*A Durkheimian Environmental Socio-Political Theory*

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Émile Durkheim was no John Muir—that American environmental activist who was Durkheim’s contemporary. Durkheim cannot be considered an environmental social theorist or advocate. Indeed, aspects of his social theory encouraged the damaging anthropocentric direction that sociology and other social sciences in many ways still pursue. Nonetheless, it is beneficial to critically construct a *Durkheimian environmental social theory* to address such pressing challenges as climate change, environmental degradation, and anthropocentrism, and to cultivate beliefs, practices, and institutions that bring dignity and justice to the interwoven relationships between humans and the more-than-human. Such a Durkheimian-inspired environmental approach would, among other things, extend Durkheim’s robust social analysis of and commitment to the dignity of the human person and the flourishing of human communities to include non-human creatures and entities. Durkheim, for example, famously analyzed and supported the rights and dignity of the individual by employing the language of the sacred. A Durkheimian environmental approach would extend the status of the sacred to aspects of the more-than-human, thereby conferring respect and protections.

Moreover, a Durkheimian environmental social theory would pursue the twin pronged​ method inherent in much of Durkheim’s work, namely, his analysis and support of progressive democracies via: 1) principled, institutional mechanisms and constraints that are intended to check arbitrary power and exploitation (e.g., by such means as laws backed up by governmental power), and 2) progressive cultural beliefs, ideals, and practices that form a “second nature” in individuals and communities, thereby providing a social fabric or cultural climate that supports various democratic institutions, projects, and aspirations. This twin pronged method, in the framework of environmental social theory, would advocate institutionalizing constraints on human power in relation to the non-human world while also cultivating a cultural “second nature” (beliefs, ideals, and practices) that would engender care and perhaps even reverence for the non-human world. And while both prongs are central to Durkheim’s social theory, it is the second, cultural prong that is most salient and distinctive in his work—especially his later work—and in this chapter. Durkheim understood that while formal institutional constraints such as laws, constitutions, and contracts are of great importance, they become impotent in the absence of robust, socio-cultural support in the form of shared beliefs, practices, and habits.

Although the focus of this chapter is on the construction of a Durkheimian—a Durkheim-inspired—environmental social theory, some attention is given to claims by Durkheim that *directly* pertain to anthropocentricism, culture-nature binaries, and the relation between humans and the more-than-human. His claims about “social facts,” homo duplex, and the sacred status of the human person have led some to claim that Durkheim steered sociology down an anthropocentric path that has failed to acknowledge human exploitation of the more-than-human and the integral role of the more-than-human in human social life. While there is some truth in these claims, Durkheim’s work is not as anthropocentric as some have claimed. Indeed, some of his comments on “social facts” and morphology challenge anthropocentrism, and aspects of his work on totemism suggest a potential kinship between humans and such more-than-human lifeforms as animals and plants.

Durkheim, of course, could have done better, environmentally speaking. It is disappointing that he did not include in his wide-ranging analyses the exploitation of the more-than human, the environmental degradation caused by the first and second Industrial Revolution, and the connection between economic liberalism and environmental harm, among other matters. Such disappointment is not anachronistic, though it should be noted that it is difficult to name among Durkheim’s contemporaries social theorists or philosophers who were attentive to environmental concerns and the intimate relation between the human and more-than-human. Sociology, and the social sciences more generally, developed and worked with an almost exclusively human-centered paradigm and worldview. There was little recognition that human social life is powerfully informed by its dependent relation with the non-human world, and that there is a connection between the assault on the natural world on the one hand, and social inequality and injustice among humans on the other. The pervasive paradigm of Western anthropocentrism informed (and continues to inform) the social sciences, and Durkheim was not exempt from its clutch. Nonetheless, he did push back against it in various ways, and more importantly, many of his major theoretical achievements can be employed to expand and transform the social sciences to become more environmentally sophisticated, responsive, and accountable. With this goal in mind, I have forged a new reading of Durkheim as the social sciences seek to shed anthropocentricism and address the environmental crises of our age. I have, then, constructed a distinctively Durkheimian environmental social theory.

That construction is found in the first—and most extensive—part of this chapter. I argue that Durkheim’s articulation of the dignity of the human person in the idiom of social traditions and commitment to a common good can be extended to include the dignity of non-human creatures and entities within a common good suitably enlarged to include the more-than-human. Additionally, I highlight Durkheim’s penetrating critiques of various aspects of classical liberalism (precursor of neo-liberalism) and his fear that the corrosive effects of such liberalism would erode not only the economic sphere but spheres of being outside the economic life, thereby transforming an otherwise multifaceted democratic society into a narrow, economically driven machine and cultural way of life—the very machine and way of life that have greatly contributed to the current climate change catastrophe. I also investigate Durkheim’s proposals for institutional and cultural safeguards to protect democratic society from neo-liberal harm (e.g., the role of a democratic, culturally robust “second nature,” a sacred sense of human worth, ethical pluralism and spheres of being, and active state agencies and roles, including that of public education). I critically appropriate these various socio-critical analyses and proposed interventions as I craft a Durkheimian environmental social theory. In the second, shorter part of the chapter, I briefly assess the claims that Durkheim’s scholarship is inherently anthropocentric. Specifically, I discuss his work on “social facts,” morphology, the culture-nature binary, andtotemic kinship relations between humans and such non-humans as animals and plants.

