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Justin Leach 03/24/2025

Meditations on Collective Force

A Philosophical Engagement with Emile Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*

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Abstract

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By Justin Leach

This thesis offers a philosophical engagement with Emile Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, examining his account of religion as a social product and his proposal of a revolutionary collective epistemology. Part I frames Durkheim's definition of religion as a relational system centered on an essential sacred object, then raises concerns about his reliance on empirical data to identify that object, drawing on notable methodological critiques of several Durkheimian scholars. Additionally, it suggests that a justification rooted in philosophical reasoning rather than a generalization from ethnographic data could preserve his definitional aims, and protect his theory from such critiques. Part II explores Durkheim's collective epistemology as a response to Cartesian skepticism, arguing that his attempt to replace individual reason with socially derived, collective categories ultimately fails. Part III uses the philosophical framework articulated in Part II to provide the alternative justification for Durkheim's religious theory discussed in Part I, reconstructing totemism through the logical derivation of *the other* as a necessary subject of faith.

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Introduction

In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life,* Emile Durkheim argues that religion is a social product. This claim constitutes, most immediately, a revolutionary challenge to classic religious theory. However, embedded in Durkheim's reasoning is a significant departure from convention in yet another field: philosophy. These twin challenges – perhaps more accurately framed as twin solutions for their respective fields – are designed to address a chasm in the former, and a crisis in the latter. The religious solution seeks to explain the persistence of spiritual practice and belief in a more useful and accurate manner than previous accounts like animism and naturism have been able to achieve. The philosophical solution, on the other hand, aims to address the long-standing epistemological disconnect between subjective perception and objective, empirically valid truth.

In this thesis, I will engage directly with both aspects of Durkheim's theory, analyzing its approach and identifying vulnerabilities through comparative analysis. This work will be organized in three parts.

In Part I, *Durkheim on Religion*, I will begin by reviewing Durkheim's stated goals with regard to his religious theory and identifying a potentially problematic element of his methodology. Then, I will offer a detailed summary of this theory, and introduce some of the most notable critiques by prominent scholars. After reviewing these, I will argue that these critiques are connected by their common focus on a specific vulnerability in Durkheim's work. Then, I will suggest the form that a possible solution to this family of critiques might take. Finally, I will address one additional notable critique aimed at a different aspect of this work and pose my own question about a puzzling pattern that emerges in Durkheim's writing.

In Part II, *Durkheim on Philosophy,* I will summarize Durkheim's revolutionary departure from a traditional philosophical framework, while incorporating the work of a notable Durkheimian scholar to provide historical context. Then, I will review the core tenets of that philosophical framework and

facilitate an interaction between these contrasting schemas. In doing so, I will put forth my own critique of Durkheim's collective epistemology.

In Part III, *A Proposed Solution,* I will attempt to resolve issues raised in Parts I and II by proposing an original philosophical argument.

Part I – Durkheim on Religion

Durkheim's Goal:

In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim undertakes an ambitious project: defining the essential nature of religion by studying its most primitive manifestations. He conducts an in-depth analysis of Australian Aboriginal tribes, relying heavily on the detailed ethnographic accounts of Baldwin Spencer and Francis Gillen in *The Native Tribes of Central Australia* and *The Northern Tribes of Central Australia*. These observations serve as the empirical foundation for his broader religious theory.

Throughout *The Elementary Forms*, Durkheim expresses dissatisfaction with previously established prominent religious theories that have been "obliged to admit that men have superimposed [religion] upon reality" rendering it "an unreal world" (Durkheim 225). He argues that the persistence of religious beliefs and practices throughout history serves as evidence that conceptions of the divine are not merely illusory and that theories that portray them as such are thus incomplete. For, if these beliefs were rooted merely in delusion, he argues it is "incomprehensible that humanity should have remained obstinate in these errors through the ages, for experience should have very quickly proven them false" (Durkheim 225).

It is important to note that Durkheim cannot improve on these past accounts by simply identifying what purportedly religious beliefs and practices appear to have in common. Such a generalization would serve only to reapply a colloquial label that already exists, rather than offering a new definition rooted in something truly divine. In short, Durkheim is seeking an *essential element* of religion, not a *general commonality* – what is necessary, not merely ubiquitous. To achieve this, Durkheim's religious definition requires a relational element. He commits to identifying a "special… object" independent of religious

phenomena, to which these beliefs and practices must relate (Durkheim 36). Then, by demonstrating that such a special object embodies the divine essence, a definition of real, non-illusory, religious phenomena will emerge.

Durkheim is well aware of this necessity, arguing that without distinguishing religious phenomena from their object, and defining the former as *truly religious* by their relation to the latter, "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 23). Here, Durkheim is referring to a certain exclusionary power that an *essential* element holds, and a ubiquitous element lacks – it is truly a definition, not merely an observation. Consequently, as the particulars of individual beliefs and practices fluctuate in and out of relation to this essential element, it is their classification as truly religious that changes, and not the element itself. Of course, it also maintains an equally important inclusionary power, as it allows one to categorize beliefs and practices typically considered to be secular as religious so long as they bear sufficient relation to this essential element. In this way, a relational definition maintains a sort of *authoritative* power that a generalization cannot.

It is also worth noting that attempting to establish an essential religious element in the form of an authoritative, relational definition, rather than a commonality makes this endeavor far more feasible. This is because each belief, practice, and organization is, in many ways, unique, and even their subtle differences would make any generalization appear reductive, and render it vulnerable to counterexamples – especially over time, as customs inevitably evolve. Moreover, the body of ethnographic research necessary to identify and substantiate such a commonality would be impossibly vast.

However, the task of justifying a relational definition poses its own set of challenges. If the authority of the s*pecial object* relies on its independence from the phenomena it aims to define, then the use of such phenomena in identifying this object in the first place may be problematic. In other words, making use of ethnographic data or employing sociological methods could render Durkheim's religious theory circular. Even if determinations are made to narrow the scope of ethnographic data to a certain type

of religious practice, or a certain region or time period, the object pulled therefrom would still represent a sort of commonality – albeit, of a more specific population. Thus, it would still rely on pre-existing, colloquial understandings of what constitutes religion, robbing it of its necessary independence. Furthermore, the methodology by which certain "religious" traditions or organizations were privileged (i.e., assumed to possess and display the essential religious element) would be subject to a myriad of objections.

Thus, one may argue that to procure the essential element Durkheim desires with the definitional and ontological utility he describes, this element must be originally identified and validated through non-sociological means. Perhaps such a goal could be achieved through philosophical reasoning. Yet, this approach would inevitably trigger another set of questions. Could a philosophically justified *special object* defy all of society's intuitions regarding what religion is? Could it establish a relational requirement that no actual belief meets? In this case, would we be forced to disqualify all earthly practices from religious classification? If so, of what use would this definition be?

In theory, it seems that an ideal *special object* would be one that is first identified and verified through non-sociological means, but which, once established, aligns – at least roughly – with common understandings of religious practices. Moving from the philosophical definition of the special object outward, sociology could freely document a host of effects which have traditionally been associated with religion (or which have not) that result from the relation between phenomena and this object.

Furthermore, the fact that no consideration of traditional conceptions of religion would be involved in the establishment of such a philosophical definition does not necessarily mean that any alignment between the two is a coincidence. It is true that such a philosopher should be prepared, in establishing this definition, for it not to comport in the slightest with common religious ideas. However, if after engaging in this uninfluenced logical reasoning, and taking hold of their special object, they look up to find that, in fact, it lays near the center of the corpus of phenomena commonly associated with religion, this is no problem. It would simply confirm that humanity's endeavor to interact with the divine has been properly aimed. This approach seems most promising for achieving Durkheim's objectives.

However, this is not the approach that Durkheim takes. Instead, he embraces sociological methodology to identify the essential object to which religious phenomena must relate. Durkheim will begin by reflecting on practices commonly associated with religion, and authoring a definition of religion according to these features. This definition, by logical necessity will be referential, deriving meaning ultimately from Durkheim's special object. Then, Durkheim will define this special object, and begin to refer to it as God. With this relation in mind, Durkheim will then outline the effects that result from individuals' interactions with God, and show them to be similar to those traditionally considered religious. In this description, the danger of circularity should be apparent.

To analyze this argument, we will first review its tenets in detail, as well as some of the most notable critiques leveled against this theory by scholars. Then, I will address these critiques, and explain my position towards Durkheim's religious theory in general.

Durkheim's Definition of Religion:

At the outset of his argument, Durkheim asks his readers to "consider the various religions in their concrete reality, and attempt to disengage that which they have in common" (Durkheim 24). To guide this reflection, he embarks on a critical review of existing definitions, arguing that "it is fitting to examine some of the most current of the definitions in which these prejudices are commonly expressed" (Durkheim 24).

The first definition he examines defines religion in terms of the "supernatural" (Durkheim 25). That is, as concerned with forces that "surpass the limits of our knowledge; the supernatural is the world of the mysterious, of the unknowable, of the un-understandable" (Durkheim 24). Although mystery plays a significant role in religions like Christianity, Durkheim notes that more primitive religions do not necessarily hold such an association. In fact, he says that for many of these worshippers, "there is nothing strange in the fact that by a mere word or gesture one is able to command the elements, retard or precipitate the motion of the stars, bring rain or cause it to cease, etc." (Durkheim 26). In addition, he holds that the supernatural "presupposes [a] contrary idea" (Durkheim 26). The very notion implies a

natural order – and an exception to it – thus creating a logical contradiction. Given these points, Durkheim concludes that there "is nothing in these [supernatural] representations which could serve to characterize religion" (Durkheim 28).

Next, Durkheim considers a definition centered on the "divine", understood essentially as a mythological conception of a "God" or "spiritual being" (Durkheim 34). He rejects this definition because many religions do not feature a deity as a central figure. In addition, he notes that "even within deistic religions there are many rites which are completely independent of all idea of gods or spiritual beings (Durkheim 34)." He concludes "Religion is more than the idea of gods or spirits, and consequently cannot be defined exclusively in relation to these latter (Durkheim 35)."

It is important to note here that Durkheim's dismissal of a mythical spiritual being as a necessary defining characteristic of a religious system does not undermine Durkheim's use of the word "God" in his theory (Durkheim 34). When he invokes this term, it is not meant to refer to a mythical entity or an icon per se, but to what lie at the core of truly religious systems (i.e., the special object).

Having considered and dismissed these accounts, Durkheim sets out to identify his own definition of religion. First, he separates religious "phenomena" into "two fundamental categories: beliefs and rites" (Durkheim 36). Beliefs are "states of opinion" held by worshippers, and rites are practices or "modes of action" taken by them (Durkheim 36). Next, Durkheim says "The rites can be defined and distinguished from other human practices… only by the special nature of their object" (Durkheim 36). Here we see Durkheim establishing the pivotal, necessary relationship between religious phenomena and their object – God.

Durkheim continues, "Now it is in the beliefs that the special nature of this object is expressed. It is possible to define the rite only after we have defined the belief" (Durkheim 36) Noticing the mechanics of this statement is tantamount. We know that rites (or practices) gain their status as *religious* through their relation to the special object - God. We now also know that beliefs gain their religiosity through the very same relationship. And yet, God cannot be defined through the rites themselves – only through the beliefs. Why must this be? Here, we are learning something very important about Durkheim's God, or

special object. This object may only be accessed (articulated, conceptualized, communed with – all those things that constitute a relationship), through beliefs.

So, what is this special object to which all truly religious things must relate? Here, Durkheim reveals that the defining characteristic of "All known religious beliefs" is the classification of all things "real and ideal, of which men think" into two categories: the *sacred* and the *profane* (Durkheim 37). Durkheim says that anything, from inanimate objects, to rituals, to gestures, may maintain a sacred character. But what is this character? How can the sacred be defined? While one may assume that sacred things sit at the top of a hierarchy, being more *important* or *powerful* than others, Durkheim says of hierarchical relationships that "there is nothing in it which is really characteristic of the sacred" as "It is not enough that one thing be subordinated to another for the second to be sacred in regard to the first" (Durkheim 37).

Instead, Durkheim argues that the sacred and profane should be conceptualized primarily through their opposition to each other. This distinction, he says, is so clear and so categorical that the two could never be mistaken in human minds. In addition, he clarifies that sacredness is derived from collective regard, saying that in religion, "The individuals which compose it feel themselves united to each other by the simple fact that they have a common faith", and that this constitutes a "society whose members are united by the fact that they think in the same way in regard to the sacred world and its relations with the profane world, and by the fact that they translate these common ideas into common practices, in what is called a Church" (Durkheim 44).

Finally, Durkheim arrives at his definition: "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 47).

While this definition has not yet been fully explained, it would be helpful to pause here and review some characteristics of the key terms of which we are so far aware. They are as follows:

1. Religious phenomena include rites and beliefs.

2. Rites and beliefs are only granted religious status through their relation to the sacred.
3. The sacred is a thing that can only be accessed through beliefs.
4. Any item or concept can take on sacred status.
5. The sacred is categorically opposed to the profane.

These characteristics offer insight into how the concept of the sacred fits into a religious schema – that is, the anatomy of Durkheim's definition. However, we have not yet established the meaning of the term *sacred*. What does it mean for something to be sacred? What causes this concept to emerge in human minds?

Durkheim recognizes the importance of these questions. He says that after identifying the common element of religion – the distinction between the sacred and profane – "we must look for the germ of the grand opposition which separates the profane from the sacred" (Durkheim 87). In the interest of due diligence, Durkheim reviews "two contrary solutions" that have thus far been proposed.

The first, called naturism, "addresses itself to the phenomena of nature, either the great cosmic forces, such as winds, rivers, stars or the sky, etc., or else the objects of various sorts which cover the surface of the earth, such as plants, animals, rocks, etc." (Durkheim 48) The second, called animism "has spiritual beings as its objects", particularly souls that exist independent of bodies (Durkheim 48). Animist reasoning notably regards dreams as instances in which human minds are able to transcend their bodies – and thus as evidence for the existence of souls.

Durkheim critiques each of these systems in detail, and ultimately determines that they both fail to sufficiently explain the origin of the idea of sacredness. He says that on animism "it is the illusions of the dream which brought about this transfiguration", and on naturism, "it is the brilliant and vain company of images evoked by the world" but that in "one case as in the other", they describe religion only as "the product of a delirious imagination" (Durkheim 87). That is, they provide no "objective

foundation" to which the concept of the sacred may relate (Durkheim 87). Instead, they simply point to particularly extraordinary natural events as inspiring divine ideas in the minds of observers. This sort of explanation reduces sacredness to a product of imagination that relates to nothing in particular.

