sense that our analytic language is necessarily only ever partial and provisional. Metaphors are necessary and helpful tools, but they can also constrain our abilities to see beyond the metaphor. Durkheim saw totemism as the elementary form of religion, rather than as a helpful metaphor for thinking about contemporary religious life. As Jones (1986) demonstrated so effectively, when Frazer interpreted totemism as a form of magic, Durkheim was forced to defend the position that totemism "really" was a religion, even the most primitive religion, untouched by later evolutionary influences. Acrobatic intellectual contortion followed from his inability to see the totem as a useful metaphor.

If Durkheim had no issue with the religious origins of scientific categories and analytic concepts, the fundamentally non-rational sources of rational thought, why should he seem to have such ambivalence about metaphors? While Durkheim does not address this issue anywhere in his writings, the answer is likely bound up in his conception of la vie sérieuse: metaphor smacks of poetry, art, and thus also artifice, rather than of the science of the social. But if we recognise that metaphor is an essential element in all thinking, we have a better chance of seeing when our metaphors are useful, and when they are likely to lead us astray.

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#### FOOTNOTES

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<sup>2</sup> I have considered translating this metaphor into a more gender inclusive form, but I decided that not only would this result in a clumsy mouthful, but it may also make for a metaphor that is less apt.