I. *Fashioning a Durkheimian Environmental Social Theory*

a) *From Human Solidarity to Planetary* *Solidarity*

Durkheim maintained a dual commitment that may seem oxymoronic: on the one hand, he vigorously advanced various arguments in support of the dignity and respect—indeed, the sanctity—of the human person. This, he held, was a central value and even principle for aspiring democracies. On the other hand, he also robustly supported the importance of solidarity or the common good—a good that is not simply the protection of citizens’ self-interest but rather the dynamic goals, aspirations, and projects that promote the wellbeing of the political community. Such democratic solidarity, however, was not construed by Durkheim as sameness or uniformity. Rather, it emerges dynamically in the context of just arrangements for, and engagements among, diverse citizens. Honoring the dignity of the person *and* shared aims—these twin poles, with all the tension between them—marks much of Durkheim’s work, his vision, his challenge.

The concept of solidarity is associated with the life and thought of Durkheim, and for good reason. He was committed to it, both theoretically and practically. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, arguably his most important book, Durkheim set himself the task of discovering an enduring source of human social identity and fellowship (*solidarité)*. Durkheim treated religion, broadly understood, as dynamic social ideals, beliefs, and practices that shape a shared perception of, and therefore life in, a society’s moral universe. One finds religion wherever public, ethical concepts, symbols, or rites are employed. Religion, in this view, is manifested variously in modernity. The upshot of this—ethically and epistemologically—is that human life is, in a significant sense, life together. This is Durkheim’s response, and challenge, to a long tradition of classical and economic liberalism.

Even Durkheim’s investigations of ethical individualism (the dignity of the human person) became a vehicle to explore social solidarity. Durkheim made the surprising claim that there is a form of contemporary individualism, what he called moral or ethical individualism, that emerges from the solidarity that marks North Atlantic democracies (Durkheim 1973a). Think of ethical individualism as a cluster of dynamic beliefs, practices, symbols, and institutions that support the dignity and respect of the human person. Commitment to the rights and dignity of the individual is a principal thread, Durkheim argued, in the moral fabric that weaves together the diverse citizens of a modern democracy. It provides a shared ethical identity of “we, the people.”

Durkheim maintained that ethical progress requires a social solidarity that is willing to wrestle with social problems and achieve social change. Of the three basic ideals of a democratic republic—liberty, equality, and solidarity—can we hazard to neglect the last of these? Can we pursue liberty and equality—which require much from us in the way of social resolve, collective wisdom, and financial commitment—without a tremendous sense of shared purpose? Durkheim maintained that as social diversity and the need for social justice increase, so does the need for a robust yet appropriate form of democratic solidarity.

A challenge for us, now, is to extend Durkheim’s sophisticated model of solidarity to support and include not only the dignity of diverse citizens but also *the dignity of diverse more-than-human creatures and entities*. To transform his notion of *human* solidarity to a *planetary* solidarity. And to envision Durkheimian paradigms of solidarity and cooperation for such shared projects as the mitigation of and adaptation to climate change, the protection of all climate refugees (both human and non-human), the promotion of environmental justice, and the eradication of poisons from soil, water, and air. Durkheim has supplied us with a theoretical apparatus. It is now our task to employ it for the sake of today’s environmental challenges. A Durkheimian environmental social theory would continue to embrace Durkheim’s support of a particular form of *humanism* (the dignity of *all* human persons), while it also would support a form of *posthumanism* (the rejection of deleterious anthropocentricism and the broad acknowledgment of the numerous ways non-human creatures and entities inform human existence and possess their own distinctive agency and desires). So, even as a Durkheimian liberatory form of humanism is affirmed, so is a robust posthumanism, that is, the affirmation of an interdependent relationality between humans and the more-than-human, thereby challenging anthropocentric forms of humanism and displacing the human from the center of all things. Honoring and respecting the human person and communities as well as non-human species and communities is at the heart of a Durkheimian environmental social theory and its account of a planetary solidarity. It captures and extrapolates Durkheim’s firmly held belief that (as mentioned above) human life is life together—however, “life together” is now understood in the broadest sense, encompassing the more-than-human. And as I show below, this extrapolation is congruous with Durkheim’s social theory and his account of the dynamic, on-going nature of human morality.

*b) Durkheim’s Critique of Corrosive Liberalism*

Neo-liberalism perpetuates appalling inequalities within human communities and catastrophic environmental harm to non-humans and humans, especially to the most vulnerable. Global neo-liberalism emulates laissez-faire liberalism insofar as it secures unprecedented autonomy for corporations, disassembling national, state, and local regulations. Neo-liberal corporations, in turn, resemble authoritarian entities in terms of vast concentrations of power that are not publicly accountable—except perhaps to disparate, private shareholders. Unregulated concentration of power subverts the sovereignty of citizens and the autonomy of communities. Moreover, neo-liberal, extractive capitalism drives a non-sustainable, polluting economic engine designed to maximize earnings. Increased profits require an ever-expanding global economy, and such global consumption entails the misuse of renewable and nonrenewable resources, runaway extinction rates of animals and plants, disastrous loss of soil, fisheries, and forests, unparalleled pollution of the planet’s land, water, and air, and catastrophic climate change. Additionally, the creation of corporate wealth and global poverty are perversely connected.

