

DURKHEIM'S NOTION OF SOCIAL FACT

In what follows, I wish to present a critical analysis of Emile Durkheim's views on social facts. Durkheim, is regarded as one of the profound thinkers in Sociology. If Augustus Comte is credited with the honour of having created the discipline of sociology. Durkheim is credited with the honour of making it a positive and scientific discipline having a distinct subject matter and method of its own.

What do sociologists study? Do sociologists study individuals or society? According to Durkheim, sociologists study social facts. But now the question is: How to understand the notion of social fact?

Before we answer the question what is a social fact it is imperative on us to explicate the concept of fact. Fact is usually distinguished from things and events. Things are amenable to perception. In short, we perceive things and objects. But can it be said that facts are amenable to perception? Perhaps not. The early Wittgenstein and Russell argued that there are facts. Russell even went to the extent of advocating the existence of negative facts. But neither positive nor negative facts are amenable to observation. Facts emerge only when we begin to talk or think about things. If there were no speech and thought, there would be no facts. In other words, there is a kind of dependence between fact and speech. But are facts a kind of things? In what sense do facts emerge out of our speech, thought and description? In answer to this question, it can be said that speech, does not give rise to facts as a particular cause gives rise to a particular effect. Speech and fact are simultaneous in origin. Communication and understanding presuppose something stable and persistent and this stable element in speech and communication is meaning. In short, that which is spoken, communicated or thought of is the meaning of fact. A certain type of

meaning or fact is known as proposition. Seen in this light, facts turn out to be meanings and meanings are different from things. In this sense only meanings or facts enjoy a Platonic status. Meanings and facts are interchangeable.

Durkheim in his attempt to protect the autonomy and identity of sociology, distinguishes it from psychology. His major assumption is that psychology studies the psychic states of men either at individual or at the collective level. The psychic states being mental, are subjective and so are not persistent. Further, these psychic states, including the collective sentiments, are the effects of social facts.

Far from being product of the will, they determine it from without. They are like molds in which our actions are inevitably shaped.¹

Further, he says :

The determining cause of a social fact should be sought among the social facts preceding it and not among the states of the individual consciousness.²

In the course of these lines Durkheim wishes to detach and delink social facts from individual psychic states. He has not given any argument in support of his thesis. Further, the existence of social fact independent of any individual is inconceivable. It is rather the case that only after the individual human beings appear on the surface of the earth, the so called social facts emerge. Durkheim admits that social facts are coeval with individuals. In a way, the emergence of individual and social facts is simultaneous. He says :

Indeed social things are actualized only through men; they are a product of human activity.³

From the context, it appears that Durkheim is not so much concerned with tracing out the chronology of the social fact as he is keen to distinguish between individual consciousness and social fact. It is true that all thoughts and actions begin with particular individuals but they (thoughts and actions) do not remain confined to them at all. In short, they get socialised and collectivised. This type of collectivisation of events does not take place in nature at all. By being *socialized* and *collectivised*, actions and thoughts acquire a kind of autonomous

status and in their turn, tend to determine individual thoughts and actions. At a certain stage, the social facts cannot be thought of as being identical with the sum totality of the individual actions. Durkheim says :

A whole is not identical with the sum of its parts. It is something different and its properties differ from those of its component parts.⁴

If it is being argued that social facts are not modified by the individual thoughts and actions at all then it can be pointed out that Durkheim is trying to create a fictional entity in the name of social fact. It is true that sometimes a kind of social fact determines the individual psyche but at the same time it is equally true that on certain occasions, the individual transcends and modifies the so called social facts; nay, even replaces one order of social fact by another. Durkheim seems to have overlooked this fact. Further, in this connection he makes a very tall claim in his remark :

When the individual has been eliminated society alone remains.⁵

How and in what sense does the society continue to exist even if the individuals are eliminated? Surely the ideas and thoughts of a society survive the death and destruction of individuals but only in a fictional sense. This is because of the desire to treat society as basic and primary over the individuals that Durkheim advocates a kind of ethereal existence for it. Further, he treats society and social facts as a body of authority and knowledge which can be understood without reference to individuals. This view is based upon the presumption that knowledge and fact have a contextless existence. To cling to it, is to cling to the rationalist hangover. On the other hand, nothing is knowledge or fact unless it is recognised. The world might exist even if there is nobody to know it. In fact, an unknown planet might exist; nobody may be aware of it. But no knowledge and fact can be said to be there without being known and recognised. The idea of unknown and unrecognised fact is a contradiction in terms. Durkheim tried his best to make sociology an empirical science on par with physics, chemistry and biology but he could not free himself from certain apriori assumptions about knowledge, society and fact.