Durkheim continues, arguing that "Since neither man nor nature have of themselves a sacred character, they must get it from another source. Aside from the human individual and the physical world, there should be some other reality, in relation to which this variety of delirium which all religion is in a sense, has a significance" (Durkheim 87). Thus, he declares that "there should be another sort of cult" besides naturism and animism, and endeavors to build on a system ethnographers had already named "totemism" (Durkheim 88). He feels that his critical analysis of these two previous systems warrants this ambitious move because it is only after we notice the "insufficiency of these traditional conceptions" that we can see "how indispensable it is to attempt a new one" (Durkheim 49).

Through totemism, Durkheim will provide a framework within which sacredness can be defined. In fact, he has already previewed his intentions in the latter part of his definition of religion, which claims that sacred things "unite into one single moral community called a church, all those who adhere to them" (Durkheim 47). These intentions come into clearer focus when he adds, immediately thereafter, that "the idea of religion is inseparable from that of the Church", because it is clear "religion should be an eminently collective thing" (Durkheim 47).

On Totemism, the special object to which the sacred must relate is *the collective*. Thus, just as in the prototypical explanation we understood that *the religious* gains its meaning entirely through its relation to God, we see in this particular account that *the sacred* borrows its meaning entirely through its relation to *the collective.*

Durkheim argues that the collective, also referred to as the totemic principle, can serve as a universally applicable special object because totemism is the prevailing religious system among many elementary societies. He reasons that religious "causes are proportionately more easily observable as the societies where they are observed are less complicated. That is why we try to get as near as possible to the

origins" (Durkheim 8). In addition, the relative isolation of these tribes ensures that they have not borrowed their religious conceptions from elsewhere but have instead generated them organically. By studying these societies, Durkheim suggests, we can construct "a sort of model which later religions only have to reproduce" (Durkheim 8). In other words, Durkheim seeks to locate the essential element of religion by identifying it in its most "pure" and "elementary" form and extrapolating therefrom (Durkheim 8). Specifically, he contends that "Australia is the most favorable field for the study of totemism", as it is home to several isolated tribes and has already been the subject of ethnographic study foundational to the development of the theory of totemism (Durkheim 93).

Introduction to Totemism:

Totemism refers to a religious system in which a symbol (often an animal or plant), is worshipped as a sacred "totem." The totem, according to Durkheim, has the "first place" among sacred things (Durkheim 221). Durkheim says that sacred regard is contagious by nature, spreading from the totem "to everything that is closely or remotely connected with it" (Durkheim 222). In this way, constellations of sacred things begin to form throughout society, all originally deriving their sacredness from the collective force.

Durkheim explains that the totem does not derive its sacred status from its material composition – in fact, it is frequently a mundane object rather than an astrological one that might naturally evoke divine ideas. He remarks that the totem is "before all a symbol, a material expression of something else. But of what" (Durkheim 206)? In his view, this symbol represents the divine "totemic principle" or "God", and simultaneously serves as a symbol of the clan that venerates it (Durkheim 206). He reasons that if this emblem embodies both the divine essence and the collective spirit of the clan, then that collective spirit must be synonymous with God. As he explains, "The god of the clan, the totemic principle, can therefore be nothing else than the clan itself, personified and represented to the imagination under the visible form of the animal or vegetable which serves as totem" (Durkheim 206). Durkheim claims that all essential characteristics of divine communion derive from the totem, including feelings elicited in individual

worshipers, “it is unquestionable that a society has all that is necessary to arouse the sensation of the divine in minds, merely by the power that it has over them; for to its members it is what a god is to his worshippers” (Durkheim 206).

For clarity, below is an additional list of important terms mentioned here, defined primarily by their relationship to each other:

1. The Totemic Principle: The collective force that impacts members of the clan.
2. God: Synonymous with the totemic principle.
3. The Totem: The physical symbol that represents the totemic principle.
4. Sacredness: The quality that a thing has when it embodies the totemic principle.
5. Religious beliefs and rites: The two categories of sacred things.

Next, Durkheim describes several effects individuals experience when interacting with the totemic principle (God) and notes that these effects have been traditionally associated with divine communion.

God’s Manifestation I - Authority and Impact on Individuals:

Durkheim claims that in general terms, “a god is, first of all, a being whom men think of as superior to themselves, and upon whom they feel that they depend” (Durkheim 206). He further explains that the worshipper of a God “believes himself held to certain manners of acting which are imposed upon him by the nature of the sacred principle with which he feels that he is in communion” (Durkheim 206). Often, the mandate of this sacred authority is so potent that believers act in conflict with their own rational interests. This action may feel urgent to them, “leaving no place for hesitation” (Durkheim 207). Durkheim contends that members of a clan experience the totemic principle in a similar fashion. In experiencing collective force concentrated and reflected back to them through the totem, they will feel that a strong, external force is acting upon them. Yet, most will be unable to identify its origin. Durkheim

says, “men know well that they are acted upon, but they do not know by whom. So they must invent by themselves the idea of these powers with which they feel themselves in connection” (Durkheim 209).

God’s Manifestation II - A strengthening and inspiring force:

Next, Durkheim asserts that “a god is not merely an authority upon whom we depend; it is a force upon which our strength relies” (Durkheim 209). Here, Durkheim compares the inner strength typically associated with a belief in God to what is gained through worship of the totemic principle. He contends that the spirit of the clan must “penetrate us and organize itself within us”, transforming the individual through his acceptance of his role in the collective (Durkheim 209). Durkheim further illustrates this “vivification” with several compelling examples (Durkheim 209).

For instance, he describes the phenomenon that occurs when an individual addresses a large crowd: an orator’s booming voice and narrative style, which might seem peculiar or unnecessary in isolation, become amplified as “the passionate energies he arouses re-echo within him and quickens his vital tone. It is no longer a simple individual who speaks; it is a group incarnate and personified” (Durkheim 210). Likewise, he observes that the exaltation of membership in society elevates “the most mediocre and inoffensive individuals” to become “either a hero or a butcher” (Durkheim 210).

It is this force, felt through connection with God or the totemic principle that inspires ordinary people to greatness. He writes, “the Crusaders believed that they felt God present in the midst of them, enjoining them to go to the conquest of the Holy Land; Joan of Arc believed that she obeyed celestial voices” (Durkheim 211). By drawing this parallel, Durkheim underscores that the same powerful mental processes observed in totemism are at the very core of traditional religious experience, concluding, “and so clearly are all these mental processes the ones that are also at the root of religion that the individuals themselves have often pictured the pressure before which they thus gave way in a distinctly religious form” (Durkheim 211).

God's Manifestation III - Instilling Morality:

The next essential religious element produced by totemism is the distinctive moral sense that it endows upon its worshippers. Durkheim observes that "just like the believer who thinks that he feels the regard of his god turned graciously towards him" a worshipper of the totem feels in him a new assuredness, confidence, and unity with others (Durkheim 211). This "perpetual sustenance" naturally gives rise to a "moral nature" (Durkheim 211). He says that the moral consciousness does not exist innately inside ourselves, but must be triggered by divine contact. Belief in the totemic principle incorporates individuals into the collective, thus moralizing them. Durkheim says "All the beings partaking of the same totemic principle consider that owing to this very fact, they are morally bound to one another; they have definite duties of assistance, vendetta, etc., towards each other; and it is these duties which constitute kinship. So while the totemic principle is a totemic force, it is also a moral power" (Durkheim 190).

To emphasize the fundamentally religious nature of moral concepts, he concludes by noting "by the way", that "men have never made even a slightly distinct representation [of morality] except by the aid of religious symbols" (Durkheim 211). In other words, the moral principles that emerge from totemism are inextricable from religious expression.

God's Manifestation IV - Sparking an Energizing and Transcendent Feeling:

Finally, Durkheim describes a force called "Collective Effervescence" (Durkheim 226). Some language here parallels his commentary about the collective as a strengthening and inspiring force, but the differences are significant enough to divide them into distinct categories. Specifically, collective effervescence does not necessarily describe a productive force, calling one to *greatness* and instead describes a temporary state of excitement. In this state, individuals will feel possessed, energized, impulsive, and erratic, often acting in strange and irrational ways. It is, in essence, a feeling of frenzy rather than of calling – of exaltation, rather than inspiration.

To explain the conditions that give rise to collective effervescence, Durkheim describes two different modes of social organization within the tribe. The first, characterized by hunting and gathering individually or in small groups, has a depressing effect on the spirit of the individuals, "The dispersed condition in which the society finds itself results in making its life uniform, languishing and dull" (Durkheim 215). The second, occurring when the clan reconvenes to form an assembly called the "Corrobbori" causes a shift in mood – as Durkheim says, "everything changes." In this configuration, the tribe members run around frantically, acting with such energy and passion that they might otherwise be thought of as insane (Durkheim 215). This reaction is, according to Durkheim, the direct result of their communion: "The very fact of the concentration acts as an exceptionally powerful stimulant. When they at once come together, a sort of electricity is formed by their collecting which quickly transports them to an extraordinary degree of exaltation" (Durkheim 215).

Entranced by this state, the tribe members begin to cry out, joining together in songs or chants. They make noises by banging objects together and dance furiously to the point of collapse. In this setting, Durkheim says "Every sentiment expressed finds a place without resistance in all the minds, which are very open to outside impressions; each re-echoes the others and is re-echoed" (Durkheim 215). In addition, members of the tribe will often break social norms, even "exchange[ing] wives" and participating in a host of taboos with impunity (216). In the throes of collective effervescence, men forget themselves, feeling they are being acted on by some external, divine force. This force, according to Durkheim, is the direct result of the totemic principle and is therefore religious in nature. He states, "so it is in the midst of these effervescent social environments and out of this effervescence itself that the religious idea seems to be born" (Durkheim 219).

Affirming the *Realness* of God:

Following his account of how the totemic principle manifests in tangible experiences, Durkheim makes use of the structure of his definition, affirming the existence of God as something more than a mere collection of religious phenomena. In doing so, he addresses the "accredited classical theories" that were

referenced previously, and their attribution of divine feelings and experiences to physical or biological causes, reducing God to an illusion (Durkheim 224).

Durkheim says that through the study of totemism, “Religion ceases to be an inexplicable hallucination and takes a foothold in reality. In fact, we can say that the believer is not deceived when he believes in the existence of a moral power upon which he depends and from which he receives all that is best in himself: this power exists, it is society” (Durkheim 225). Furthermore, while the worshipper may technically be mistaken in his attribution of sacredness to the symbol itself, this is a trivial error. “Behind these figures and metaphors, be they gross or refined, there is a concrete and living reality. Thus religion acquires a meaning and a reasonableness that the most intransigent rationalist cannot misunderstand” (Durkheim 225). In other words, the religious shadow is not cast simply by materialistic means. There is something called god which, in fact, casts the shadow. “For it is an eternal truth that outside of us there exists something greater than us, with which we enter into communion” (Durkheim 226).

Before addressing several notable critiques of Durkheim’s work, we will review what his religious theory has attempted to accomplish.

1. Durkheim seeks a relational definition, where beliefs and practices are considered religious if they relate to a special object (God). This structure, if executed correctly, would allow:
    a. Durkheim’s theory to include a true definition with authoritative power, rather than a generalization of common religious associations. This avoids beliefs and practices that are religious in name only.
    b. Religion to relate to some truly divine essence, outside of the “individual and physical world”, thus liberating it from its illusory designation in previous theories (Durkheim 88).
2. He also establishes a mediate definition – that of sacredness – which accounts for how divine essence is distributed throughout the material world and perceived by individuals.

3. Durkheim describes the nature of God as the collective or the totemic principle.
4. Durkheim then applies the definition he has established, attributing a series of effects that have traditionally been associated with religion to individuals' interactions with God through the sacred.

Notable Critiques of Durkheim's Religious Theory:

Given the revolutionary nature and lasting influence of *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, it is no surprise that the work has inspired a vast and diverse body of critical commentary. The range of scholarly responses is too extensive to address fully in this thesis. However, to aid our understanding of Durkheim's theory, we will briefly examine some of the most significant critiques. In particular, we will focus on the analysis provided by Robert Alun Jones in his chapter on *The Elementary Forms*, published in *An Introduction to Four Major Works*. Jones offers a clear and incisive summary of what he considers the most serious flaws in Durkheim's argument, drawing on the insights of several prominent sociological scholars. Among these is Steven Lukes, who is widely regarded as a leading authority on Durkheim and is the author of the influential biography *Emile Durkheim: His Life and Work*. Lukes also references Clifford Geertz, a distinguished American anthropologist known for his interpretive approach to cultural analysis and his critical essays on *The Elementary Forms*.

Many of the criticisms Jones identifies relate to Durkheim's sociological methodology. He remarks that "if there is a single feature of the work more disturbing than any other, it is Durkheim's treatment of the ethnographic evidence. The choice of a 'single case' of central Australia has an intrinsic appeal to anyone familiar with the 'scissors and paste' method of comparative religion" (Jones 153). This term is often used to describe the problematic practice of *cutting* isolated elements from various cultural contexts and *pasting* them together to create artificial similarities or sweeping generalizations while ignoring contrary evidence. This problem is potentially exacerbated by the fact that Durkheim works exclusively from second-hand accounts, separating him further from relevant cultural contexts. This factor is also addressed by Lukes.

Another critique highlighted by both Jones and Lukes concerns Durkheim's disregard for the role of individual religious figures in inspiring divine ideas. Jones notes that "in sharp contrast to Max Weber, for example, Durkheim largely ignores the role of individual religious leaders" (Jones 152). Similarly, Lukes points to Durkheim's "neglect of the role of individuals, especially religious leaders, and functionaries, such as prophets, magicians, sorcerers, and shamans, and religious elites" (Lukes 479). Instead, Durkheim's analysis portrays religion as a collective and impersonal force.

In addition, Jones and Lukes suggest that *The Elementary Forms* fails to account for cases in which religion acts as a dividing force rather than a unifying one. As Lukes puts it, Durkheim ignores "social and religious conflict and the non-integrative consequences of religion" (Lukes 480). Jones echoes this sentiment, saying that Durkheim does not account for how "religion functions in social conflict and asymmetric relations of power" (Jones 152). In other words, Durkheim's collective account of religion potentially paints a one-sided picture, discounting a long history of violence and division that has resulted from religious practice.

At times, Lukes criticizes Durkheim's methodology so forthrightly that it seems as though he is accusing Durkheim of purposeful deception or malpractice. For example, he says of Durkheim, "He made use of the American evidence whenever the Australian data did not support his thesis" (Lukes 480). He also states that "Not only is it highly dubious that he had found the simplest available case that contained in germ 'all the essential elements of religious thought and life'" but that "this concentration on a very limited range of evidence served to shield him from uncomfortable evidence from elsewhere than Central Australia, and led him to make the boldest generalizations on the slim basis of his own theory laden view of one very particular religion" (Lukes 480).