Neo-liberalism, then, is a chief culprit of human and environmental harm, and Durkheim was a vehement critic of the liberal economic and social developments that led to today’s neo-liberal climate. From the start of his career, Durkheim was critical of classical liberalism, especially laissez-faire liberalism. He feared that the state would increasingly be viewed as an economic, as opposed to an ethical, agent. Classical liberals long for a minimalist state, powerful enough to enforce legal contracts and rights, yet not interfering with the so-called natural harmony of private interests guaranteed by laissez-faire economics. In an article written in 1887, after his first visit to Germany, the early Durkheim applauded the work of the social economists Adolf Wagner and Gustav von Schmoller. Following their lead, Durkheim criticized “the school of Manchester” for whom “political economics consists in the satisfaction of individual needs” (Durkheim 1887, 37). Durkheim remarked that isolated individuals“exchanging their products” is the greatest social bond that liberaleconomists can imagine (Durkheim 1887, 37). They “see in the social bond only a superficialunion determined by private interests happening to coincide” (Durkheim 1887, 37). Durkheim argued that the “orthodox economists” and the “moralists of the Kantian school” divorce the moral world from the economic one: “these two sciences appear to study two worlds without any connection between them” (Durkheim 1887, 40–41). The two worlds, however, are deeply connected, and it is impossible, as Durkheim puts it, to “abstract the one from the other” (Durkheim 1887, 45).

Durkheim’s critique of “unleashed” economic liberalism grew only more robust as his career progressed. For example, in his 1904 lectures on professional ethics, Durkheim summarized an account of the economic, liberal world that seemed to place it “outside the sphere of morals.” He asked, “Is this state of affairs a normal one? It has had the support of famous doctrines. To start with, there is the classical economic theory according to which the free play of economic agreements should adjust itself and reach stability automatically, without it being necessary or even possible to submit it to any restraining forces” (1992, 10). Just and wise social practice, however, “cannot follow of itself from entirely material causes, from any blind mechanism, however scientific it may be. It is a moral task” (1992, 12). Why a moral task? Because we should not expect just economic and social practices to emerge spontaneously from private contracts or supply and demand or from any other liberal market devices that, ultimately, seek profit above all else. An ethical task is at hand because individuals, communities, and governments must do something to bring justice to the economic sphere. Human effort and planning are required.

And there is more at stake here than just the condition of the economic realm: “this amoral character of economic life amounts to a public danger” (1992, 12). His fear is that, because of the prominence of the economic sphere in modern societies, its amoral character is spreading and will dominate other social spheres. This insight of Durkheim’s has proved to be disastrously prophetic, as neo-liberalism has informed not only the economic realm but practically every aspect of modern social life, including governments, notions of freedom, dominant values, and individual desire and subjectivities. Durkheim warned of this development. He claimed that beginning in the industrial realm, “le mal de l’infini”—the sickness of anomic, market driven desire—“has thence extended to the other parts [of society]” (1951, 256). This is not merely to say, “money corrupts.” It is to claim that the economic realm has been freed from social accountability, divorced from ethical traditions, and that its anomic character is dominating spheres that, until recently, were relatively independent of it.

Durkheim, of course, knew nothing about the environmental costs and destruction that would come from a global, neo-liberal economy and order unleashed from ethical beliefs, institutions, and practices. Yet he did anticipate the human social harm and suffering that would flow from a neo-liberal order. What of Durkheim’s response? Early in his career, Durkheim asserted that “all communal life is impossible without the existence of interests superior to those of the individual” (Durkheim 1973a, 44).From the outset, Durkheim argued that in modern societiesjustice and happiness are achieved not by placing a premium on narrow self-interest driven by liberal, economic desire, but rather by supplying the various spheres of society with institutions, cultural beliefs, and practices dedicated to shared common goods and progressive, democratic principles, values, and aspirations.

*c) A Twin Pronged, Durkheimian Approach: Institutional and Cultural Support for an Eco-Democracy*

Neo-liberalism, I have claimed, has brought disastrous human and environmental harm, as it shapes the cultural soul, politics, and economics of contemporary societies, and yet a Durkheimian environmental social theory has powerful means to address this threat. It would advance institutional and cultural protections against neo-liberalism—*institutions and cultural practices, values, and perspectives that nourish ethical visions of an environmentally responsive and progressive eco-democracy embodied by citizens and embedded in its lands and institutions*. By “ethical visions,” I mean linked yet diverse arrays of stories, perspectives, arguments, and insights that inform the ethos and practices of a people. By “embodied” and “embedded,” I mean the ways eco-democratic beliefs, practices, and affect are enacted and reflected in the identities of individuals and in the lands and institutions in which they dwell. “Embodied eco-democracy” brings attention to a Durkheimian democratic *second nature* of citizens and to the Durkheimian cultural (not simply procedural) dimensions of democracy, including aesthetic, religious, and affective ones, highlighting the distinctive ways democratic citizens move, dwell, and engage with humans and the more-than human. “Embedded eco-democracy” also brings attention to the reciprocal relationships between democratic beliefs and practices and the *lands* that sustain them. Democracy informs the lands even as the lands inform democracy.