Social facts along with society have been treated by Durkheim as having a kind of coercive power over the individual. In fact, it

is argued that society exercises a kind of moral authority over the individual. In this sense, society rules over the individuals through its moral code, religion, government and other forms of social organisations. Durkheim says :

We have shown that the source of all that is obligatory is outside the individual.⁶

Religion has also been conceived by Durkheim in the similar manner. It is the society that creates morality and religion and through these it controls and restrains the individuals. He says:

Religion is, in a word, the system of symbols by means of which society becomes conscious of itself; it is the characteristic way of thinking of collective existence.⁷

By placing morality and religion outside the individual, Durkheim again falls back on the so called independent and impersonal social facts. It is true that morality and religion have a kind of coercive power but what is their source? Can it be said that their source is not the human individual? On the other hand, the source of all thought and action including religion and morality is the human individual. It is the human individual who not only creates morality and religion but also is guided by it. At times, he even transcends, modifies and replaces one order of morality and religion by another. This is how major social and cultural changes take place from time to time. Durkheim tends to endow social facts with some kind of self-abiding force. If his view is accepted, social change and dynamism cannot be explained at all.

If social facts are all-pervasive and they have a kind of impersonal force then the source of social change, if any, will lie with these facts alone and not with the individual. But as a matter of fact most of the time, it is the charismatic leadership that initiates social change. In Durkheim's scheme of things, there is no scope for exogenous type of social change. In short, for him, all changes are endogenous. Further, by accepting social facts as supreme over the individual, Durkheim tends to advocate a kind of social determinism. If social facts are coercive and they do not owe their origin to the individuals, then it is these social facts which act as the determinants of everything that take place in society. To argue in this manner is to advocate a kind of deterministic mode.

Further, morality and religion cannot be said to belong to the realm of facts. That is to say, the language of religion and morality is not the language of fact. The categories of truth and falsity cannot be applied to it. The language of morals belongs to a normative order and the language of religion is a mixture of parable, myth and values. Therefore, to treat morality and religion at par with facts is to misconstrue their meaning and significance. If the logical positivists underplayed the significance of morality and religion, Durkheim has overplayed their significance. The coercive nature of morality and religion does not follow from their being at par with facts but from the fact that any violation of moral rules and religious rituals calls for a kind of social censure. As a matter of fact, precisely because of these reasons, morality and religion seem to be exercising a type of coercive force on individuals. Morality as a system of values has been created by men. An ethical code is different from a mere conjunction of moral injunctions of the form 'do's and 'donot's. In short, an ethical code or moral system is an integrated one in the sense that it contains its justification including the world view of the group concerned. Similar is the case with religions. Seen in this light, morality and religion turn out to be a system of symbols and meanings, which are being created and recreated since the dawn of civilization. Durkheim seems to be treating symbols and meanings as facts which can be either true or false. On the other hand, it is the individuals who not only control but also create the so called social facts. But once the symbols and meanings are created they do not remain at the level of its creator i.e., the agent. In fact, it tends to acquire a social and objective character.

How do we know the social facts? Are they amenable to ordinary observation and perception or they are known through a kind of intellectual reflection? Durkheim says :

We cannot doubt their existence since we perceive it simultaneously with our own.⁶

It is argued that knowledge of our self and knowledge of social fact are simultaneous. That is to say, self knowledge involves the knowledge of social facts. Durkheim treats self as a kind of society. He attaches a kind of Cartesian indubitability to the knowledge of social facts. According to Durkheim, everything that goes in the name of the individual is really society in disguise. That is to say, for him, the individual is a replica of society and society incarnates in individuals.

It is not clear what does Durkheim mean by 'perception of the self'? Is the individual nothing but a replica of the society in the sense that individual freedom and liberty are mere myths? By equating the individual self with society, Durkheim is forced to accept the view that society is prior to individuals. But the context yields altogether a different picture. It is this : Society and individuals mutually influence one another. This fact cannot be denied. But then the meaning of 'mutual influence' is to be explicated. When it is said that society and individuals influence one another it does not mean that society and individuals are a kind of physical objects and their mutual influence is to be understood in terms of causal interaction. Rather, the mutual interaction, if any is to be understood in the sense of interchange of meanings. If society is understood as a concatenation or a system of meanings it makes its presence felt on the individuals and the individuals in their turn, sometimes not only transcend the meaning system but replace one system by another.

