



Classical Sociological Theory and Foundations of American Sociology

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I. EXTRA: Review of Suicide by Havelock Ellis

NOTE ON SOURCE: This is taken from a contemporary review of *Suicide*, by the well-known and controversial sexuality studies scholar, Havelock Ellis. It was published in the journal *Mind* (volume 7, issue 26) in April of 1898.

Introduction – Why this is important and what to look for

Ellis' review is worthwhile to read because it demonstrates how Durkheim's sociological analysis was critically received by his contemporaries. Analyzing suicide as a social fact was quite a novel proposition, and Ellis is not wholly convinced of its value, as this review makes clear.

REVIEW

There is room for a new study of suicide. Morselli's book, which must still be regarded as the most comprehensive and on the whole the most scientific manual on the subject, is now nearly twenty years old, and is not only out of date but disfigured by many hasty generalizations—which more recent writers have shown to be unfounded. It can scarcely be said, however, that Professor Durkheim has replaced Morselli's manual. Although, with the assistance of the French Minister of Justice and old pupils of his own, he has prepared new maps and summarized the unpublished data of 26,000 suicides, the Bordeaux professor has for the most part been content to argue on old data, and has not brought his statistics up to date, even when the official publications of various countries would easily have enabled him to do so. Moreover, it can scarcely be said that the author takes any special interest in his subject except in so far as it expresses tendencies in the social organism, and consequently various aspects of suicide are passed over lightly or altogether ignored.

It is fairly clear, however, that Prof. Durkheim himself would not wish his book to be regarded as a complete manual of the subject. By calling it “a sociological study” he admits the bias which affects it throughout. The book is, indeed, not so much a study of suicide as a study of sociological method and, more especially, an illustration of the author's philosophy of society.

In the Preface this special object of the book is frankly set forth, and it may be briefly recapitulated for those who are not acquainted with the author's previous works. Sociology, he asserts, must be made something more than a mere form of literary philosophy; it must interrogate the auxiliary studies of history, ethnography and statistics; it must ascertain laws. The special value of the study of suicide is that it enables us easily to ascertain such laws, and so to demonstrate better than by mere argument the possibility of sociology. It

enables us, he thinks, to establish a certain number of propositions concerning marriage, widowhood, the family, religion, etc., which teach what the ordinary theories of moralists are unable to teach; it even gives us some indications concerning “the causes of the general discomfort from which European societies are at present suffering, and concerning the remedies which may mitigate them.” Further, it is not only the value of sociology in general, but more especially the value of Professor Durkheim’s sociology, which this study is to affirm. And for Professor Durkheim society is strictly an organism; “the individual is dominated by a moral reality which goes beyond him: the collective reality.” Thus, he regards sociology as dealing with “realities as definite and as resistant as those the psychologist or the biologist deals with.” As he elsewhere (p. 350) states it, “individuals by uniting form a psychic being of a new species, and which consequently possesses its own manner of thinking and feeling.” That statement is the essence of Professor Durkheim’s sociological doctrine.

The volume consists of an introduction, in which suicide is defined and its relationship to sociology explained, and of three books. Book I deals critically with the alleged extra-social factors of suicide, i.e., with psychopathic conditions, heredity, cosmic influences and imitation. Chapter 2 deals with the question of race and heredity as a factor of suicide. The author here subjects to severe criticism the arguments of Morselli, Wagner and Oettingen that every race has its own suicide-rate, and gives reasons in support of his own contention that if, for instance, the Germans commit suicide oftener than other peoples, the reason is to be found not in race but in civilization.

Having thus attempted to put aside, or minimize, the extra-social factors of suicide, in Book 2 Professor Durkheim proceeds to discuss the social causes and the sociological types of suicide. The three main sociological types of suicide he terms egoistic, altruistic and anomic.

By egoistic suicide is meant that particular type of suicide which is the result of extreme individualism, and the chapters devoted to it are mainly a discussion of the influence of religion, education, the family, etc., in which it is shown that all the facts indicate that every loosening of social or domestic bonds increases the tendency to suicide. On the whole the author concludes that suicide varies in inverse ratio with the degree of integration of religious, domestic and political society.

Altruistic suicide—a type chiefly prevalent in primitive societies, and of which the suttee may be taken as an example—is more briefly treated. It is the characteristic of altruistic suicide to be, regarded not as a right but as a duty, and its significance at the present day is small.

A more important form of suicide is that which the author terms *anomic*, by which he means the suicides produced by any sudden social shock or disturbance, such as that due to economic disasters. Men commit egoistic suicide because they see no further reason for living, altruistic suicide because the reason for living seems to them to lie outside life itself, anomic suicide because they are suffering from a disturbance of their activity.

Then the author turns to another form of suicide with which he had already dealt to some extent under the head of egoistic suicide (thus revealing a weakness in his classification)—domestic suicides. He here deals with the suicides due to divorce, and further develops in detail the remarkable and interesting point already brought out, that marriage is a greater protection to men than to women. Where divorce does not exist, or where it has only lately been established, women contribute in larger proportion to the suicides of the

married than to those of the celibate; the more prevalent divorce becomes, the more favorable marriage is for women. The development of divorce involves an improvement in the moral situation of women, and it is the divorced man who is more exposed to suicide:

“We thus reach a conclusion far removed from the current idea regarding the part played by marriage. It is regarded as an institution established for the benefit of the wife, in order to protect her weakness against masculine caprices. In reality, whatever may have been the historic causes which led man to impose this restriction on himself, it is he who has profited by it. The liberty which he has thus renounced could only have been a source of torment to him. Woman had not the same reasons for abandoning it, and in this respect, we may say that, in submitting to the same rule, it is she who has made a sacrifice” (p. 311).

In Book 3, the author gathers together his arguments, further expounds his general conception of society as a group of collective tendencies with an existence of its own as real as the cosmic forces, discusses the relation of suicide to criminality, and presents the practical consequences of his study. Professor Durkheim has no important suggestion to make in aid of the prevention of suicide; he relies mainly on his favorite panacea of co-operative associations of workers, professional groups or corporations developed on a new basis and made a definite and recognized organ of daily life. On the whole this is a work which every subsequent writer on suicide must seriously reckon with, while at the same time it confirms Professor Durkheim's position as an original and systematic investigator into social problems.

Questions for Contemplation and Discussion

1. According to Ellis, what is Durkheim's conception of society?
2. In the final paragraph, Ellis claims that Durkheim doesn't provide any "important suggestions" to aid in preventing suicide, other than his "favorite panacea." What is this favorite panacea? How would this prevent suicide?
3. What can we learn about the reception of Durkheim's ideas at the time of his writing?