After laying out these methodological critiques, Jones makes a decisive statement, claiming that one categorically distinct critique overwhelms all others, acting alone to destabilize Durkheim's theory. He argues, finally, we may choose to circumvent the details of Durkheim's interpretation of the ethnographic literature altogether, observing that its raison detre – the notion that the 'essence' of religion itself may be found among any particular tribe – is, in Clifford Geertz's words 'palpable nonsense'. What

one finds among the Arunta are the beliefs and practices of Arunta, and even to call these 'religious' is to impose the conventions of one's own culture and historical period" (Jones 154).

Response to Critiques:

I will begin my analysis of these critiques by agreeing with Geertz, in principle, that a *religious essence* generalized from ethnographic data amounts to *palpable nonsense*. However, in my view, the consequences of this are gravely misapprehended by him and Jones.

As I illustrated at the outset of this section, I contend that Durkheim's definition of religious essence can – and indeed must – be detached from the sociological process through which it was first identified. This is necessary because grounding such a definition in ethnographic data robs it of the independent and authoritative nature that Durkheim is seeking. In other words, by deriving this definition from empirical generalization, Durkheim renders it circular: it cannot be an objective standard by which phenomena are assessed or categorized, but merely a reflection of the data itself. If the concept of religious essence is to function as a true definition, it must be posited prior to, and independently of, empirical data – derived from philosophical reasoning, or otherwise justified. Only then can ethnographic accounts be meaningfully compared to this definition, rather than the definition serving as their product.

For this reason, I share Jones' belief that all methodological critiques can be circumvented by dissolving the concept of a sociologically derived religious essence. However, I mean this in quite a different way than him and Geertz. Whereas they see the methodological shortcomings in Durkheim's procedure as fatal to the validity of his definition, I view them as opportunities to liberate the scheme from its flawed empirical justification. Through this lens, I contend that these critiques reflect a set of parallel oversights by Durkheim and his critics. For Durkheim's part, it is the errant use of sociological means to establish a definition which, to serve its intended purpose, must be conceived independently of them. His critics, meanwhile, fail to recognize that Durkheim's definition might remain valid even

without empirical support, thus discarding potentially valuable theoretical insight along with its compromised foundation.

In addition to arguing at the beginning of this section that any sociological support would render Durkheim's definition circular, I also argued that establishing such justification would be pragmatically infeasible – inviting a myriad of methodological objections.

In Lukes' critiques, we see this concern come to fruition. Each of these issues – whether the problem of the single case, dependence on second-hand accounts, disregard for individual religious leaders, or neglect of non-integrative religions – attacks the same vulnerability in Durkheim's theory. That is, his commitment to arriving at his definition through sociological means. This is because this approach forces him to concoct a highly controversial, and yes, "dubious," system that privileges certain ethnographic data and boldly extrapolates therefrom (Lukes 480).

Even Lukes' most severe accusations are indicative of this problem. In essence, he accuses Durkheim of settling on religion's essential element first, and from there, falsely constructing a sociological means by which he could have arrived at that conclusion. In fact, Lukes even employs the term "theory laden" with what appear to be derogatory intentions (Lukes 480). I share Lukes' suspicion that this element may not have appeared to Durkheim as the natural result of a strictly sociological process. It does seem too treacherous an ordeal for one to undertake without a firm destination in mind. And, its result seems too strange an object, both in shape and function, to have been first conceived as a sociological conclusion rather than a theoretical confection. However, once again, I am not concerned with condemning Durkheim in the case that he did attempt this sort of retroactive justification, or that his object was conceived of through *theory* rather than empirical evidence. I am happy, instead, to accept this series of critiques, and consider Durkheim's sociological justification for his essential religious element undermined. I believe that with the collapse of such support, this definition could potentially maintain its validity and gain the utility Durkheim so desires.

By this, I mean that there may be alternative grounds for supporting this definition – grounds that do not rely on empirical data or sociological methods, but instead on philosophical reasoning, or "theory" (Lukes 480). Once such a definition is established independently, sociological analysis of religious phenomena – as Durkheim undertook – can then explore the extent to which real religious phenomena correspond to, or diverge from, that definition. By reversing the order of justification in this way, Durkheim's definition would avoid circularity and gains the independence necessary to fulfill the relational function he originally intended.

Moreover, because the most compelling critiques of Durkheim's project focus on his flawed methodology, severing the definition from that methodological foundation would effectively immunize it from these objections. In doing so, one could preserve the theoretical insight at the heart of Durkheim's work without carrying forward the problematic methodological apparatus that has so often obscured it.

Additional Questions:

Before pivoting to a different aspect of *The Elementary Forms* in Section II, it is important to mention two additional curious features of Durkheim's religious theory that will become relevant later on.

The first concerns another of Jones' critiques. This critique is categorically distinct from those previously discussed because it does not pertain to Durkheim's means of arriving at his religious definition. Rather, it targets his application of that definition to observable religious practices. Jones argues that "'Collective effervescence' stimulated by religious assemblies presumes a social psychology never made explicit, and Durkheim's account of how such gatherings generate totemic symbols is dubious to say the least" (Jones 153). In other words, Durkheim does not offer a sufficient mechanistic definition for *how* and *why* interaction with the totemic principle has such extraordinary effects on individuals – leaving his causal inference without support. While I will not offer my complete opinion on this issue here, it would be helpful to consider possible reasons such a notable absence appears in Durkheim's work.

Is this yet another consequence of his sociological justification? What kind of impact does this omission have on Durkheim's theory more broadly? What form would a solution to this problem take?

The second puzzling aspect of Durkheim's theory that I will name here is his consistent reliance on the language of faith. As we've already reviewed in discussing his definition, Durkheim divides sacred items into two categories: beliefs and practices. He asserts that we may only define the sacred after "we have defined the belief" (Durkheim 37) Yet, he never offers an in-depth explanation of why belief must come first. Is this simply another way of expressing the *collective regard* that constitutes the totemic principle? Or is there something deeper at work?

From here, we can observe how Durkheim repeatedly invokes the language of faith to describe the relationship between individuals and the totemic principle. He writes, for example, "the *believer* is not deceived when he *believes* in the existence" of this force, and that those who are affected by the totemic principle share a "common faith" (Durkheim 225).

One may be inclined to ask: What differentiates the totemic principle from, say, the sun in the sky, whose power courses through all people indiscriminately? Surely, Durkheim would not describe the relationship between humans on Earth and the sun as one between *believers* and an entity that may only be defined through their belief. The use of this language suggests that the totemic principle is not self-enforcing – as if an individual may simply switch off this belief and exempt themself from all effects. Without belief, they would see only the rotting head of a fish where others see a sacred totem, and would perceive the Corrobbori as nothing more than a meaningless series of movements. Is this really the case? And if so, why?

Why must the relationship between the individual and the totemic principle – God – be articulated in terms of faith? Is it because relationships with the sacred must, for some reason, be mediated through faith – as if belief does not simply refer to the acceptance of a proposition without evidence but to a

means by which individuals engage with an otherwise inaccessible transcendence? Or, is it that there is something actually uncertain about the totemic principle, rendering it unverifiable through reason alone?

We should keep these questions in mind as we move forward. However, for now, we must turn our attention to Durkheim's second core goal in *the Elementary Forms*: establishing a collective epistemology.

Part II – Durkheim on Philosophy

Durkheim's Collective Epistemology:

In addition to offering an account of how collective practices create religious experiences through moral force, Durkheim develops a theory of the collective formation of knowledge throughout the *Elementary Forms of Religious Life.* In doing so, he seeks to establish a revolutionary epistemology that challenges prevailing assumptions about knowledge and truth.

Traditionally, epistemology has centered on the relationship between the subjective perceiver, and objective reality. To *know*, in this sense, is to ensure concordance between individual perceptions and the true nature of things. This conception of knowledge depends on the stability of objective truth: any rational individual, given clear perception and reasoning, should be able to apprehend and reaffirm it at will. Additionally, by viewing knowledge as a proximal relationship between subjective perception and objective truth, the two are supposed to be distinct. This distinction implies a crucial independence, such that the objective reality maintains its existence whether or not it is perceived by individuals. These characteristics are central to Durkheim's conception of knowledge. As he states succinctly, "Impersonality and stability are the two characteristics of truth" (Durkheim 436).

Similar assumptions underpin the scientific enterprise, which, at its core, is a systematic approach to establishing and communicating knowledge. Its methods are imbued with these concepts, requiring us to continually re-test and re-affirm. Thus, if the fundamental relationship between the individual and objective reality were called into question, the very foundation of empirical scientific study could be

threatened. This concern looms large in Durkheim's work, as he interrogates the conditions under which knowledge – and, by extension, science – can be grounded.

Yet, this epistemological project is fraught with challenges, as this analysis will explore. The core dilemma lies in the nature of the seekers of truth themselves. Whether they are philosophers or scientists, all individuals are confined to their own subjective perspectives. How can we bridge the gap between personal apprehension and an impersonal reality? How can we access stable truths when we ourselves are unstable? If our knowledge is always mediated by subjective experience, can it ever truly be objective? In this way, we are trapped within the very condition we seek to transcend.

Durkheim believes he has found the solution to this problem: "It is under the form of collective thought that impersonal thought is for the first time revealed to humanity; we cannot see by what other way this revelation could have been made" (Durkheim 436).

At the outset of his argument, Durkheim concedes that he risks being "overbold" in attempting such an ambitious explanation (Durkheim 432). He also notes that there remain major gaps in our understanding of how social conditions affect knowledge. However, he reasons that "the question is so grave, and so directly implied in all that has preceded, that we must make an effort not to leave it without an answer" (Durkheim 432). With this caveat in mind, Durkheim begins outlining his theory by distinguishing concepts from sensuous experiences (i.e. "sensations, perceptions, or images") (Durkheim 433). Sensations, he argues, exist in a state of "perpetual flux", coming "after each other like the waves of a river", and "even during the time they last", not remain[ing] the same thing" (Durkheim 433). He says that "Each of them is an integral part of the precise instant when it takes place. We are never sure of again finding a perception such as we experienced it the first time; for if the thing perceived has not changed, it is we who are no longer the same" (Durkheim 433). On the other hand, concepts are stable, resisting change from material fluctuation or shifts in perception.

In this way, concepts are "universal", while perceptions are particular, and concepts may be transferred between individuals, whereas perceptions may not (Durkheim 433). Durkheim states, "A concept is not my concept; I hold it in common with other men, or, in any case, can communicate it to

them", but "it is impossible for me to make a sensation pass from my consciousness into that of another; it holds closely to my organism and personality and cannot be detached from them. All I can do is to invite others to place themselves before the same object as myself and to leave themselves to its action" (Durkheim 433). This distinction is so fundamental that Durkheim even locates concepts "in a different portion of the mind" than sensations (Durkheim 433).

Furthermore, Durkheim argues that the universality of concepts reveals their collective origin. He writes, "if it is common to all, it is the work of the community" (Durkheim 434). To illustrate this, he turns to the example of language. Language meets the first condition — being common to all — since it is shared among individuals in communication. It also satisfies the second condition — communal origin — because words convey meaning beyond what any individual has personally observed. In many cases, words refer to things that the speaker has no sensuous experience of at all. And even when they have personally experienced the thing to which they refer, their direct perceptions make up only a small fraction of the meaning a word conveys. Thus, there exists "a great deal of knowledge condensed in the word which I never collected, and which is not individual" (Durkheim 434).

However, Durkheim is careful to distinguish between collective concepts and what he calls "general ideas" (Durkheim 435). He states "By his own power, the individual can compare his conceptions and images, disengage that which they have in common, and thus, in a word, generalize" (Durkheim 435). For example, if a person looks at two round rocks, and holds a commonality – roundness – in their mind, they have formed a general idea. Yet, according to Durkheim, this sort of thought really consists only of an arithmetic the individual has done with sensory perceptions. Thus, this sort of thought is individualistic in origin and is impossible to transfer between consciousnesses.

The Relationship Between Collective Concepts and Objective Truth:

With this understanding of collective concepts in mind, we can now examine how Durkheim believes these concepts provide access to a more fundamental form of truth. He traces the question of non-subjective reality – that to which a subject's knowledge must relate – back to its origins. He notes that

most people assume “at least confusedly, that there is such a thing as truth, distinct from sensuous appearances”, but that this claim is not self-evident. In fact, he says that in many ways it is contradicted by ordinary experience, and thus does not occur to animals and young children (Durkheim 436). He observes that even great thinkers such as Plato have struggled with this question: “Philosophers have sought to elucidate this sentiment, but they have not succeeded. In order that they might reflect upon it and analyze it, it was necessary that it be given them, and that they seek to know whence it came, that is to say, in what experience it was founded” (Durkheim 436). As previously noted, Durkheim believes that his theory of collective concepts provides an answer to this enduring problem.

However, to truly understand and engage with Durkheim’s argument, we must delve further into its mechanics. For a moment, let’s assume certain concepts are, in fact, collective in their origin and their apprehension, making them impersonal, stable, and transferable between people. The fundamental question persists: how do these concepts escape subjectivity? In other words, how do they relate to the true nature of things?

Durkheim acknowledges this potential challenge. He says that it could be argued that collective concepts prove only the universality of certain truths, but not their objectivity, (I.e., their existence independent of perception). In his words, this would suggest he is prioritizing only these concepts’ “harmony among minds”, and not their “harmony with the nature of things” (Durkheim 437).

Here, Durkheim makes a crucial claim. He says “A collective representation presents guarantees of objectivity by the fact that it is collective: for it is not without sufficient reason that it has been able to generalize and maintain itself with persistence. If it were out of accord with the nature of things, it would never have been able to acquire an extended and prolonged empire over intellects” (Durkheim 438). In other words, a concept that is formed and sustained collectively must necessarily correspond to an objective reality. Then, Durkheim goes further, arguing that universality is not only sufficient to indicate objectivity but necessary to do so. He says that “even when constructed according to the rules of science”, concepts do not “get their authority uniquely from their objective value” (Durkheim 438). Instead, he says

they must be accepted by the people. If they are shunned by the collective, then it is “as though they did not exist” (Durkheim 438).

The merits of this claim will be examined further, but for now, it is necessary only to recognize its potential implications: If this assertion holds true, then an individual can replicate collective concepts in their own mind, thus aligning subjective experience with the true nature of things, and resolving the epistemological problem of knowledge.

The Categories of Understanding:

Next, Durkheim introduces a set of concepts that he considers the clearest examples of collective thought. Their origins, he argues, are unmistakably social, and “their stability and impersonality are such that they have often passed as being absolutely universal and immutable” (Durkheim 439). At the same time, they express “the fundamental conditions for an agreement between minds” (Durkheim 439). These are the *categories of understanding* - concepts that, according to Durkheim, structure human perception of the world. They include time, space, causality, number, force, totality, substance, personality, and classification.