Durkheim understood that people and place over time shape a democracy even as democracy shapes people and place. The shaping engendered by democracy can be referred to as a Durkheimian “democratic second nature”: the cultivation of an ecological, democratic subjectivity against a neo-liberal subjectivity. Second nature is the formative, dynamic process and condition of acquiring, in time and place, various beliefs, practices, and dispositions that become internalized. Progressive democratic second nature, while trustworthy, must be subject to constant critique and transformation. Indeed, *critique itself—a sacred practice for Durkheim—is a cultivated capacity within democratic second nature*. Progressive democratic thought and practice are not only compatible with ways of Durkheimian cultivation—tradition, practice, and exemplars—but require them. Durkheim advanced models of democratic institutions, communities, and practice that do not rely on either: 1) appeals to liberal, private interest or market efficiency models, often purportedly derived from principles of universal, deliberative human rationality, or 2) political arguments based on natural reason or any other anchors in an ahistorical moral reality. His commitment, rather, was to exploring models that describe progressive democracy as liberatory, socio-cultural ways of life, whether at the local, nation-state, or even transnational level. To acknowledge the socio-historical nature of democratic achievements (however limited) is also to acknowledge the fragility of these achievements (as Durkheim showed, for example, in his writings on the Dreyfus Affair). By acknowledging democratic forms of life that support just institutions and practices, one can purposefully attend to and cultivate a dynamic second nature—an identity or subjectivity—that combats such democratic and environmental threats as neo-liberalism.

A Durkheimian environmental social theory would focus on cultivating ecologically responsive democratic institutions and cultural practices, believes, and subjectivities. At the start of this chapter, I described this as Durkheim’s twin pronged method of advancing both: 1) principled, institutional mechanisms and constraints, and 2) progressive cultural beliefs, ideals, and practices that form a “second nature” in individuals and communities. But now as an *environmental* social theory, this twin-pronged approach includes such goals as socio-ecological justice, multispecies justice, and planetary justice. Later in this chapter, I discuss the kinds of *institutional* mechanisms and constraints that a Durkheimian environmental theory would advance; here I now allude to the kinds of *cultural* goals and work that a Durkheimian environmental theory would pursue.

As mentioned above, Durkheim came to hold the view that religion permeates modern, Euro-American societies. Although its beliefs and practices have changed, its basic *religious form* has not: robust, shared normative beliefs and practices embedded in moral community are still prevalent. The dignity of the human person and the spirit of free inquiry and critical thought, for example, are charged with the sacred. Many secular beliefs, Durkheim claimed, are “indistinguishable from religious beliefs proper” (Durkheim 1899, 20). Indistinguishable because modern Euro-American societies, like traditional societies, have common (even if “secular”) faiths composed of shared beliefs and practices. Durkheim also understood that there were conflicting “sacred” values and “common faiths” that threatened to undermine the continued development of progressive democracies. There were the competing liberal traditions, such as those of the classical economists and utilitarians, as well as competing solidarity traditions, such as those of the Royalists and the conservative Roman Catholics. Durkheim, champion of the Third Republic and the goals of the French Revolution (equality, liberty, and solidarity), was intentional in his support of progressive democratic cultural ways of life, arguing that social democratic traditions represented France’s most ethically defensible and legitimate traditions.

Similarly, a Durkheimian environmental social theory would champion the development of eco-democratic ways of life by extending the sacred value of the human person to include the sacred value of all life, pushing back against destructive and pervasive paradigms of anthropocentricism. This extension of sacred value would challenge the anthropocentricism implicit in Durkheim’s own work on the sacred status of the human person. If humans, and *humans alone*, are to be respected and treated with care, such that “any attempt against [human] life suggests sacrilege,” then all other forms of life are implicitly deemed “profane” and are subject to exploitation (Durkheim 1951, 333). To undo this anthropocentrism, a Durkheimian environmental social theory would not jettison Durkheim’s humanism, that is, his commitment to the sanctity of the human person. Rather, it would extend Durkheim’s account of the sacred to include all forms of life, thereby advancing socio-ecological and planetary justice.[[1]](#endnote-1) This move, in fact, is consistent with Durkheim’s own view that the sacred is dynamic, changing as society itself changes.

There is correlation between perceiving the “more-than-human” as having sacred value and acting to protect the more-than-human. Justin Farrell conducted an extensive study, investigating “Durkheim’s theory about the role of sacredness in moral decision making”—specifically decision making that pertains to environmental activism (Farrell 2001, 399). The results of his study “show that believing nature is sacred has a positive and significant effect on the odds of participating in activism” (Farrell 2001, 413). Farrell’s work demonstrates the practical power of a Durkheimian environmental social theory that advances the sacred status of the more-than-human. This sacred status could be supported and articulated variously: some could come to hold the more-than-human as a sacred gift and reflection of God; others could deem the more-than-human as being sacred in and of itself; and still others, resisting the language of the sacred, could understand the more-than-human as that which is inherently worthy of care, respect, and protection. The exact language and held belief are not as important as generating shared, public normative perspectives on the dignity and value of the more-than-human and advancing various forms of planetary justice.

This goal—generating shared ecological perspectives and advancing planetary justice—would need to be pursued in distinctive ways appropriate to the various social spheres of contemporary societies. Durkheim articulated two kinds of socio-ethical pluralisms,most notably described in *Professional Ethics and Civic Morals* (Durkheim 1992).*A plurality of morals* refers to the diverse sets of goals and values, and the varying levels of homogeneity that characterize groups in the domestic, occupational, civic, and international spheres. *Moral pluralism*, in contrast, pertains to the relation between the beliefs and practices of the political community and the beliefs and practices of such associations or groups as churches and synagogues, non-profits and activist alliances.[[2]](#endnote-2) This can include associations that can be said to rest upon comprehensive religious, moral, or philosophical doctrines. The solidarity of the political community, in Durkheim’s view, does not require broad agreement from these associations on every issue. Social solidarity, in other words, does not require social homogeneity (registering Durkheim’s concern over oppressive nationalism). On some issues, however, such as the protection of human dignity and free speech, widespread agreement is necessary (registering Durkheim’s concern over atomistic liberalism and libertarianism). Moral pluralism, then, refers to a plurality of communities and associations that promote distinctive practices and beliefs, and yet also contribute to—or at least do not threaten—common public projects and goals.