Durkheim argues that if one wishes to discover social facts one has to undergo a special type of sociological training. Further, he maintains that the objective of education is to gradually instill the social facts into the mind of students. He says :

All education is a continuous effort to impose on the child ways of seeing, feeling and acting which he could not have arrived at spontaneously.⁹

Durkheim does not spell out the nature of the sociological training which could help men in discovery of social facts. Given the nature of social facts, they can neither be perceived nor observed. Therefore, the only method of teaching social facts to students is to brainwash them. In his attempt to uphold the supremacy of social fact, Durkheim envisages education as a process of imposing ideas on the pupils.

Further, Durkheim postulates a particular objective of education and then argues that education is an attempt to instill social facts. He seems to ignore 'spontaneity' that is very important in learning and teaching. If the objective of education is to brainwash, then accordingly, the educators have to instill corresponding values, norms and attitudes into the mind of their pupils. But conceptually, education and brain

washing are opposite concepts. Spontaneity and individual freedom are built into the concept of education and Durkheim rejects them. The desire to make sociology an independent and autonomous discipline compels him to discover social facts in all aspects of life including the field of education.

Durkheim sometimes seeks to prove the existence of social fact by arguing as follows: It so happens that sometimes a group of absolutely innocent and inoffensive people get together and indulge in inconceivable violence and atrocities. This proves that a particular type of social fact is responsible for igniting the innocent mass of people to violent action. But this argument misconstrues the actual situation. It is not the presence of impersonal social facts that goad innocent men to violent action. Durkheim ignores the obvious fact that the behaviour of individuals in isolation is different from that of individuals in a crowd. In short, individuals behave differently on different situations and it is not because of the presence of certain social fact but because of the fact that a crowd is guided, by and large, by its own psychology.

The upbringing of children is sometimes cited as an evidence in support of the existence of social fact. Durkheim is inclined to argue that upbringing of children involves inculcation of social facts. Here, too, he goes wrong. He overlooks various aspects of upbringing. Further his obsession with mechanistic concept of mind and society has compelled him to explicate the concept of education and upbringing in such a fashion. He seeks to bring sociology at par with other positive sciences like physics and chemistry but does not take sufficient care to distinguish between what is a fact and what is a fiction. The so called social fact is a logical construction- a fiction that man creates in interaction with others. But the moment we treat these social facts as the solid bed rock of human society, confusions begin to ensue.

Regarding the status of social fact, Durkheim appears ambivalent. On the one hand, he claims that social facts are uncreated; on the other hand, he maintains that they (social facts) are created through individual actions. Further, in this connection, he maintains that social facts exist in form of ideas in the minds of individuals. Contrarily, he also maintains that the locus of the social fact is no other than human society.

Now the question is : How to understand these statements of Durkheim's? Is it really the case that sociology is an autonomous discipline? Are social facts the prerogatives of sociologist only? We wish to point out that no social science, either history or economics, study the human individual in its physical aspect. In short, all social sciences, to begin with, study social actions and social actions are meaning-impregnated. The meaning dimension of social action makes it symbolic in nature and distinguishes it from natural events. This aspect of social action has not been recognised by Durkheim. Seen in this light, not only sociology but all social sciences study social facts. Therefore, it is not appropriate to say that sociology is an autonomous discipline because it studies social facts.

It is true that if there are no individuals there can be no society. In fact, individuals are both causally and logically required to account for society. Further, with the death and disappearance of some individuals, society cannot be said to disappear. Therefore, individuals cannot be regarded as constituting the substratum of social fact. If at all there is a substratum of the social fact, it is none other than the society. If society is defined as the totality of what man has including the system of knowledge, beliefs, values and norms then it becomes indistinguishable from the so called social facts. Durkheim should have used society and social fact interchangeably but he does not do that. If society and social facts are construed as a system of symbols and meanings, they cannot be adequately and exhaustively studied in terms of cause and effect. The failure to understand this aspect of social fact has compelled Durkheim to fictionalize social facts into things and objects. Once the symbols and meanings are created, they become persistent to a very great degree. Though the so called meanings and symbols are created by men yet in their turn, they continue to influence man almost unceasingly. This is the implication of what Durkheim means by saying that the social institutions and facts, therefore, are not created by men. They are received from the previous generation. Seen in this light, it can be said that man is not so much influenced by the physical environment as he is by the so called social environment. But Durkheim does not take note of the fact that there is constant interaction between man and the so called social facts or meanings. Man creates the social facts or meanings and the meanings in their turn mould man. This constant interaction between man and society accounts for social change and dynamism.

To conclude, social facts as envisaged by Durkheim are a kind of meanings. These meanings are relatively permanent. To study society means to study these meanings. Durkheim, because of his positivistic bias, misconstrued these meanings as social facts.

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