Durkheim models these categories after Kant’s, which similarly frame human reason. However, whereas Kant describes them as *innate* — implanted in the human mind by God — Durkheim argues that they are socially produced. Durkheim explains how each of these categories is socially developed, saying, for example, that it is “the rhythm of social life which is at the basis of the category of time”, and that “the territory occupied by the society furnished the material for the category of space” (Durkheim 440).

There is one category that is particularly important to consider here because the explanation of its social origin brings into view another aspect of how Durkheim sees the collective. This is the category of totality. Durkheim says “The concept of totality is only the abstract form of the concept of society: it is the whole which includes all things” (Durkheim 442). He continues, “Since the universe does not exist except in so far as it is thought of, and since it is not completely thought of except by society, it takes a place in this latter; it becomes a part of society's interior life, while this is the totality, outside of which

nothing exists" (Durkheim 441). While this explanation is primarily intended to illustrate how the human conception of totality is a product of the social world – just like our conceptions of time, space, etc. – its implications reach far beyond the implications of these other categories. In essence, Durkheim is arguing that because objective reality necessarily manifests in universal concepts, and because individuals may access those concepts, they may be introduced to the "whole which includes all things."

To clarify this point, Durkheim says that "collective consciousness is the highest form of the psychic life since it is the consciousness of the consciousnesses. Being placed outside of and above individual and local contingencies, it sees things only in their permanent and essential aspects, which it crystallizes into communicable ideas" (Durkheim 444). From this language, it is clear that Durkheim does not regard the collective as a mere aggregation of individual subjective conceptions. Instead, he views it as an actual melding of these conceptions into a unified consciousness. In describing this, Durkheim is not describing an inaccessible archive, but a universal experience for conscious minds.

Context from Rawls:

To further explore Durkheim's collective epistemology, it will be helpful to reference *Epistemology and Practice,* by Anne Rawls. In this book, Rawls aims to correct common misinterpretations of *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, and refocus discourse on Durkheim's revolutionary "attempt to establish a unique epistemological basis for the study of sociology and moral relations" (Rawls Preface). In doing so, she provides valuable context about the philosophical climate of the late nineteenth century, detailing particular aspects of previous epistemologies that Durkheim rejects.

Rawls explains that, in the years preceding the publication of *The Elementary Forms*, "Questions of epistemological validity and scientific knowledge were hotly debated" and that "It looked as if all claims to knowledge were hopelessly relative; that no knowledge was valid" (Rawls 8). She refers to this gap between subjective perception and objective truth as the "epistemological crisis" (Rawls 8). Specifically, Rawls highlights how "Greek philosophy struggled with a separation between thought… and

reality" and how "attempts by empiricists to explain the origin of general ideas through a detailed logical analysis of individual perception, and the logical relation between objects and perception, had concluded that not only logical relations, but all relations, are properties added by the mind, and not part of perceived objects in its own right" (Rawls 9).

According to Rawls, this idealistic dead-end drove Durkheim to reject Kant's categories of understanding as insufficient for grounding scientific study. While Kant claimed that these categories united human minds with one another, they did not necessarily connect humans to objective reality. In *Critique of Pure Reason,* Kant distinguishes between knowable *phenomena* and unknowable "noumena" – contending that humans can only access subjective perceptions of objects through their senses while the true nature of the objects remains obscured. However, according to Rawls, Durkheim was dissatisfied with this solution. She states that this approach, called "apriorism", "came at a price" (Rawls 9). "After Kant, epistemology has to deal with a further separation between thought and reality created by the faculty of human understanding: because the categories of the understanding were considered by Kant to be a priori, natural reality would always be perceived in terms of human categories of thought, and never in itself" (Rawls 9). She explains that while Durkheim believed "an a priori argument" like Kant's "solves the problem of generalization", it renders these universal concepts "purely ideal." This, she states, is a route Durkheim is "unwilling to follow" (Rawls 10).

Rawls claims, "From Durkheim's perspective, unless some common and valid conceptual foundation can be established that is shared by all persons, the problem of explaining both individual knowledge and intersubjective communication, and hence morality, will remain unsolvable. And truth and knowledge will remain indeterminate" (Rawls, 11). Here, the word "common" carries as much weight as the word "valid" – the former referring to the universal understanding Kant's categories achieve, and the latter to the relationship with objectivity they lack (Rawls 11).

For Durkheim, Kant's move to supplant objective truth with universal agreement undermines the core epistemological mission. Rawls says, "According to Durkheim, however, this abandonment of the

classical question" (of objective truth) "in favor of a consensus theory of truth" (universal agreement) "only appears to be necessary because the epistemological question has been cast by both empiricists and a priorists alike in individualistic terms" (Rawls 9).

Rawls says that to address the question of how "individual perceptions of natural reality [can] give rise to valid knowledge of that reality", Durkheim argued "that because individual ideas are not the origin of human reason, this way of posing the question makes it appear to be unsolvable. According to Durkheim, replacing the individualist approach of traditional philosophy, with an approach solidly embedded in enacted social practice, was the only possible solution to the epistemological dilemma" (Rawls 11). She continues, "A sociological approach to epistemology is necessary, for Durkheim, because knowledge begins with relations between persons, not with the individual. The individual human perceiver does not exist outside of, or before, society" (Rawls 11).

Rawls notes that this move – from the individual to the collective – represents a radical break from the philosophical tradition and was widely dismissed by philosophers at the time for its "essentially heretical form" (Rawls 18). While Durkheim was trained as a philosopher, Rawls says "In advocating an empirical study of the social as a corrective to philosophy, and in rejecting rational individualism, he was essentially rejecting the philosophical starting point" (Rawls 19). This starting point was, according to Rawls, seen as "necessary and logical" (Rawls 19).

Durkheim's attempt to overthrow the individualist philosophical order hinges on the collectivity of concepts, particularly the fundamental categories of understanding. Through this theoretical contribution, "Durkheim contrasts the individualistic, or empiricist mode of perception with the apriorist or rationalist mode of thought. The individual pole, she says, includes 'sensations and sensory tendencies.'" (Rawls 87). Rawls continues, "Sensations have an entirely different character from the experience of the categories. Sensations are particular, and as such, not transferable. In their particularity, according to Durkheim, the 'sensation' cannot be detached from the 'organism'" (Rawls 87). She proceeds, paraphrasing Durkheim, "it is impossible for me to make my awareness pass over to someone

else. Other persons can see the same things that we see, but they do not have access to our sensations. This level of individual experience is, therefore, essentially incommunicable" (Rawls 87).

Analytical Plan and Introduction of Descartes:

In this section, I will assess Durkheim's departure from the individualistic framework and ultimately argue that it fails – demonstrating that the traditional Cartesian starting point is, in fact, "necessary and logical" (Rawls 19). In addition, I will attempt to do so by engaging directly with relevant arguments on their own terms, rather than relying exclusively on established relations between alternative theoretical labels. This concerted effort is, in large part, a response to Rawls' lamentations that "an enslavement to a history of ideas approach, based on labels" privileges "context over argument" in academia today (Rawls 18). She says that in most modern sociological work "labels are allowed, even encouraged to stand in for theory itself" (Rawls 18). As a result, "commentators who do take time to discuss Durkheim's epistemology generally begin by naming the debate he was addressing, using words like empiricism, apriorism, neo-Kantianism, or Cartesian rationalism" (Rawls 18).

Thus, I will begin to review the individualistic foundation Descartes established – as such a foundation is critical for understanding Durkheim's contributions – with a focus on its theoretical mechanics rather than semantics.

Summary of Descartes:

René Descartes, often considered the "Father of modern philosophy", anchors his individualistic framework in his most famous work, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (Skirry).

At the outset of Meditation I, Descartes' narrator reflects on the instability of his past beliefs. Over the years, he has discovered that many convictions he once held with certainty have proven unreliable. Such realizations have led him to question the foundation upon which his beliefs rest. Now

older, and equipped with greater wisdom and discretionary time, he feels it is appropriate to examine his beliefs with a higher degree of rigor.

Seated before his home fireplace, he resolves to “rid myself of all the opinions I had adopted,” in search of a point – or several points – of absolute certainty (Descartes 6). His goal is to dismantle any belief that admits even the slightest doubt and, from what remains, construct a new and unshakable foundation for knowledge. To accomplish this, he subjects his beliefs to a rigorous skeptical method, systematically applying negative presuppositions to any claim that appears certain. This practice is intended to expose any vulnerability to doubt. The narrator clarifies that to do this, it is not “necessary for me to show that the whole of these are false”, only that they can be doubted (Descartes 15).

He begins by examining the source of his knowledge: “All that I have, up to this moment, accepted as possessed of the highest truth and certainty, I received either from or through the senses” (Descartes 16). But, thinking skeptically, he recalls moments in the past when his senses have deceived him. He recoils, reasoning that “it is the part of prudence not to place absolute confidence in that by which we have even once been deceived” (Descartes 16). With his confidence in sensory perception undermined, he begins to question his surroundings, considering the possibility that he may be dreaming. He recalls dreams in which he was convinced he occupied places much like where he sits now, as well as some far more improbable. He concedes that he cannot be certain he is truly sitting before his fireplace – he may, in fact, be asleep in bed.

Continuing this line of thought, he calls into question the existence of his own body, suggesting that it is possible to suppose that “we really possess neither an entire body nor hands such as we see” (Descartes 17). However, he proposes that even if he is dreaming, certain truths must hold. The objects within his dream – his hands, the fire, or a book – may be illusions, but the general forms they represent must be real.

According to this idea, he says disciplines such as “physics, astronomy, [and] medicine” are vulnerable to doubt, being dependent on “composite objects”, but that other sciences like arithmetic and geometry contain something that is “certain and indubitable” (Descartes 18). He reasons that the four-sidedness of a square, or the truth value of basic arithmetic must maintain its truth regardless of whether he is dreaming.

However, even this certainty is soon undermined. The narrator, reminded of his long-held faith in an all-powerful deity, considers the possibility that a demonic creator may have rigged his perceptions intentionally so that he is deceived. He wonders how he can be sure that this demon has not “arranged that there should be neither earth, nor sky, nor any extended thing, nor figure, nor magnitude, nor place, providing at the same time, however, for the rise in me of the perceptions of all these objects” (Descartes 18) He continues, asking “How do I know that I am not also deceived each time I add together two and three, or number the sides of a square, or form some judgment still more simple, if more simple indeed can be imagined” (Descartes 18)? This thought experiment proves even more devastating than the dream argument, as it undermines not just sensory experience, but reason itself. If an all-powerful being could deceive him about basic arithmetic, then nothing at all is certain.

The narrator commits, “I will suppose, then, not that Deity, who is sovereignly good and the fountain of truth, but that some malignant demon, who is at once exceedingly potent and deceitful, has employed all his artifice to deceive me; I will suppose that the sky, the air, the earth, colors, figures, sounds, and all external things, are nothing better than the illusions of dreams, by means of which this being has laid snares for my credulity; I will consider myself as without hands, eyes, flesh, blood, or any of the senses, and as falsely believing that I am possessed of these; I will continue resolutely fixed in this belief, and if indeed by this means it be not in my power to arrive at the knowledge of truth, I shall at least do what is in my power, viz, suspend my judgment, and guard with settled purpose against giving my assent to what is false, and being imposed upon by this deceiver, whatever be his power and artifice” (Descartes 20).

In Meditation II, the narrator grapples with the ramifications of this radical doubt. He is unable to locate certainty in his physical form (his body), or in his soul. His supposition that he is deceived in all cases where deception is possible has led him to assume that "there was no sky and no earth, neither minds nor bodies" (Descartes 22). At this point, he asks: does this mean that he, too, may not exist? However, no matter how rigorously he applies his method of doubt, he finds himself unable to cast doubt upon his own existence in the same way. Something about himself seems immune to the uncertainty that undermines all else. He realizes that even if he were persuaded that nothing in the universe exists, "I assuredly existed, since I was persuaded" (Descartes 22). This insight would prove to be one of the most revolutionary in the history of philosophy, famously articulated as "*Cogito, ergo sum" – I think, therefore I am* (Descartes 30).

Descartes – Latter Sections:

In sections III-IV of *the Meditations*, Descartes attempts to build his foundation of knowledge from this single point of certainty. He reasons that the products of his consciousness must exist at least in the form in which they appear to him. Thus he does not need to "fear that falsity may exist in the will or affections; for, although I may desire objects that are wrong, and even that never existed, it is still true that I desire them" (Descartes 34). In other words, while his perceptions may not accurately reflect external reality, their existence as experiences is undeniable. The act of perceiving itself confirms their manifestation in his mind, regardless of whether they correspond to anything outside of it.

However, Descartes' ultimate goal is to establish an epistemology that extends beyond subjective perception. He seeks verification of existence outside of his own mind, stating, "I will use circumspection, and consider with care whether I can still discover in myself anything further which I have not yet hitherto observed, and to discover whether, of the objects whose ideas are in my mind, there are any that exist out of me" (Descartes 31).

This search leads him to an argument for the existence of God. He postulates that ideas in one's consciousness must have external causes "for whence can the effect draw its reality if not from its cause" (Descartes 37)? He invokes the example of light, saying that "there must at least be as much reality in the efficient and total cause as in its effect" (Descartes 37). From this, he reasons that because he possesses a conception of God as a "sovereign, eternal, infinite, immutable, all-knowing, all-powerful" being, God must exist as the cause of this idea (Descartes 36).

Furthermore, Descartes asserts that such a God would not implant in him convictions that are "clear and distinct" if they were not accurate representations of objective reality (Descartes 73). He concludes, "God is no deceiver, and that consequently he has permitted no falsity in my opinions which he has not likewise given me a faculty of correcting" (Descartes 73). From there, Descartes gains grounds for ascertaining knowledge about the material reality that surrounds him.

Incorporating Descartes:

Descartes' *Meditations* can best be understood as the identification of a problem and the proposal of a subsequent solution. The *problem* is that a person cannot be certain of any knowledge beyond the existence and the contents of their own cogito. Skepticism – most notably the argument of the deceptive demon – is the means by which this problem is exposed. Descartes' *solution* involves locating the idea of God within one's own mind, and from there, positing that such a God must exist, and must not be deceptive.

For the purposes of this analysis, we should distinguish clearly between Descartes' problem and his solution. The former represents a truly revolutionary insight that gave rise to the dominance of individualism in Western philosophical thought. The latter, however, is a far more contentious argument, which Descartes was forced to defend "against scathing objections by some of the leading intellectuals of

his day" (Nolan). In other words, while Descartes' skeptical problem reshaped philosophy, his solution remains highly disputed.

Consequently, much of modern philosophy has been dedicated to constructing epistemological theories that begin with Descartes' skeptical foundation but seek alternative resolutions. Among these are Locke's empiricism and Kant's transcendental idealism. Both of these theories are framed as solutions to Descartes' skepticism, allowing an individual cogito to achieve a foundation of knowledge from its own perceptions.