A Durkheimian environmental social theory would support the development of environmental perspectives and practices that are distinctive of, and appropriate for, the “plurality of morals” in the domestic, occupational, civic, and international spheres. These could entail *households* committing to energy-saving heat pumps, *industries* committing to aggressive pollution reduction, *nations* committing to net-zero emissions within early timeframes, and *international* organizations and treaties to limit global temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels. The point is the various spheres of society would advance perspectives and practices distinctive to their own ways of being for the sake of protecting all forms of life and advancing socio-ecological, planetary justice. And in terms of “moral pluralism,” beliefs and practices pertaining to the dignity and respect of the more-than-human would be deemed central to those common, shared projects and goals that pertain to the greater political community. Regardless of one’s specific comprehensive good, a Durkheimian environmental social theory would seek to find mutual, broad agreement for the protection and dignity of non-human creatures and entities.

I have lingered with various forms of socio-cultural elements necessary to advance a progressive eco-democracy, because Durkheim warned that formal institutional constraints such as laws, constitutions, and contracts are powerless without the support of shared beliefs, practices, and habits. Nonetheless, Durkheim did analyze and commend principled, institutional constraints and mechanisms for modern, progressive democracies. This is what I have called the first prong in a Durkheimian environmental social theory. Perhaps needless to say, it is closely related to the cultural prong. In Durkheim’s view, the ideal is when a democratic state’s formal institutions and agencies, on the one hand, and its citizens’ diverse yet overlapping socio-cultural matrixes, on the other, mutually support each other. Durkheim’s model for the democratic state, which is neither libertarian nor nationalistic, assigns to the democratic state many significant roles, or, if you like, active roles. The state’s authority is unique. At its best it guards against countless forms of domination and oppression; it works for social justice, seeking to eradicate racism, patriarchy, and social inequalities; it attempts to usher various spheres of society toward the common good, promoting a political community informed by democratic ideals, beliefs, and practices. The democratic state is active in many diverse social spheres: protecting children, instituting educational requirements that forbid repression and discrimination, regulating trade and commerce, establishing and funding the courts, and so on.

A Durkheimian environmental social theory would analyze and support a democratic state’s formal institutions and agencies with an aim to advance an environmentally responsive and progressive eco-democracy. As mentioned above, although Durkheim rejected nationalistic models of the state, he was not in favor of minimalist states that passively allowed economic markets to run autonomously. He favored an *active*, democratic state. One of the best examples of the role of the active state is his remarkable, forward-looking work on democratic, public education. Durkheim’s research and views on public education illustrate his commitment to furthering formal democratic state institutions but also, once again, to bolstering socio-cultural democratic ways of life. A Durkheimian environmental social theory would investigate and promote democratic public education as one avenue to bolster an *eco-democratic second nature* in the lives of its citizens.

Fostering ecological beliefs, practices, and perspectives via education resonates with Durkheim’s fundamental belief about the broad aim of public education: “It is necessary that we never lose sight of what is the aim of public education. *It is not a matter of training workers for the factory or accountants for the warehouse, but citizens for society”* (Durkheim 1885, 449). Specialization, in Durkheim’s view, is not the chief aim of public education. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Durkheim rejected the view that secondary education should concern itself primarily with job training. Hence Durkheim wrote: “The object of all secondary education is to arouse and develop a capacity for thinking without trying to tie it down to any one particular vocation; it follows therefore that the whole concept of a secondary education system designed to give only a specialized training for particular jobs, say in commerce or industry, is radically incoherent”(Durkheim 1977, 320). Public education needs to develop “intellectual habits and attitudes” and to teach toward “what kinds of thing the public thinking should be directed” (Durkheim 1977, 320). Educating “public thinking” and directing it toward socio-ecological goals requires something like Durkheim’s account of public education. Its heterogeneous character, embracing critical thought and shared traditions, autonomy and community, human diversity and social solidarity, offers a nuanced description of and challenge for progressive democratic institutions more generally. Durkheim held that citizens of democracies need to know about styles of belief and practices other than those of the family or local group. He emphasized the need to accustom students to the unfamiliar in order that they can appreciate otherness and to identify the stranger as a fellow human.

The study of history and literature are especially helpful in developing democratic skills and virtues, according to Durkheim. Studying history, for example, enables students to have an appreciation for the rich complexity of social life, and to develop a critical understanding of their own society’s place in history. The study of history promotes critical thinking because it both discloses to students their society’s distinctive shared understandings and exposes them to unfamiliar ways of life. History, then, plays a critical role in public education: “It is by learning to become familiar with other ideas, other customs, other manners, other political constitutions, other domestic organizations, other moralities and logics than those which he is used to that the student will gain a sense of the richness of life within the bounds of human nature. It is, therefore, only by history that we can give an account of the infinite diversity of the aspects which human nature can take on” (Durkheim 1938, 208–09).

