

Finding a role for Durkheim in Contemporary Moral Theory

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Whatever happened to Emile Durkheim's ideas about moral education, indeed? Dave Boote wants us to reconsider the importance and fruitfulness of Durkheim's ideas for guiding educational thought and action in our pluralistic, rapidly changing society. As motivation for this reconsideration, Boote offers a rich yet concise summary of Durkheim's moral education theory in relation both to Durkheim's larger opus and to the social context in which Durkheim wrote.

Boote wants to rescue Durkheim from the all-too-common tendency to reduce Durkheim to a one-sided social conservative who values the State over the individual and whose moral education ideas are limited to the use of ritual and persuasion to create an emotional attachment in children to the existing social order. As an antidote to this tendency, Boote offers us Durkheim's concept of autonomy, and shows that Durkheim emphasizes creating emotional attachment to the State because this is the surest foundation for later self-creation and personal growth. In other words, emotional attachment to the State—and thereby to larger social purposes—is critical for becoming an autonomous moral agent.

According to Boote, Durkheim aims for a middle ground between liberal/utilitarian and conservative/deontological theories. He emphasizes the importance of both emotion and rationality in moral growth. The relationship between freedom and submission in social order is not simply oppositional, but rather enabling of autonomy in a seemingly paradoxical way. Durkheim believes that contemporary social change requires a nuanced approach to moral education, in which individuals are prepared to respond to social change in ways that benefit not only themselves but the larger society.

As a student of John Dewey's moral philosophy, I am struck by how similar the views Boote attributes to Durkheim are to Dewey's mature ethical views, or for that matter to the views of the later Dewey's primary philosophical mentor, Aristotle. For example, Aristotle also believed in the importance of creating an emotional attachment to social norms in young people as a way of helping them to control their personal desires and impulses, not to simply create obedience but to prepare them for the moral deliberation that comes with moral maturity. Observing that, I wonder why a scholar of Aristotle or Dewey, or anyone else with a position that is fairly consistent with the views that Boote attributes to Durkheim, would decide to turn back especially to Durkheim. Is there anything about Durkheim's views that are unique, or especially relevant to our contemporary educational situation, beyond what can be found in Dewey, Aristotle, or others?

There is one concept in Boote's essay that might lead me to put down my Dewey, and that is the concept of "anomie." According to Boote, "anomic people transgress social mores because they do not understand social mores and are not sufficiently integrated into society for other people to correct their actions." Thus,

society is “unable to exert proper control on their desires, allowing desires and resources to become mismatched.” This condition stems from the unstable life that many people lead in modern society, and from a failure of social institutions—including schools—to both inculcate emotional attachment to the State and prepare individuals to respond to changing conditions.

While Boote’s essay suggests that Durkheim’s theory of moral education has been largely ignored by people interested in moral education, I think history proves otherwise. Looking specifically at the concept of “anomie” in the late twentieth century, I think we can see an enormous theoretical impact. From the late 1950s through the early 1980s—before our nation as a whole put aside concern with individual growth in favor of a focus on the collective results of schooling as measured by standardized tests—whole legions of philosophers, psychologists, sociologists, and educators devoted themselves to the study of why our society was consistently producing sizable minorities of young people who were disaffected with and alienated from the larger social order, that is, large numbers of anomic individuals. This body of what might be called the alienation research produced one quite useful concept that remains at the forefront of contemporary educational research: the concept that some young people—due to personal or demographic characteristics—are “at risk” for developing drug abuse problems or dropping out of school later. Most prevention programs in existence today—and certainly all or most federally funded programs—use the concept of “at risk” youth as their core theoretical construct. This, I would claim, is a tribute to Durkheim’s legacy, and one that he (and those who study him like Boote) can be proud of.

The primary role of the “at risk” construct is to say that while most kids (we can think of them as the “normal” kids) will grow up to be relatively law-abiding, relatively content members of the larger society—who contribute as much as they take away from the common good—a small percentage will never develop the personal attachments or social constraints necessary to keep desire in check relative to resources. While no one can say for sure which kids will turn out okay and which ones will stray outside social norms, through empirical analysis we can predict pretty well which kids are most likely to stray, and once we have identified them—or so the “at risk” theory goes—we can provide compensatory services or targeted educational programs to help them to remain in school or to become drug free. The implication is that while most kids will do just fine without a lot of fussing about their emotional attachments to society, or their understanding of the value of social norms, other kids—the “at risk ones”—need special attention to “prevent” problems caused by anomie.

In the logic of the educational officials who push these ideas, this approach “works,” because fewer “at risk” kids who participate in prevention programs will go on to use drugs or to drop out of school than those “at risk” kids who do not participate in such programs. This is a classic example of successful educational research: first, a problem was identified (drug use, dropping out); second, a theoretical framework was developed (alienation of youth, based on Durkheim’s concept of “anomie”); third, empirical research identified the causes of the problem

(the so-called “at risk factors”); and finally, interventions were developed, piloted, and proven successful. Now, of course, this “success” has become somewhat of a dogma: drug abuse and drop-out prevention programs now must include evidence that the target populations are “at risk” in order to qualify for federal funding. The transformation of contextual findings into programmatic dogma is not particular to this line of research; nor is it a discredit to Durkheim’s original theory.

However, I do think there is a lesson to be learned in the history of this particular line of research, and it might indicate one reason that Durkheim continues to be so easily caricatured as a conservative. The concept of anomie seems to assume that the problem of moral alienation from the larger society is a problem of the individuals who are so alienated, and not a problem of the larger society. Durkheim’s view is that successful moral education would prevent such anomie, and that in response to changing moral and social conditions, the proper response of a society is to develop programs for the “at risk” youth in order to prevent the personal and social harms that might arise from their alienation from social norms. Just as the concept of “at risk” youth has taken attention away from deeper social issues such as rampant materialism, anti-intellectualism, social conformity, and the deprivileging of aesthetic or spiritual experience in our society’s social life, so does Durkheim’s theory of moral education take attention away from the real problems of the social order, placing the blame for anomie on the failure to adjust the disaffected individuals adequately to the realities of our social life.

The best way to assess the legacy of a thinker such as Durkheim, I think, is not so much to reassert the internal consistency, reasonableness, and even-handedness of the thinker’s opus—as Boote has done in his essay—but rather like a good pragmatist to look at the consequences of the thinker’s views. In the case of Durkheim, those consequences include, I think, a tendency to view the prevalence of anomie in our society not as evidence of larger social ills needing serious attention, but merely as the manifestation of localized failures to properly adjust certain “at risk” youth so that they can be content within a larger social structure that will be more-or-less taken for granted and treated as a given, incontestable “condition” of moral development. And that, if you ask me, is a truly conservative consequence, and one that might lead some to look elsewhere than to Durkheim for useful ideas to deal with contemporary social and educational problems.