This is the individualistic "starting point" to which Rawls refers, and from which Durkheim so radically departs (Rawls 19).

Form of Critique:

Before proceeding further with this analysis, it is important to clarify my approach. Evaluating Durkheim's collective epistemology differs from assessing his religious theory in two key ways. First, the critiques referenced in the previous section were written after *The Elementary Forms* and were crafted in direct response to Durkheim's religious theory. This meant that I could evaluate Durkheim's arguments simply by accepting or rejecting these critiques. In contrast, the rival perspective in this section predates Durkheim's work, making comparative analysis more difficult. Second, while the critiques in Section I were technical and specific, the conflict here is broad and foundational. This necessitates a more active approach than in the previous section. Simply juxtaposing these frameworks – labeling one individualistic and the other collectivistic – would reveal only their general opposition. This alone would be insufficient to test the validity of Durkheim's philosophical resolution – the very kind of vacuous comparison that Rawls decries as "an enslavement to a history of ideas approach, based on labels" (Rawls 18). To properly assess this theory, I must facilitate an interaction between the collective and individualistic at the level of their mutually incompatible particulars. Accordingly, I will identify two implications of Descartes'

individualistic problem that challenge several key suppositions of collective epistemology and evaluate whether the former successfully undermine the latter.

In addition, it is important to note that because this section requires a more active theoretical cross-application than Part I, it also involves a greater degree of interpretive choice. These subjective elements fall into two primary categories: curation (choosing which supplementary texts to invoke) and argumentation (asserting an opinion about such contributions). In Section I, my personal inclinations were largely confined to argumentation. While I contended that several critiques stem from a shared vulnerability in Durkheim's approach, the supplementary texts I engaged were not intentionally chosen to advance that claim. They were contributions that I felt, regardless of my stance, demanded acknowledgment in the natural course of an analysis of *The Elementary Forms*. I feel similarly about the two supplemental texts I have admitted thus far in Part II. Rawls' work is widely regarded as a major contribution to discussions of Durkheim's epistemology and offers critical context for his rejection of the traditional individualistic philosophical frame. Likewise, Descartes' *Meditations* constitutes the core of that tradition and is essential to review in any analysis of Durkheim's epistemological claims.

However, in the remainder of Part II, my approach will shift. The implications of the Cartesian starting point are too numerous, and the process of applying them specifically to Durkheim's theory too intricate, for me not to fully embrace my autonomous role. I intend to openly incorporate my opinion through both curation and argumentation – thereby connecting the two. In other words, I will invoke specific logical extensions of individualism *because* I believe they have a substantive impact on vital aspects of Durkheim's epistemology. Furthermore, when I feel it is necessary, I will invoke my own argumentative devices to carry this cross-application forward. In short, whereas Part I should be viewed as an analysis of pre-existing critiques and a description of what form a potential solution might take, Part II constitutes an original critique.

The Problem of Other Minds:

The first important implication of Descartes' individualism, known as the *Problem of Other Minds*, asserts that individuals cannot be certain of the existence of conscious beings besides themselves. While Descartes himself did not discuss this issue in depth, his theoretical foundation makes it virtually unavoidable.

Given that an individual's cogito cannot offer them direct access to the contents of another's (i.e., a person can not live another person's experiences), the existence of streams of consciousness (and thus, those experiences) distinct from one's own is vulnerable to radical skepticism. Specifically, Descartes' deceptive demon argument is applicable in this case. If an all-powerful demon can deceive an individual into believing they possess a body when they do not, it could just as easily fabricate the appearance of other walking, talking entities that seem conscious but, in reality, lack minds. This solipsistic possibility – that Descartes' meditator may be alone in the universe – is difficult to disprove.

The impossibility of transferring conscious experience between individuals has preoccupied philosophers since long before Descartes' time. In the fifth century, St. Augustine observed "For even when a living body is moved, there is no way opened to our eyes to see the mind, a thing which cannot be seen by the eyes." However, it was Descartes' introduction of radical skepticism that solidified the "problem of other minds" as a frequently debated philosophical issue.

In the centuries since two notable counterarguments have emerged. The first, most famously espoused by John Stuart Mill, is "the argument from analogy" (Mill) (Avramides). Mill asks, "By what evidence do I know, or by what considerations am I led to believe… that the walking and speaking figures which I see and hear, have sensations and thoughts, or in other words, possess Minds" (Mill) (Avramides)? He argues that we may assume other minds exist because "First, they have bodies like me, which I know in my own case, to be the antecedent condition of feelings; and because, secondly, they exhibit the acts, and outward signs, which in my own case I know by experience to be caused by feelings"

(Mill) (Avramides). Bertrand Russell shares a similar sentiment decades later, stating that "It is clear that belief in the minds of others requires some postulate that is not required in physics", and that "we must appeal to something that may be vaguely called 'analogy'" (Russell) (Avramides). This is because, as he puts it, "The behavior of other people is in many ways analogous to our own, and we suppose that it must have analogous causes" (Russell) (Avramides).

The second prominent counterargument, the "best explanation argument", builds on the "argument from analogy", but with a more pragmatic justification (Avramides). It states, "my reason for believing that others have minds similar to my own can be taken to be the same as the scientific realist's reason for believing in the existence of electrons or other theoretical entities", because "no other explanation would be plausible" (Avramides). Robert Pargetter lists several alternative hypotheses which are implausible, including: "(i) God is working others like puppets; (ii) I am unique in having mental states as the cause of behavior; and (iii) that others have mental states but they are of an entirely different nature to my own" (Pargetter) (Avramides).

While both of these arguments provide compelling reasons to assume the existence of other minds, neither pushes the issue outside the bounds of Descartes' skepticism. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy acknowledges, "those who defend either the argument from analogy or from best explanation are firmly of the view that any knowledge we may have of other minds (or any justification there may be for our belief in them) must be indirect. They accept that, while our knowledge of our own mental states is direct, our knowledge of the mental states of others must proceed by reasoning from what we observe – the other's behavior – to what we cannot observe – the other's mental states. The idea that the mind of another is not directly observable is one that seems common to many philosophers" (Avramides).

These intuitive arguments proposed by Mill, Russell, and Partegger provide ample reassurance of the existence of other minds for pragmatic use. However, their vulnerability to Descartes' skeptical approach will prove problematic for Durkheim's collective epistemology.

Summary of Berkeley:

In addition to bringing the problem of other minds to the fore, Descartes' skepticism opened the door for radical philosophical perspectives calling the very concept of objective reality into question. Perhaps the most notable was that of an Irish Bishop named George Berkeley, who published a series of works on the topic, including *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge.*

Berkeley's work marked a milestone in the restless transition from the question posed in Descartes – that of how we can know that anything exists beyond our perception – to another, more punishing question – that of how something *could possibly* exist unperceived.

In *Principles*, Berkeley claims that existence is essentially synonymous with perception, and that objective reality – reality unperceived – is a contradiction in terms. This is a significant step beyond Descartes, who raises doubts about external reality but accepts the possibility of its existence. This is illustrated by the argument of the deceptive demon. Implicit in the idea that a demon is obscuring the true nature of things from Descartes is that the *true nature of things* exists independent of his perception. Surely, Descartes is not suggesting that the person is deceived by the demon because his understanding of reality is in discordance with another person's understanding of reality. For, if this were the case, it would be impossible to know who was deceived and who was aligned with the true nature of things. Instead, it seems that the true nature of things – from which Descartes may be deceived – must be things unperceived. This presupposition by Descartes is precisely the subject of Berkeley's attacks.

In *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge,* Berkeley claims that "Sensations or Ideas imprinted on the Sense, however blended or combined together (that is, whatever Objects they compose) cannot exist otherwise than in a Mind perceiving them" (Berkeley 12). This is because, for

Berkeley, the very notion of existence can have no meaning except in relation to experience. He grounds this concept with several common examples, “The Table I write on, I say, exists, that is, I see and feel it… There was an Odor, that is, it was smelled” (Berkeley 12). In other words, to say that something exists is to say that it has been perceived, and therefore “the absolute Existence of unthinking Things without any relation to their being perceived… seems perfectly unintelligible” (Berkeley 13). He remarks that it is strangely common for people to consider objects like houses, mountains, and rivers to “have an existence natural or real, distinct from their being perceived by the understanding” (Berkeley 13). But, acknowledging the often negative reception for challenges to this convention, and reaffirming his thesis, he states “whoever shall find in his heart to call it in question, may, if I mistake not, perceive it to involve a manifest contradiction” (Berkeley 13).

Berkeley acknowledges several potential counterarguments, including the claim that one’s sensations cannot comprise all of reality, because a person can imagine things they have not directly sensed. For example, they might imagine a mythical being or a levitating person. However, Berkeley argues that distancing an object conceived in the mind – or an idea – from the physical senses does nothing to separate that object from perception. This is because all cognitive products – be they perception of the color red, or conception of a complex concept like justice – manifest as perceptions. To this end, he argues “Light and Colours, Heat and Cold, Extension and Figures, in a word the things we see and feel, what are they but so many Sensations, Notions, Ideas or Impressions on the Sense; and is it possible to separate, even in thought, any of these from Perception” (Berkeley 13)? He ultimately decides “it is impossible for me to conceive in my thoughts any sensible thing or object distinct from the Sensation or perception of it” (Berkeley 13).

Another objection Berkeley addresses is the claim that even if particular objects cannot exist unperceived, “there may be Things like them whereof they are Copies or Resemblances, things which exist without the Mind, in an unthinking Substance” (Berkeley 14). In response, he says that “an Idea can be like nothing but an Idea” (Berkeley 14). This means that such a similarity between an individual’s

conception of a specific object and the broader category that object belongs to is a relation still maintained exclusively in that individual's mind. In other words, the generalization of an object *type* refers only to a broader class of like objects perceived in the same way. He says "If we look but ever so little into our thoughts, we shall find it impossible for us to conceive a likeness except only between our Ideas" (Berkeley 14). To further his point, he asks whether the proposed g*eneral form* with which the individual object relates is perceivable or not. He says that if it is, "we have gained our point", and if it is not, "I appeal to anyone whether it be sense, to assert a colour is like something which is invisible; Hard or Soft, like something which is Intangible; and so of the rest" (Berkeley 14).

While Berkeley's claim that the concept of objective reality is incoherent goes further than Descartes' radical skepticism, the relationship between the two theories is clear. It is Descartes' severance of individual perception from the external world – if only to apply doubt – that defines the individualistic revelation. Therefore, Berkeley's idealism may be seen as a solution to Descartes' problem. Like the solutions posed by Descartes, Kant, Locke, and others, it provides a way to escape skepticism. However, it takes a special form that sets it apart from these other solutions and positions it well for an interaction with Durkheim's collective epistemology. This special element is that Berkeley, unlike the others, denies that an epistemological problem exists at all. While he accepts the individualistic frame – that one's knowledge must be confined to experience in their cogito – he resolves any discordance by undermining the assumption that an alternative mode of reality (objectivity) exists.

Original Critique:

Durkheim's description of collective concepts should serve as the frontier for this critique of his epistemology, as this is the mechanism by which he attempts to overthrow the traditional individualistic order. Recall, Durkheim differentiates between things perceived through the senses like *colors* and *sounds*, and those conceived in the mind as *concepts*. His explanation of the former comports with individualistic reasoning: "it is impossible for me to make a sensation pass from my consciousness into

that of another" because it "holds closely to my organism and personality and cannot be detached from them" (Durkheim 433). Durkheim's revolutionary move, however, lies in his treatment of concepts, which he claims are produced and sustained collectively. These include but are not limited to *the fundamental categories of understanding*. Of such concepts, Durkheim writes, "Since they are not attached to any particular object they are independent of every particular subject; they constitute the common field where all minds meet" (Durkheim 13).

To devise a proper means of facilitating the interaction between Descartes' individualism and Durkheim's departure therefrom, we can draw from the unusual structure of Berkeley's argument. While Berkeley's theory may, in some ways, seem diametrically opposed to Durkheim's, they share a crucial methodological feature: both attempt to evade Descartes' problem, rather than solve it on his terms. The difference is that, rather than disposing of the individual starting point (as Durkheim attempts to do), he discards the objective ending point. This demonstrates that such a fundamental move is possible, and provides a roadmap for evaluating Durkheim's approach. Berkeley exposes one part of the equation as arbitrary by claiming that a person may reconstruct all they have ever known about reality without ever appealing to objective – or unperceived – things. Therefore, he argues, the search for a means of connecting one's perceptions with objective reality is futile and fallacious. This effectively evades skepticism because it makes use exclusively of first-hand perceptions, which Descartes himself concedes cannot be doubted – at least in their existence as perceptions. By undermining the notion of an external reality beyond perception, Berkeley neutralizes skepticism by embracing its reductive ontology and denying the existence of an alternative reality with which it could be in discordance.

Durkheim's argument should function in precisely the opposite manner. In Berkeley's case, the Cartesian narrator can never progress beyond the realm of perceived things into the unperceived. In Durkheim's case, the narrator should find himself unable to retreat past the collective into the individual. Therefore, it follows that if we use the same tool Descartes uses (radical skepticism) to cast doubt on all things in an effort to isolate the indubitable cogito, we should, at a certain point, encounter an indubitably

collective concept. For, if it is true that each person holds within them some concepts which serve as undeniable proof of the collective, they should emerge naturally in the process of skeptical reasoning.

To be sure of this point, recall that Durkheim argues that the individualistic starting point – the isolation of the indubitable cogito – fails to resolve the epistemological crisis because attaining knowledge from that position appears "impossible" (Rawls 87). In other words, there is no way to determine whether one's sensory experiences correspond to objective reality – thus, skepticism holds, as reality could always be otherwise, and one could be deceived. Therefore, in proposing collective concepts as a *solution* to this problem, he is necessarily saying that such concepts are, in fact, indubitable, immune from skepticism, and not possibly the products of deception. Accordingly, a skeptical meditator, assuming in every possible case that they are being deceived, should find themselves unable to do so for this concept, just as they are for the cogito. This is the means by which such a concept could verify for the individual its concordance with the true nature of things. Furthermore, to verify both necessary elements of Durkheim's theory, such a concept must not only be indubitably existent, but indubitably collective. It must evidently be the former because of the latter. Otherwise, Durkheim's epistemology loses its distinctive social feature. If the meditator is unable to identify a concept immune from skepticism in these ways, then collective concepts have failed to overthrow Descartes' paradigm. In short, Berkeley's theory accounts for reality using only indubitable elements. To evade skepticism and solve the epistemological crisis, Durkheim must do the same.