Awareness of such diversity is an essential aspect of public education, because it thwarts the desire to designate a parochial vision as universal and then impose it on all humanity. Literature also figured importantly in Durkheim’s approach to public education, and for many of the same reasons. General and abstract talk about the practices and hopes of a people will not make a vivid impression on students. Thick descriptions are required, and literature can deliver these. The detail found in literature allows the student “to touch [the manners, ideas, and institutions of a people] with his own hands,” to “see them alive” (Durkheim 1977, 332). The state, then, has an active role to play in education. Since education is crucial to the common life of a nation, the state must educate citizens in the ways and practices that sustain flourishing democracies.

A Durkheimian environmental social theory would study and support forms of public education that promote an eco-democracy, a democracy committed to justice among humans but also inclusive of the more-than-human. History and literature, among other subjects, would vividly reveal to students the interconnection between people and place but also the powerful otherness and agency of the more-than-human, thereby honoring and respecting the more-than-human. Just as Durkheim understood public education as a means to teach about diversity among humans, a public eco-education would teach students how more-than-human species and entities are distinctive in their own ways. Students, then, would come to understand that humans and the more-than-human are intimately connected, but difference and “otherness” are to be respected. Such pressing challenges as environmental racism and the climate change catastrophe must be addressed with the formal institutions of the state, including public education. These urgent matters cannot be left alone to private secondary groups, corporations, or other non-governmental entities (though they surely have a role to play). Nonetheless, in addition to state agencies, the second prong of a Durkheimian environmental social theory—the bolstering of cultural matrixes—must also be pursued for sake of advancing a public eco-education. In addition to formal educational institutions, Durkheim insisted that education takes place everywhere, not only in the classroom. Educational influences are “always present” and are usually implicit: “There is no period in social life . . . [not] even a moment in the day when the young generations . . . are not receiving from some educational influence” (Durkheim 1956, 91).A Durkheimian environmental social theory, then, would be attentive to implicit forms of education that would further socio-ecological ideals, beliefs, and goals.

This section has mostly focused on the institutions and cultures of the democratic *nation-state*. Yet it is important to note that Durkheim was both heartened and troubled by *international* institutions and *global* socio-economic forces. He was troubled by those global trends that fostered economic injustice and that divided and alienated world populations. Yet he also thought he glimpsed the emergence of an international spirit committed to furthering various forms of social justice. However, Durkheim held that if global justice is to be achieved, then nation-states and local communities need to jointly cultivate in their members a commitment to achieving various global ethical goals. Hence Durkheim claimed that the way to advance global justice is for “each State to have as its chief aim, not to expand, or to lengthen its borders, but to set its own house in order and to make the widest appeal to its members for a moral life on an ever higher level . . . . If the State had no other purpose than making men of its citizens, in the widest sense of the term, then civic duties would be only a particular form of the general obligations of humanity” (Durkheim 1992, 74). In a Durkheimian environmental social theory, then, planetary ecological justice would not advocate for the end of the nation-state, but rather it would work for *just* nation-states, and just states would cultivate sufficient solidarity to work jointly toward the common aims of socio-ecological justice at the local, national, and global levels.

II. *Durkheim and Anthropocentricism*

In this briefer Part II, I review the claim that Durkheim’s work neglected the more-than-human and led sociology down a vicious anthropocentric path. This concise review will refer to Durkheim’s notion of social facts, morphology, homo duplex, andtotemic kinship relations. I show that while Durkheim’s social theory did place a premium on human-centered phenomenon and thereby furthered anthropocentricism, it also pushed against anthropocentrism in some important ways.

The initial critique of Durkheim’s anthropocentricism was made by William Catton Jr. and Riley Dunlap in the late 1970s, yet their critique was in passing and therefore underdeveloped (though William Catton Jr. brought more nuance to the critique in a subsequent chapter titled, “Has the Durkheim Legacy Misled Sociology?” 2002). Catton Jr. and Dunlap claimed that for sociology to embrace the “New Environmental Paradigm”—and shed its “Human Exceptionalism Paradigm”—“it was necessary to rethink the traditional Durkheimian norm of sociological purity, i.e., that social facts can be explained *only* by linking them to other *social* facts” (Catton Jr. and Dunlap 1978, 44; emphasis in original). Their claim, then, is that Durkheim’s concept of social facts refers exclusively to human social life, isolated from any connection to the more-than-human world. This, in turn, led sociology to neglect human entanglement with non-humans and human embeddedness in natural ecosystems.

In response to this charge, Eugene Rosa and Lauren Richter successfully argue that “Durkheim’s idea of ‘social facts’ was far richer, more nuanced, and more mindful of biological and other environmental factors than typically recognized in the sociology literature. We conclude that it might profit scholars to re-visit Durkheim, not as the party guilty for dismissing the environment, but as a foundation for understanding the dynamics between human and environmental systems” (Rosa and Richter 2008, 182). [[3]](#endnote-3) Focusing on Durkheim’s inaugural lecture in sociology given at the University of Bordeaux in 1887, Rosa and Richter claim that “Durkheim’s use of social facts does not sustain the charges of anthropocentrism, for he chose the book by Alfred Espinas (from an 1877 dissertation at the University of Paris) on animals, *Les Sociétés Animales*, as the exemplar of the sociological method he wishes to promote. He is explicit about this when he writes, ‘He [Espinas] was the first to have studied social facts in order to make a science of them. . . . His book constitutes the first chapter of *Sociology*’” (Rosa and Richter 2008, 185). After noting the role of biology in Durkheim’s sociology, Rosa and Richter conclude that Durkheim’s “lecture does cast a shadow over the long-standing interpretation by over a century of sociological writings that the adjective *social* [in social facts] was to be taken in its most narrow sense, as referring to elements of human collectivities only. Perhaps the most important lesson is that environmental sociology would profit by revisiting Durkheim . . . as a source for improving our understanding of the mutual shaping of human and natural systems”(Rosa and Richter 2008, 186). Rosa and Richter are not alone in their assessment of the impact of Espinas’s*Les Sociétés Animales.* Brady Brower, for example, writes of Espinas’s advancing“a biologically grounded sociology” and “a view of society that…encompassed both the human and the animal” (Brower 2016, 337 and 338). While Espinas did point to distinctive characteristics of human societies, his overall argument was to challenge the philosophical and “spiritual” dualism that asserted an unbridgeable chasm between human societies and animal societies. It is indeed notable, then, that Durkheim would cite *Les Sociétés Animales* as “the first chapter of Sociology.”