It should also be noted that invoking the hypothetical meditator from Descartes' thought experiment here is in no way inserting an individualistic starting point. This is because it is the isolation of the cogito that characterizes this starting point. Furthermore, Durkheim explicitly discusses the "individualization" of universal concepts, clarifying that collective knowledge manifests in individual minds (Durkheim 283). For example, he writes about how a person "must assimilate [collective concepts] to himself, for he must have them to hold intercourse with others" (Durkheim 436). Similarly, when discussing the relationship between universal knowledge and objective truth, he argues that if collective concepts "were out of accord with the nature of things, [they] would never have been able to acquire an

extended and prolonged empire over intellects" (437). Again, from his reference to *intellects*, it is clear that Durkheim's collective concepts manifest in the minds of individuals. Therefore, by searching for evidence of collective concepts within an individual, we are not trying Descartes' case in an unfair jurisdiction. After all, where else could we possibly look?

Thus, we can begin to imagine the process by which the meditator might work their way toward the cogito, applying skepticism systematically to each cognitive product and watching closely for the moment when they encounter an indubitably collective concept. To streamline this process, let's imagine that the meditator in this scenario is familiar with Durkheim's work and thus knows exactly what to look for in identifying such concepts. In this search for certainty, the meditator could immediately dismiss individually sensed colors and sounds since, according to Durkheim, they lack the necessary relation to objectivity. Next, they must isolate a concept so that they can attempt to cast doubt on it. For example, let's suppose that the mediator attempts to isolate the concept of justice. A series of mental representations would emerge, each of which must be subjected to skeptical scrutiny.

For instance, the meditator might doubt the physical existence of the elementary school classroom where they first encountered the term "justice." After all, Descartes' deceptive demon could have implanted this memory only moments ago. The meditator might then recall a moment when they witnessed an innocent friend arrested by prejudicial police officers. Yet again, the images, sounds, and feelings associated with this memory must be discarded as individual, sensory-based, and thus subject to skepticism. This process would continue, stripping away each point of reference for justice, so long as it was heard, seen, felt, or otherwise interpreted through the senses. At last, when every trace of sensory experience has been doubted and thus disengaged from the concept of justice, the meditator may turn to examine what of this remains. It seems that they would find nothing there. This is because every possible source of meaning for the concept of justice has been mediated through sensory experience – including all relevant interactions with other human beings. If any concept has ever been transferred between people without being mediated through the senses, it must have been so psychically.

Thus, the first step in the process of identifying a collective concept in one's mind – identifying a concept at all – proves problematic given Durkheim's distinction between conception and perception. This is because this distinction assumes that perceptions and conceptions arise as distinct cognitive phenomena when they appear, in fact, to be deeply intertwined. All perceptions, even the most basic, manifest in cognition. The sensation of sight, for example, does not consist merely of light striking the retina but of the entire process by which the brain interprets that light as a meaningful experience. Even the perception of an isolated color – say, red – is inextricably linked to cognitive structures that categorize and conceptualize it. When someone perceives red, they do not experience it as raw, meaningless pigment. Rather, their mind immediately situates it within a broader conceptual framework, distinguishing it from other colors, recognizing its familiar hue, or even associating it with emotions, symbols, or prior experiences.

This criticism applies even in the case of time – one of Durkheim's categories of understanding. In order for this concept to be fundamentally different in nature from sensuous data like color, it would at the very least need to be distinguishable in the human mind. And yet, looking at the bright orange light that results from the sun setting immediately invokes a temporal framework. To look at that color, and to interpret it in its most fundamental sense (why it's here, what it means, where it came from) is to tell time. How are sunset (the color), and sunset (the time) separable if they are communicated to a perceiver at exactly the same moment and by exactly the same stimulus, and if their conceptualization in one's mind is mutually dependent? It seems that just as every perception is imbued with conceptual meaning, every concept is shaped by sensory experience. Just as Berkeley argues, there is no clear boundary between the two. Durkheim's argument, which relies on a rigid distinction between these categories, therefore, contains a problematic premise.

Durkheim's distinction between concepts and sensuous experience is mirrored by another crucial distinction in his framework – the difference between true cognitive transferability and mere referential communication. Recall that Rawls explains, "sensations have an entirely different character from the

experience of the categories" (Rawls 87). This is because sensations are "not transferable", while concepts are (Rawls 87). With regard to the former, Durkheim writes "All I can do is to invite others to place themselves before the same object as myself and to leave themselves to its action" (Durkheim 433). As previously mentioned, this serves as the core distinction between senses and concepts on which Durkheim's epistemology rests. However, just as the meditator may have trouble isolating concepts from sensuous experiences, the distinction between true transference of awareness and referential communication is difficult to articulate.

To be clear, I do not deny that referential communication exists – people routinely make each other aware of various things. However, I contend that in every case, whether conceptual or sensuous, the transmission of a cognitive product from one mind to another must always occur in the same way: mediately, by inviting another person to engage with an object and allowing them to directly perceive its effects – whether that object is a visual representation, a sensation, or even a spoken word.

To understand this argument, we can imagine for a moment that we wish to conjure in the mind of a friend the color red. Since the perception of color is, according to Durkheim, an inherently individualistic and non-transferable experience, we cannot directly transpose our awareness of redness into their mind. Instead, we produce a red piece of paper and hold it out for them to see. In doing so, we are effectively following Durkheim's own prescription: inviting them to "place themselves before the same object as myself and to leave themselves to its action" (Durkheim 433). We assume that, upon seeing the paper, our friend will come to understand *redness* in much the same way we do. There may be subtle differences in perception due to variations in positioning, predisposition, or biological factors, but we trust that in a fundamental sense, the sensation of *seeing redness* has been sufficiently transferred.

Now, let us imagine that we wish to conjure in our friend's mind the plot of *The Great Gatsby*. This is a concept – or a collection of concepts. Instead of handing him a red piece of paper, we hand him the full text of the novel. He opens the book and begins reading until he fully understands the plot. Here,

we have transmitted the *experience of knowing a concept* in precisely the same way that we transferred the *experience of seeing a color* – by inviting our friend to engage with the object and allowing him to perceive it.

Next, we should suppose that *The Great Gatsby* had never been written and that we had conceived of the entire plot ourselves. Imagine that we write the plot on pieces of paper, one by one, handing them to our friend for him to read. Again, concepts – now moving directly from one mind to another – are being exchanged, not by a magical meeting of the minds incompatible with sensory experience, but in the exact same manner that redness was communicated just a few moments ago.

Finally, we can imagine that instead of writing this text, we speak it aloud. Has anything changed? Only that the object to which you invited your friend shifted from visual to auditory form. However, still, the communication of this concept is administered through the invitation of another to interact with a mediate object – not through direct transmission of experience. At no point throughout these scenarios were minds united in any way that they were not in the initial example pertaining to color. Furthermore, given that these scenarios encompass both spoken and written language, they represent virtually all communication between individuals. If the secret to truly direct transposition lies elsewhere than speaking and writing, then where can it be found?

Here, we see that the inseparability of concepts from sensory data and the impossibility of directly transferring awareness are not separate problems but two expressions of the same fundamental fact: no information can directly "pass over" from one mind to another. In every case, perceptions and conceptions are mediated *through the senses to individuals*, and their objective validity is always potentially the subject of Cartesian doubt (Rawls 87).

Thus, it seems the meditator would be unable to identify a concept that is both indubitable and collective. The absence of such a concept can be seen vividly when we recall Berkeley's challenge to Descartes' objective ending point. One can easily imagine the meditator straining indefinitely to perceive

the unperceived or to conceive the unconceived. If a collective concept truly defied skepticism, then any attempt to reduce it to sensory data or to deny its attachment to a multiplicity of minds should prove equally impossible. Yet, we find the opposite effect here.

In the absence of such justification, the meditator committed to skepticism would have no choice but to let doubt consume both the conceptual and the perceptual alike. This extends, inevitably, to the problem of other minds. Since the experience of others cannot manifest directly within the meditator's cogito, the very existence of these experiences (had by others) becomes subject to doubt by the meditator.

The reasoning which grounds an assumption of others' consciousness (articulated in the aforementioned counterarguments to the theory of other minds) is, of course, compelling – so much so that this assumption is held virtually universally. Furthermore, it seems clear that human interaction engenders a substantively different feeling within participating individuals than interaction with inanimate objects, despite the fact that it is technically possible that an *other* is just an especially deceptive, unconscious object. The purpose of this critique is in no way to suggest that such conscious experience does not exist, but simply to illustrate why Durkheim is not able to establish an epistemological base through collective consciousness.

Finally, I will add that even if Durkheim's collective concepts were to successfully provide a basis for indubitable, universal truth, much work remains to be done before establishing such a truth as objectively valid. Recall that Durkheim critiques Kant's *categories of understanding* as purely ideal, arguing that a complete epistemology would allow human knowledge to relate to the objectively existent, *true nature of things.* Durkheim seems to believe that in positing the social formation of these categories – and claiming that shared conceptions in society must be indicative of some underlying reality – his categories of understanding achieve an objective authority that Kant's do not.

However, the work of Berkeley and Descartes illustrates the insufficiency of this explanation. Durkheim's passing reference to the *true nature of things* outside of subjective minds leaves critical

questions unanswered. For example: Is this reality unperceived? Why should we associate such a reality with the true nature of things? How can this reality permeate society if it is not accessible to individual minds?

In short, if Durkheim seriously intends to incorporate a mind-independent reality into his epistemology – and to argue that socially adopted beliefs necessarily mirror this reality – he has not sufficiently justified his position. And if, on the other hand, this tie between the universal and the objective is meant simply to render objectivity arbitrary, then his theory is no less idealist than Kant's.

Part III – A Proposed Solution

Context for Solution:

In Parts I and II of this thesis, I analyzed both the religious and philosophical aspects of Durkheim's theory. In discussing the former, I highlighted what I believe to be a vulnerability arising from Durkheim's reliance on sociology to identify his essential religious element. I argued that such reliance compromises the authority of his definition, and allows (or, perhaps even necessitates) many of the theories' most prominent methodological critiques. However, I also defended the definition itself as functionally promising.

Furthermore, I posited that if such a definition were justified by non-sociological means – independent of ethnographic data and conventional understandings of religion – it could possess the necessary authoritative power to fulfill Durkheim's goals while sidestepping many of the critiques it faces. I also argued that such an alternative support would not preclude this definition from having sociological utility. Once established, it would allow an ethnographic study of humanity's interaction with the religious essence to inform social theory without relying on circular reasoning.

In Part III, I intend to propose such a philosophical support.

While this original contribution aims to address a problem I articulated in Part I, it should be understood as a broader culmination of my analysis. This is because my philosophical critique of

Durkheim's collective epistemology in Part II was also necessary to lay the groundwork for this effort. Specifically, I described and justified the fundamental philosophical starting point from which I intend to build my argument, and introduced subsequent scholarship to which I will refer throughout.

However, I should note that the dual utility of those philosophical tenets is no coincidence. For, the same logically rigid, vividly self-enforcing nature of the individualistic perspective that, in my view, undermines Durkheim's epistemology, also guarantees that it is the only viable means of vindicating his religious theory. In other words, because this starting point appears immovable, the truth of any philosophical conclusion is inextricably linked to it.

Thus, if I were to know only that collective epistemology was invalid, I would also know that it necessarily contains a conflict with this essential starting point. In turn, my suspicion that Durkheim's religious theory may be true implicates some subterranean tie between the two. It is this connection that I intend to pursue. After all, in my view, the development of sound theory should always be more archaeological than constructive in nature.

Furthermore, I can attest that this suspicion is rather strong. The location of the divine essence in social interaction strikes me as immediately resonant. I have spent most of my life in a skeptical posture toward divine communion, raised in a secular household where organized religion was largely viewed as a nefarious means of political and social control. However, even in the absence of an inherited theological framework, I have not found myself estranged from the experience to which such systems refer. In fact, on this issue more than any other, I have found a dissonance between the conclusions demanded by a materialist calculus and the testimony of my own lived experience.

Over the years, I have learned of numerous innovative theories seeking to redefine or relocate this elusive essence. Yet, none has proven as compelling or as illuminating as Durkheim's. In fact, upon reflecting on *the Elementary Forms*, I have noticed that virtually every experience I have been tempted to associate with divine contact relates to social exaltation. It is only in these collective contexts that I have been struck by such an undeniable, invisible force. Thus, a social definition of religious essence is one I feel is worth justifying if such a feat is possible.

The Challenge Ahead:

I will now set out the task before us in clear terms.

Our first step is to revisit Durkheim's initial objective, drawing insight from his criticism of alternative religious theories. As previously discussed, Durkheim contends that prior accounts reduce religious sentiments to "illusions" of an "unreal world" (Durkheim 225). Specifically, he claims that animism and naturism "undertake to construct the idea of the divine out of the sensations aroused in us by certain natural phenomena, either physical or biological" (Durkheim 87). These divine ideas are ultimately hollow because they suppose "a variable creation ex nihilo [out of nothing]" (Durkheim 87). Durkheim explains, "A fact of common experience cannot give us the idea of something whose characteristic is to be outside of the world of common experience… natural forces, as our senses perceive them, are only natural forces, howsoever great their intensity may be" (Durkheim 87).

To progress beyond theories that relegate religious sentiments to mere illusion, Durkheim aims to identify a truly divine object that exists outside of our ordinary experience. This object, he reasons, would confer meaningful sacredness upon all that is related to it. He states, "Aside from the human individual and the physical world, there should be some other reality, in relation to which this variety of delirium which all religion is in a sense, has a significance" (Durkheim 88).

To understand the practical implications of this critique, we can consider the naturalist example of a shooting star. While this phenomenon may be awe-inspiring, according to Durkheim, it cannot be sacred unless it stands in relation to an "other reality", or the special object (Durkheim 88). Without this connection, the phenomenon remains within the realm of ordinary perception and lacks true religious significance. Thus, given that naturism does not offer an account of any such special object, it can offer no validation to those who feel it inspires in them divine ideas. Thus, Durkheim's primary goal in *The Elementary Forms* is to offer an account of such a reality, so that divine ideas must not merely be considered delusions.

From this explanation alone, we cannot know exactly what the nature of this special object might be, nor by what means it may be related to. What we do know is that this object is not something

individuals can naturally or directly perceive through ordinary experience. This characteristic – which constitutes the solution to the problem of religious illusion – will function as our sole Durkheimian reference point throughout the following argument. Because my intention is to propose a non-sociological justification for Durkheim's conclusion, I must, of course, abstain from relying on ethnographic data or common conceptions of what constitutes religion or God. I will engage exclusively in philosophical reasoning, and aim to identify the special object that meets that criterion reviewed just above.

Logical Starting point:

To begin, I will once again introduce Descartes' skeptical meditator. However, it is important to note that the role of this figure here differs significantly from its function in Part II. There, the meditator served purely as a format for reasoning – a neutral vessel to facilitate a linear progression of thought and a concrete illustration of the limits of knowledge. In that capacity, the use of Descartes' argumentative device brought with it none of his philosophical presuppositions or conclusions. One could, in theory, use this figure to explore ideas that run entirely contrary to the Cartesian framework.

To clarify this, it may be helpful to imagine a spectrum of possible epistemological positions. At one end lies the Cartesian result of radical skepticism – awareness that only the cogito is certain to exist. At the other end lies certainty that all things exist objectively. In Part II, the meditator started in the middle, with no predetermined philosophical inclinations, other than an interest in exploring the limits of his knowledge. To reach either end, original reasoning was necessary.

Through this system, I explained how, according to Berkeley, the meditator would encounter an impermeable barrier established before reaching certainty that everything is objectively existent. That barrier is the contradictory nature of objective reality. I then reasoned that if Durkheim's collective epistemology were valid, a similarly impermeable barrier would present itself as the meditator tried to move in the opposite direction using skepticism – towards the isolated cogito – such that eventually, they would be unable to deny the existence of certain collective concepts.

In Section III, I will again employ the meditator as a medium for reasoning, but with a key difference: here, I will invoke him as the thinker who has already arrived at Descartes' most pivotal conclusion – *Cogito, ergo sum*.

This move would have been problematic in the previous section, where my aim was to critique Durkheim's theory, which explicitly rejects the individualistic starting point. Here, by contrast, I am outlining my own argument, which explicitly embraces that foundation. As a result, I can rely on the authority of this well-established starting point, drawing on its historical and logical justification outlined in Part II, rather than needing to reaffirm it here.

In summary, my goal is to identify Durkheim's special object from the individualistic philosophical frame. However, given that such an effort involves drawing inferences from logical necessity rather than according to an academic agenda, we should attempt to temporarily forget this goal, and engage in a unprejudicial reasoning.

Argument:

Let us now imagine that our Cartesian meditator is tasked with identifying the special object that Durkheim describes. Unable to appeal to any conventional understanding of religion or God, the meditator knows only one thing about this object: it must not appear within his perception. Relying on this fact alone, he arrives at his first insight into its nature.

If only his cogito and the direct perceptions therein are immune from skepticism, and he cannot directly perceive this object, then it is vulnerable to skepticism. In other words, the meditator cannot be certain of the object's existence. However, this fact, in and of itself, does not necessarily guarantee that such an object cannot exist. The meditator is not yet concerned with the feasibility of existence outside of his cogito. This conclusion only regards realities he can be certain of – perceptions and conceptions immediately present in his mind. Durkheim's special object is, by definition, excluded from this category.

Next, the meditator considers the means by which he could, in theory, come to understand the nature or accept the existence of such an object. Since all of his perceptions and conceptions take the form

of products in his cogito, his understanding of an object outside of this would need to be informed through perceptions of things which are not themselves the object. Features of the natural world, to which he has access, must continually hint at or indicate the existence of a thing beyond themselves. Moreover, even once the meditator forms a conception of such an object to which these things refer, this conception – being a product of his cogito – must only allude to this thing. He must never experience it directly.

The meditator, hypothetically, would not have been informed of the necessary relational tie between the special object and sacred things that Durkheim explains. However, we can see that through reasoning from his single starting point, he has identified, out of logical necessity, a more informative description of this very feature. More than just relational, this association must be referential and must maintain a specific directionality: things accessible to the cogito must point beyond themselves, indicating to the cogito the nature of what remains inaccessible to it.

Here, the meditator establishes a mediate definition of his own: This special object, if it does exist, must be something he can access only through *belief,* or *faith*. In this context, these terms describe the unique relationship between an individual and something he cannot directly perceive, yet accepts as real, and attributes a specific nature to. This definition goes hand in hand with the conclusions drawn just above. Unable to directly perceive the special object, the meditator must rely on natural phenomena that reference it as indirect evidence of its existence. To be so convinced – or, shall we say, compelled – by this evidence that one accepts the existence of an unperceivable thing is to have faith in it. To be clear, this faith is not necessary because of the improbability of the object's existence, but because of the opacity of its contents. No matter how strong the evidence, or how vivid the indications offered by natural phenomena, they can never establish the object's existence as certain. This is a necessary feature of an object that is not directly perceived.

At this point, the meditator has drawn sufficient boundaries around the object to discern the shape it would necessarily take if it were to exist. He resolves to find a coherent definition for a thing that meets the following criteria: it must not be directly perceivable by him, its existence must be referenced – and its nature described – in the natural world, and it must be able to act as the subject of his faith.

To begin exploring this question, the meditator wonders if an object that exists independent of perception, and thus *objectively*, could fit this description. Here, we should step out of the meditator's perspective for a moment.

Note on Berkeley:

In Part II, we examined Berkeley's handling of this very question of objective reality. As previously discussed, he argued that belief in such a reality entails a contradiction, rendering the concept incoherent. Berkeley's work is widely respected as a significant contribution to philosophy and is often regarded as a natural extension of Descartes' individualism. I, personally, share this sentiment. Thus, it could be contended that in this argument, Berkeley's conclusion should have been accepted apriori by the meditator along with Descartes' starting point. Yet, I believe that there is value in not presuming this implication from the outset. Instead, I aim to reason to this conclusion within the mind of the meditator and offer my own, context-specific account of this critical argument. By exposing the inner workings of this reasoning, we will be better positioned to make necessary connections later on.

However, In the absence of this assumption, I wish to preface the next stage of my argument with a reminder that these conclusions are not without reputable philosophical backing. The case against objective reality can, at first, seem counterintuitive – perhaps even jarring. Entire volumes have been dedicated to this question, and it remains a central issue in metaphysics. While I believe the reasoning I present here is, in itself, sufficient to justify my conclusion, I am mindful that, without the broader philosophical context, the decisive nature of my claims may appear over-bold. To be clear: though this argument is formulated concisely and in my own terms, it follows the same logical structure employed by Berkeley – one that has given rise to a long-standing and respected school of thought. Its brevity and bluntness are products of the constraints of this form of analysis, not of a desire to conceal or avoid its significant implications. With that said, we can now return to the argument.

Argument Continued:

As the meditator considers the coherence of objective reality, he can first reason that an objective reality, or a reality *independent* of perception, must be a reality perceived by no one. To confirm this point, he imagines for a moment a world in which objective reality refers only to things subjectively perceived. In this system, when a table comes within view of the perceiver, thus existing subjectively in exactly the ways he sees, hears, or feels it, it at once begins to exist objectively in exactly the same ways. Then, when the perceiver turns away, reducing the table's subjective existence from a visual rendering (now obstructed) to a fuzzy mental image, the objective existence of the table morphs accordingly. Clearly, this definition would render objectivity utterly meaningless – simply a synonym for subjectivity. To affirm the objective existence of a thing is to refer to the aspect of that thing that is not identical to subjective perception. Therefore, it is to refer to a thing, or aspect of a thing, unperceived.

Thus, if the meditator intends to claim a table he sees – made of, let's say, brown wood – exists objectively, he must not be referring to its brownness, its woodiness, its *table-ness*, or any other aspect that he perceives. Colors seen, textures felt, and sounds heard all become inadmissible evidence in this matter. Renderings of the table manifested in the mind through imagination or memory are inadmissible as well. This is because, once again, for the existence of the table to be substantiated through something other than the cogito of its perceiver, that existence can in no way be derivative from that individual's perceptions or conceptions.

Hence, the meditator reasons that if there is an objective reality, he certainly does not know about it. In fact, it fits the description of *objective* precisely *because* it is not known about.

However, upon further reflection, what initially appeared to be an issue of accessibility begins to reveal itself as a problem of coherence. For something to exist objectively, it must never have been seen, heard, tasted, smelled, felt, imagined, remembered, etc. With each aspect through which the meditator has ever understood existence, comes the immediate recognition that such an aspect is a manifestation within his cogito, and thus the disqualification of such a feature from any unperceived object. However far the

meditator's conceptions reach is precisely how far the objective must retreat. Thus, the concept of the objective is rendered purely antithetical to the concept of existence. For existence can only be defined by manifestation – and objectivity can only be defined by a lack of manifestation. In addition to rendering objective reality incoherent, this reasoning also fuses the definitions of existence and perception, so that these terms are virtually synonymous (so long as perception refers to all contents of the cogito, including concepts, etc.).

It is important to note that in drawing these conclusions, nothing is lost for the meditator. While Descartes' framing makes it appear as though gutting reality is a necessary step in isolating the cogito, his secondary conclusion – that the contents presently appearing within the cogito certainly exist, at least as perceptions – restores to the meditator all he has ever known. To discover this, the meditator may begin by noticing the cackling of the fireplace before him. He reasons that whether it is truly delivered to him as he imagines (being produced by the fire, transmitted through the ears, etc.) the fact of the sound's manifestation in his cogito is indubitable. Next, he might summon a memory of his children and recognize that, at the very least, this image manifests in his mind at this moment. He can continue this exercise, taking stock of every element of his current perceptual and conceptual world, simply acknowledging their presence in his cognition – and never asserting their existence beyond it. Using this method, it is only a matter of time before he finds he has accounted for everything.

Every sound, sight, thought, or other sensation he has ever experienced was accessed exclusively through these means. No matter how offensive an example may initially seem to this reasoning, by breaking it into its constituent parts and searching for them within the cogito, the meditator can find that they reside there. For example, what constitutes the meditator's knowledge that his mailbox exists outside, at the end of his driveway? First, a mental image of the mailbox, informed by many memories over the years from different angles and in different lights. Second, a conceptual structure that assures him that a certain image would appear again to his eyes if he were to walk outside and look directly at it. Third, an understanding of the nature of mailboxes in general, and so on. All of these aspects are readily

available to the meditator without appealing to things unperceived. He finds that he can conceive of no aspect of reality that relies in the slightest on such a thing.

By reaching this conclusion, the meditator gains another crucial insight into Durkheim's object: if it is unperceived, it is impossible to reference or relate to. In other words, the statement, "X relates to a thing which does not manifest" portrays an identical meaning to the statement "X relates to nothing", or "X does not relate." With this conclusion in mind, the meditator can reason the following.

Given:

1. References from perceivable phenomena are the only possible means by which he could identify Durkheim's special object (which the meditator has previously concluded).

It follows that:

2. The possibility of accepting the existence of this object or understanding its nature relies on it being possible to reference.

Thus:

3. Such an object could not be identified if it existed *objectively.*

More simply, he could also reason that:

Given:

1. Nothing can exist objectively

It follows that:

2. Durkheim's sacred object cannot exist objectively.

In addition, while the meditator does not have access to the first of the following premises, we can supplement our understanding by reasoning:

Given:

1. Durkheim explicitly discusses the necessary relation between the object and natural phenomena.

It follows that:

2. This object could not be of a kind that is impossible to relate to natural phenomena (i.e., an unperceived object).

Thus, the meditator can conclude, and we can confirm, that the special object cannot exist unperceived, or objectively. With this in mind, the meditator pushes forward. He has thus far reasoned:

1. Durkheim's special object is, by definition, inaccessible to him through perception.
2. This object must not exist independent of perception.
3. If this object exists, he must relate to it through faith.

Conclusion of Argument:

Finally, the meditator reaches his ultimate conclusion: The special object must be perception, and yet, must not be his own – it must be the perception of others.

Sandwiched between the Cartesian assertion that the meditator can be certain of that which appears in his cogito, and the Berkeleyan assertion (which follows shortly therefrom) that objective existence is incoherent, is a unique liminal space. Consciousness outside of one's own mind is the only thing that can never be verified, but it is not incoherent. This solution allows the argumentation above to be understood much more clearly.

An "objectively existent" object is impossible to reference and relate to *not simply because* it can never manifest in the mind of the meditator – for this is equally true of the perceptions of other minds. Rather, this is impossible because such an object can never manifest *anywhere*, whereas the perceptions of others *could* manifest in other consciousnesses. In other words, there is simply nowhere for a reference to objective reality to land. Even if no other conscious minds existed beyond the meditator's cogito, perceivable phenomena could still be interpreted as suggestions that they do. But nothing could ever indicate the existence of nonexistence. Critically, it is the *possibility* or *coherence* of the object that allows for references to it.

Furthermore, the meditator reasoned earlier that if he were to identify such an object, even his conception of it could only be referential. Now, the meaning of this conclusion becomes clearer. It may be helpful to recall the previous claim that nothing is lost by denying the existence of objective reality and referring to the example of the mailbox employed there. The meditator's reasoning illustrated how Descartes' clause about certainty in presently manifest perceptions and conceptions extends to validate all things one could possibly understand as existent. We can build on this conclusion here.

One may intuitively feel that their recognition of an immediate sense – say, of darkness when their eyes are closed – is of a fundamentally different nature than their conceptualization of a mailbox that is not presently in view. However, when that conception is broken into its constituent parts, it can be seen to consist entirely of similar mental renderings: visual images of a mailbox, the understanding that looking at the mailbox would recreate such an image, knowledge of mailboxes in general, etc. The second item in this list can be called a *reference*.

Berkeley called this type of mental construct a *subjunctive conditional.* This is an idea that suggests, *if one were to do X, then Y would appear in my cogito*. However, this type of conception is not categorically distinct from all other "natural" or "individual" conceptions and perceptions, because it still manifests as an experience in the mind (Durkheim 88). In short, a reference is merely the experience of

anticipating another experience. It indicates the potential existence of another experience without, itself, being that experience.

This is why naturism fails to escape the "individual and physical world" (Durkheim 88). A shooting star may evoke ideas of a larger cosmos or an elevated, beatific vision of reality within the cogito of an observer. Yet, such meanings remain internally referential. The shooting star points to nothing beyond entities of its own kind. In other words, references made by the shooting star attach only to one sort of thing: subsequent manifestations in an observer's cogito. They may be the birth of a new idea, a new picture, or a new emotion.

By contrast, when that same perceiver encounters another person – their life-like edifice, reasoned tone, forceful convictions, etc. – this phenomenon seems to point beyond the observer's own experience. Perceptions of this being, along with the concept that another mind may exist within it, manifest in the first perceiver's cogito. Yet, even this concept can only be referential. It alludes to another stream of consciousness but is not, itself, that stream. Thus, social interaction introduces a unique phenomenon. It references, to the perceiver, a potential experience that remains permanently in their blind spot – the experience of the other. In other words, it indicates that, *if one were to be X (the other person), then Y would appear in their cogito.*

Yet, given that this experience can never be one's own, one can never be certain of its existence (that it is manifesting *out there*, *somewhere*). Moreover, we have reasoned that such an experience is the only object external to individual perception to which reference can be made. Thus, according to this schema, the conscious *other* emerges as the *perfect and only possible subject of faith* – all else is either certainly existent in exactly the way it is perceived, or certainly nonexistent.