Durkheim’s work on homo duplex in “The Dualism of Human Nature and its Social Condition” has also brought the charge of anthropocentricism to him (Durkheim 1973b). Melanie White has claimed that “To the extent that human nature is dual for Durkheim—both animal and man—so too is the nature of our suffering. We suffer as non-human animals *and* we suffer as human animals” (White 2014, 111; emphasis in original). Animals suffer exclusively from such material conditions as scarcity, environmental degradation, disease, and so on; in contrast, due to their dual nature as both biological creatures and distinctively *human social* creatures, humans suffer from both bio-environmental conditions as well as from (human) social conditions. The upshot of this is that humans are divided creatures, part human, part non-human, and such dividedness—and human suffering in particular—separates us from the more-than-human. In a similar vein, Jeremy A. Ross claims that “At the core of Durkheim’s theory is his concept of the *homo duplex*, an inherent but tentative quality separating humans from all other animals. . . . This profound anthropocentrism becomes significant considering the degree of Durkheim’s influence on the field of sociology and the extent of anthropocentrism in sociology as a whole” (Ross 2017, 18). Whereas White argues that Durkheim sees humans at least in part as “human animals,” Ross claims that “the *homo duplex* is simultaneously a working model of humanity and an anthropocentric, ontological device *to set mankind* *apart from nature*” (Ross 2017, 21; emphasis added).

There are surely merits to both White’s and Ross’s claims that Durkheim’s notion of homo duplex failed to sufficiently describe humans as fully embedded in the natural world and it thereby contributed to aspects of anthropocentrism. However, it is important to note that Durkheim usually went to great lengths to underscore the fundamental position that social ideals and human life more generally are “*of* and *in* nature” (Durkheim 1974, 94; emphasis in original). However, on occasion he did suggest otherwise, and making sense of this ‘otherwise’ is what I will now briefly address.

It is an illusion to maintain that humans are not part of nature, that humans do not necessarily dwell there. Humans are creatures whose home, including social home, is in and of nature. In this view, artistic, scientific, and moral achievements are natural events. They may entail much effort, struggle, and even what some would call “self-sacrifice.” But they do not entail placing the social against or above the natural. And as I said above, this is largely Durkheim’s view. He held that humans act *naturally* when they exhibit human social behavior. Humans are creatures that wither in the absence of social interaction and social education, broadly understood; humans are not naturally equipped with the results of these socio-linguistic activities and caring relations. Moreover, in Durkheim’s view humans need to achieve the social nature that is natural to them, and this achievement requires much effort. And that effort can often mean suppresses some “natural” desires for other naturally produced “social desires.” This division or conflict can be understood as one aspect of Durkheim’s complex notion of homo duplex. The concept does not, however, entail humans divorced from nature.

Indeed, Durkheim’s chief complaint of Rousseau was his fundamental failure “to root social being in nature.” Hence of Rousseau Durkheim wrote: “Therein lies the weakness of the system. While, as we have shown, social life for Rousseau is not contrary to the natural order, it has so little in common with nature that one wonders how it is possible”(Durkheim 1960, 137). Ultimately, Durkheim would place Rousseau in the camp that maintains that there is an unbridgeable gulf between the natural and the social. While I have doubts about Durkheim’s judgment on Rousseau here, the judgement makes Durkheim’s own position clear: there is no abyss between the natural and the social. What, then, are we to make of the apparent nature-social binaries found in “The Dualism of Human Nature”? How are we to interpret homo duplex? Elsewhere I have argued that we interpret the binary, homo duplex, to represent the predictable conflict between public and private activities, and not between social and natural selves (Cladis 2008). By means of the implicit binary in homo duplex, Durkheim was referring to different spheres of being that the individual inhabits, not to different ontological substances or selves that inhabit the individual. My claim is that Durkheim did not present to us a grand metaphysical account of humans caught between natural, innate instincts and social, artificial—and hence painful—social norms. Rather, he presented a more historicist view of humans and their struggles in various spheres of being, but none of these spheres can be facilely described as “natural” as opposed to “social.”

This is not to suggest that Durkheim did not consider human sociability to be distinctive. He did. But such sociability did not lift humans *outside* of nature. Moreover, human *distinctiveness* does not necessarily entail human *anthropocentricism*. The socio-linguistic capacities of the human animal *are* distinctive, even as non-human animals possess their own distinctive capacities (e.g., the eagle’s flight, the electric eel’s 800-volt shock, or mountain stone wētā’s ability to freeze down to 10°C). And non-human animals, of course, possess some socio-linguistic capacities in their own manner, as Durkheim himself recognized. So, while Durkheim often emphasized how humans are distinctive from non-human animals, he nonetheless also acknowledged relatedness between humans and non-human animals, as in this remarkable claim: “The animal is a member of the clan just as *the man who bears his name is of the animal species*” (Durkheim 1985, 112; emphasis added). This brings me to totemism, the final topic pertaining to evaluating the charge of anthropocentricism against Durkheim.

Robert Seyfert has convincingly argued that Durkheim’s social theory on totemism in *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* powerfully describes and explains the radical identification between humans and non-humans in various cultures. Durkheim’s work on totemism, Seyfert demonstrates, helps us today as we seek to address how to relate to and treat non-human others. Durkheim’s theory of totemism, in Seyfert’s view, was not a *symbolic hypothesis* but a *practice-oriented* theory, and hence Durkheim was not simply claiming that humans impose a symbolic interpretation on totemic animals or plants, but rather that humans and totemic animals and plants literarily—“consubstantially”—become, within the totemic system, the same species. As Durkheim claimed, “Since man himself belongs to the sacred world, he does not worship the animals or plants whose name he bears the way another might worship his god. Relations between a man and his totem are rather those of *two beings who are clearly on the same level and of equal value*” (Durkheim 2001, 107; emphasis added). Again, such identification between humans and non-humans is not mere symbolic: “They form solidary systems in which both humans as well as nonhumans can become equal members of the group. The relation is substantial and vital. . . . This is a substantial or ontological identity, not an imaginary one” (Seyfert 2014, 321).

We find, then, at the heart of Durkheim’s mature work, *The* *Elementary Forms*, and at the heart of that book—whose French subtitle is *le système totémique en Australie*—a powerful social theory that advances the relatedness of humans and totemic non-humans. This should cast doubt on the claim that Durkheim’s work is entirely and inherently anthropocentric. But more than that, Durkheim has provided us with a language and approach to conceive of and forge solidarity between humans and non-humans. Of course, it is doubtful that totemism ever existed as Durkheim understood it—a primitive, universal institution marked invariably by the totemic emblem, totemic taboos, and exogamy. Nonetheless, totemism as an ideal type, to employ Weber’s term, allowed Durkheim to construct a highly original and useful religious sociology that can contribute today to an environmental social theory that seeks to advance ecological solidarity.

III. *Conclusion: Durkheim (for) Today*

I began this chapter noting that Durkheim was no John Muir. The more-than-human was neither a special topic of his investigations nor a central concern to his ethical commitments. His work, in many ways, reflected the anthropocentricism of modern Western sensibilities, and those sensibilities have shaped sociology more generally. Still, as we have now seen, aspects of Durkheim’s scholarship included the more-than-human and even worked against anthropocentricism. More importantly, he provided theoretical approaches, concepts, and tools that can be employed to construct a robust Durkheimian environmental social theory.

Employing Durkheim’s work to address contemporary environmental crises and concerns is supported by the socio-critical spirit that animated Durkheim himself. Throughout his career, he wore the hat of the social critic. His work was normative through and through. It is impossible to separate his efforts to found sociology from his hope and belief that the new field would do its part to promote such aims as social and economic justice. Durkheim was a Dreyfusard throughout his life. By that I mean he strove to advance the liberatory ideals of the French Revolution. Supporting theThird Republic, as he did, was tantamount to seeking to reform France’s institutions along the lines of progressive democracy. He opposed the restoration of monarchy, the political power of the Roman Catholic Church, and the licensed socio-political advantages of the aristocracy. He championed social and economic reforms, arguing, for example, for the establishment of just occupational and union groups, the right to employment, and the abolition of inherited wealth. He abhorred nationalism and, at the same time, espoused a robust challenge to unbridled economic liberalism. We know of his opposition to Action Française and other proto-fascist groups, and of his founding membership in Ligue pour la Défense des Droits de l’Homme. The Nazis themselves attested to Durkheim’s opposition to fascism by destroying his papers during the occupation.

Given the depth of his progressive political and ethical commitments in his personal and professional life, it is easy to imagine Durkheim today addressing such topics as racism, patriarchy, homo- and transphobia, neo-fascism, and environmental justice and climate change. Yes, Durkheim would have encouraged us to extend his scholarship to address today’s pressing issues. But such speculation on what Durkheim would do is perhaps not of great importance. What is important is to recognize and employ his work for the sake of constructing an environmental social theory that seeks to theorize, imagine, and work toward a socially just and ecologically sustainable planet for both human and more-than-human communities.

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1. *Notes*

   This more capacious view of the sacred—a sacred that pertains not only to humans but to more-than-human forms of life—is informed by Euro-American perspectives but especially by various Indigenous perspectives. In a personal communique with Raquel Weiss, she noted that “this movement toward sacralizing other forms of life can be taken as a sociological self-critic, acknowledging ethical wisdom coming also from non-European contexts—a dynamic that changes the sacred by broadening it in the encounter with other normative sources” (personal communique, December 5, 2024). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. For a fuller treatment of these two kinds of socio-ethical pluralisms—a plurality of morals and moral pluralism—see Cladis, 2005. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. I should note that William Catton Jr. himself later claimed that Durkheim’s emphasis on such morphological factors as population density, scare resources, and modes of transportation “actually laid some foundations useful for an environmental sociology” (Catton Jr. 2002, 92). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)