It is also important to note that the direct, one-on-one social interaction described above is only the most basic form of this kind of reference to other minds. To explore more complex examples, we might imagine an instance where a perceiver watches a group of close friends converse. Each of these

moving, talking, laughing entities appears to undeniably possess a mind of its own, creating an effect often multiple times more compelling than a single, seemingly conscious other. The intimacy of these friendly exchanges only heightens this effect, evoking the most poignant experiences from the perceiver's own inner life. In witnessing these others, the perceiver sees their most private, complex emotions manifesting elsewhere. However, as the compelling force of this evidence scales, so does the weight of the claim it makes – and the size of the faith it demands. Now, the first perceiver is not just accepting the existence of one consciousness, but of many – constituting a far larger mass of external experience, and with far deeper complexity.

Furthermore, this kind of referential object – the thing that points beyond itself to other consciousnesses – is not limited to living bodies or immediate social interactions. Consider, for example, a piece of art created by a person in collaboration with their family, whose meaning is intimately tied to their shared experiences. Such an object is charged with the individual's memories and, by extension, implicitly references the memories of all those who participated in its creation. It points toward the thought and intention behind their creative choices. The apparent fruits of each consciousness blended seamlessly with the products of the perceiver's own imbue the object with a distinct essence. The meaning of this object becomes inseparable from an act of faith in the reality of those other minds. On a larger scale, sports memorabilia may reference the hopes, fears, and memories, of an entire city. Consequently, understanding its meaning demands it's observer accept hundreds of thousands of other consciousnesses on faith.

If we attempt to conceive of an entity that inspires – and requires – the maximum possible amount of faith, we might imagine some religious symbol. Perhaps this symbol has been venerated for generations by a large society, referencing, for an individual, centuries of collective regard. It may be saturated with the devotion of thousands of people, among them the perceiver's family, friends, ancestors, and community. In the staggering presence of the mass of experience this object represents, the individual's cogito is infinitesimally small.

But we can go further still. We can imagine that this perceiver attends a mass gathering, where thousands of people congregate to celebrate this symbol with wild enthusiasm. He might find himself in a sea of others, chanting ancient words that communicate a shared history and meaning – each line alluding to a corpus of experience older and deeper than the individual could ever grasp. In this setting, he is confronted with a vivid depiction of that which the symbol represents. This reference is no longer passive – the promise of consciousness now closes in all around him, impressing itself on his every sense.

As the crowd contracts, the reference enforces itself with an ever-increasing violence, occupying every inch of space around the individual. We can imagine that the bodies pack so tightly that the perceiver's head comes pressed against another's – the impenetrable segregation of their minds embodied now only by two thin layers of skull. He may find himself so consumed that his feet lift from the ground, and he is held limp by the mass, inhaling their fervor. Now, to deny this faith is to deny the very air he breathes. The demand for his faith is so powerful, and its effect so transformational, that the perceiver can no longer resist it. His faith takes root – not as a cautious proposition, but as a visceral certainty – giving rise to an overwhelming sense of connectedness. In accepting the existence of these minds, he exposes himself completely. He relinquishes the protective posture of the skeptic and makes himself utterly vulnerable to Descartes' demon. He stakes everything on this belief – his sanity, his reason, his very sense of self. He affirms it over and over until the refusal of such a belief appears to him psychotic, deranged, even sacrilegious - of course, it is.

In moments like this, individuals may begin to embrace perfect strangers with uncharacteristic enthusiasm. They may act wildly and erratically, liberated from the typical confines of their individual condition, and thrilled by the totality of their submission. Here, we can see that increasingly vivid and compelling references naturally accompany increasingly incredible claims of consciousness. And, furthermore, it is in these most extreme cases – where the forces of faith demanded and faith inspired are most intense – that the role of the individual in committing to the former in spite of the latter is most harrowing and transcendent.

Demonstrating that Belief in the Other and the Totemic Principle are Functionally Synonymous:

At this point, I have arrived at what I contend is a logically necessary definition of Durkheim's directly unperceivable object, as well as a system through which individuals come to understand and accept it. However, this philosophical account only serves to reinforce Durkheim's sociological analysis if I can demonstrate that the essential religious element I have identified is *functionally synonymous* with Durkheim's. If this equivalence holds, then Durkheim's eventual application of his definition is safeguarded against accusations of circular reasoning and methodological critiques. It also gains a newfound definitional authority. Thus, my task, technically speaking, is to demonstrate that an individual's engagement with the object I have identified is both necessary and sufficient to constitute engagement with Durkheim's sacred object.

The claim that *belief in the other* is necessary for *interaction with the totemic principle* appears to follow naturally from the core tenets of Durkheim's description. The collective to which Durkheim refers necessarily consists of more than one conscious individual. This distinction from the individual is essential for the collective to act "from without" as a strengthening and inspiring force, and as the source of an otherwise inaccessible energy within the individual (Durkheim 209). Moreover, the morality Durkheim describes cannot be grounded without the presupposition that other consciousnesses exist. Without belief in the other, social gatherings would be indistinguishable from mere collections of unconscious objects – the very concept of social interaction would remain foreign to the individual. In every sense, acceptance of the existence of other minds appears absolutely essential for engagement with the totemic principle.

However, demonstrating that belief in the other is not only *necessary,* but also *sufficient* to constitute engagement with Durkheim's object is a more complex task. Affirming *necessity* is relatively straightforward: one can assert that solipsistic isolation severs access to any theory of collective force. In other words, a person who does not believe in the existence of other consciousnesses cannot believe in the

collective energy that Durkheim describes. By contrast, establishing the latter – that in every instance where a person *affirms the existence of minds beyond their own*, they are thereby *engaging with the totemic principle* – requires a more nuanced account of how *faith in the other* manifests for individuals. This is because Durkheim presents a complex account of how collective force is expressed. He suggests that this force is projected onto material symbols to varying degrees, depending on their association with the collective.

Specifically, I am referring here to Durkheim's mediate definition of religious phenomena as those that pertain to the opposition between the sacred and the profane. As previously discussed, Durkheim defines sacredness as a quality that items take on when they are the subjects of collective regard. First among sacred objects is the totem, followed by other entities, whose degree of sacredness is determined by the extent to which they are charged with collective force. Often, these are objects which are somehow associated with the totem.

My contention is that what Durkheim identifies as the sacred essence – interpreted by individuals as the projection of collective sentiments onto objects in varying degrees – is, in fact, another name for the reference that an earthly phenomenon makes to the existence of other consciousnesses. Below is the reasoning that explains why, given the conclusions we have thus far drawn, such an equivalence is necessary.

1. Durkheim establishes the necessity of a relational definition of religion.
2. Durkheim establishes a mediate definition of the sacred within this relational definition. That is:
    a. Religious beliefs and practices are those which relate to the sacred and profane.
    b. Sacred things are things that relate to the totemic principle, or the special object.
3. We have determined through reasoning that because of the special object's direct imperceptability, the relational definition Durkheim describes must, more specifically, be

referential, with objects indicating the existence and describing the nature of the special object.

4. Therefore, it follows that sacred things are things that refer to a special object – indicating its existence and describing its nature.
5. We have determined through reasoning that the special object can only be conscious experiences outside of one's own.
6. Therefore, sacred things must be things that indicate conscious experiences outside of one's own, and describe their nature.

This parallel is also evident in the account offered above, which explains the manifestation of *faith in the other* in similar terms to that of the sacred. Specifically, in both cases, objects are charged with collective force in varying degrees. Thus, Durkheim's construct of sacredness finds a corollary in my reasoning – defined as the amount of conscious experience *other than one's own* that an object references – in other words, the amount of faith it demands. This charge, I contend, is functionally identical to the *collective regard* that is projected onto objects in Durkheim's account.

How this Similarity Emerged:

In light of the parallels listed just above, one might reasonably ask: if Durkheim's sociological justification renders his reasoning circular, then how did he nevertheless arrive at the very object – and the very system of relation to that object – that I argue is independently, philosophically justifiable? Could this merely be a coincidence?

To answer this question, we should refer back to Section I, where I stated that it was logically possible that a truly independent, philosophically derived definition of religion could bear no similarity to traditional religious associations. Given that Durkheim's definition was originally derived from these associations, it follows that an independent definition might also end up somewhere completely apart

from Durkheim's destination. Of course, this possibility demonstrates why a philosophically derived definition maintains the authoritative definitional power that Durkheim lacks.

However, this outcome always seemed improbable. This is because, if there exists an object that truly lies beyond the bounds of an individual's ordinary perception – as I now argue there can – then it is reasonable to expect that an encounter with such an object would have profound or transformative effects on the individual. These effects, in turn, would be observable at the sociological level and may come to be described, within traditional discourse, as experiences of the divine or transcendent.

Thus, if a scientist gathers data about traditional conceptions of religion, there is a reasonable probability they will encounter recurring terms or themes in ethnographic research that are distant echoes of this divine core – and which, if followed, lead back to their true origin.

It would have been possible for Durkheim's ethnographic net to be cast so narrowly, or for society's calcification of transcendent experience into religious lore to be so distortive, that nowhere in the original data from which he drew generalizations existed any vestiges of the true object. In such a scenario, Durkheim might have reached the core of some other purportedly religious system only to find no true transcendence. Here emerges another limitation of Durkheim's circular approach. Without an independent philosophical account of what transcendence entails, he has no external standard by which to judge the core he identifies. Thus, he can never know if the essential religious element he has identified is valid or not. Instead, he relies exclusively on his assertion that religious conceptions could not have persisted as they have if they were based solely on illusion, in combination, of course, with the identification of those most common conceptions.

However, with philosophical support such as the one I have offered, we are able to verify that Durkheim did, in fact, identify the proper core – and that this core can deliver religion from its illusory designation. This confirmation assures us that Durkheim's sociological method was at least sufficient to capture refractions of the sacred essence and to trace them, however indirectly, back to their source. It

also lends greater credibility to his claim that the persistence of common religious understandings points toward a reality beyond mere illusion.

What is far more striking than this alignment of special objects, however, is the symmetry that continues beyond this essential element, and to the mediate definitions presented by Durkheim and myself. Recall that Durkheim originally describes the system of sacredness as a commonality between many religions, including the elementary tribes he studies. This system – wherein things that are subject to collective regard inspire divine ideas – was, for Durkheim, an empirical finding grounded in ethnographic evidence. And yet, the very same structure emerges as a logical necessity within my own philosophical reasoning. This system is not only the way in which individuals report engaging with transcendence but the very means by which their engagement must be facilitated.

This brings us back to the final paragraphs of Part I, where we asked why the relationship between the individual and the totemic principle must be articulated in terms of faith. We wondered if this was simply a linguistic holdover from traditional religious discourse – picked up in Durkheim's account as a sort of empirical feedback – or if this framing played some important role in his religious theory. We grew suspicious of this terminology, questioning what separates the totemic principle from the sun in the sky and why Durkheim's phrasing made it seem as if one can immunize oneself from its effects simply by refusing to believe. Now, we can see that just like the sacred, faith was a conceptual artifact – picked up in ethnographic data and generalized by Durkheim – that, in fact, also reflects a necessary truth about the interaction between individuals and the divine.

It seems that as I move outward from this special object – describing the faith-based means by which it must be understood, and the varying degrees by which other objects reference it – I begin to see Durkheim's footprints tracing the same path, but in the opposite direction. In other words, whereas I am identifying the ways in which faith in such an object would necessarily manifest, Durkheim is identifying the ways in which such an object does, in fact, appear in society in reverse order. Evidently, these findings are extremely similar.

Of course, differences in phraseology and framing exist between Durkheim's explanation and my own, owing to the distinct methods by which we arrived at these terms. However, I contend that each of these critical elements, at its core, serves the same function as its corresponding component in Durkheim's theory. Below is a list of core features of Durkheim's theory, and their correlarries in the logical framework I have established.

1. The Totempic Principle/The Collective/God = The mass of consciousness outside of one's own.
2. Faith (as a largely unexplained means of describing one's relationship with God) = Faith (as a logically necessary means of interacting with God).
3. Relation (as the description of the connection between sacred things and God) = Reference (as a logically necessary means of illuminating the nature of God, with a specific directional element.)
4. Sacredness/Collective Regard = The reference made by an object to the mass of consciousness (projected onto that object in varying degrees).
5. The Totem (as the most sacred object) = The symbol which references the maximum possible consciousness, and demands/inspires maximal faith.

In addition, there is another, more speculative connection which I have alluded to above, and which I will describe in more detail in the section below. It is:

6. Collective Effervescence (effects that appear to result from an interaction with God, but are not supported by a causal, social psychological explanation) = A liberated, frenzied state that individuals feel upon submitting themselves to faith.

Discussion of Durkheim's Sociological Findings:

Throughout this thesis, I have argued that the sociological utility of Durkheim's essential religious element was compromised by its derivation from ethnographic data and sociological reasoning. However, I have also maintained that if such a definition were independently validated and liberated from

its circular structure, it could achieve Durkheim's goals in *The Elementary Forms*. In other words, with a justified, authoritative definition in hand, Durkheim could then document a host of beliefs, practices, experiences, and social effects that result from an individual's interaction with such a principle. In fact, he already offers such an account.

Durkheim describes how the totemic principle exerts authority, provides strength and inspiration, instills morality, and sparks a feeling of collective effervescence in individuals. Since I am not conducting an original ethnographic study of my own, I cannot directly affirm or dispute these findings. I can only note that Durkheim's arguments are vivid and compelling. As previously discussed, the majority of notable critiques of *the Elementary Forms* aim away from this aspect of Durkheim's theory, focusing instead on how he constructs his religious definition – pointing to his reliance on generalization, selective use of tribes, and other methodological choices. However, there is one critique, reviewed in Part I, that directly concerns this dimension of his work.

Jones argues that Durkheim's account of the effects of the totemic principle lacks a sufficient explanation of *how* and *why* interaction with the sacred gives rise to such effects. Because Jones' critique does not directly target Durkheim's methodological approach to establishing his definition, I did not claim that it could be circumvented with an alternative, philosophical justification. However, I now submit that these concerns are not entirely disconnected. Because Durkheim's empirical approach depends on observing phenomena already occurring in society, it is difficult to draw insight into underlying causal mechanisms. Furthermore, because he was working from second-hand accounts, Durkheim was not able to interview the tribe members or elicit firsthand testimonies regarding their experiences with the sacred.

While a non-sociological justification does not allow Durkheim's theory to evade this critique entirely, I believe it offers a promising foundation for a social-psychological solution. By clarifying the role of faith and framing engagement with the totemic principle as belief in the other, new lines of inquiry open for exploring causal explanations. The scene of the mass gathering described above serves as a glimpse into this possibility.

Can the rejection of reason inspire a connection with a greater power? Can the vulnerability of faith give rise to feelings of exultation? Is escaping the individualistic frame satisfying to some aspect of human cognition? I contend that the first step in explaining the effects Durkheim associates with divine communion is exposing the philosophical connection between the two. In doing so, we draw closer to understanding the unique transcendent experiences triggered by engagement with the social world.

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