

# Durkheim, Wittgenstein and the Norms of Thought

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In their respective fields of philosophy and sociology, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Émile Durkheim are known for having associated two types of norms usually considered to be distinct: social norms and cognitive norms. In effect these two thinkers shared the same idea that the rules which govern the activity of the mind – for examples the laws of logic – are fundamentally linked to those which sub-tend social activity. For Wittgenstein and Durkheim, cognitive norms are thus a type of social norm.

Our objective in this article is to compare the way in which the two thinkers thematise the relationship between social norms and cognitive norms. We will begin by clarifying what we understand by “cognitive norms”. We will then present in turn the analyses directed to these by Durkheim and Wittgenstein. Thirdly, we will attempt to define some of the similarities and differences existing between their approaches to this problem.

## What is a cognitive norm?

The privileged field of application for normative concepts is generally considered to be that of action. Qualifiers such as *well*, *good*, *bad*, *better*, *obligatory*, *authorised*, *responsible*, etc. come naturally to mind when it is a matter of interpreting or evaluating the behaviour of an individual. The custom of reserving the concept of a norm to actions is particularly privileged by sociologists. One of the most well-known definitions of the norm in the social sciences is that of George Homans, as follows:

A norm is a statement made by a member or members of a group [...] that the members ought to behave in a certain way in certain circumstances. (Homans 1961: 46)

This definition, as may be seen, concerns exclusively the norms of actions. For Homans, a norm prescribes the manner in which an individual acts or should act considering the context in which that person finds him- or herself and in terms of the social characteristics that are his or hers.<sup>1</sup>

But a consideration of everyday language reveals that normative concepts apply not only to actions, but equally to thoughts. It is a frequent occurrence for one to say of an inference that it is

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*sound* or *unsound*, of a belief that it is *valid* or otherwise, of a rule that it *permits* or *prohibits* the deduction of a certain proposition, or of a law of logic that it *compels* us to accept such or such a conclusion. As a first approximation then, we may say that the vocabulary of norms is valid both in the field of action as in that of thought.

The idea by which thought may be perceived as a normative activity, and that as such it is grounded in *cognitive norms*, is in reality widespread among epistemologists. Kant was undoubtedly the first philosopher to have systematised the idea by which the content of our mental states – beliefs, desires, ambitions – are governed by norms. Kant held that human thought is essentially conceptual, and for him, concepts took the form of rules. An individual's possession of a concept consequently supposed his acquaintance with the correct conditions for its application, that is, his ability to conform to the norms by which they were subtended.<sup>2</sup>

Gottlob Frege, one of the founders of “analytical” philosophy, also believes that thought is grounded in norms. In his view, the word “true” exercises in logic the same function as the word “good” in ethics and the word “beautiful” in aesthetics (Frege 1999). Frege contends that it behoves logic to set the norms that an individual must respect if one is to think correctly, just as it behoves ethics to set the norms that an individual must respect in order to act appropriately. Thus, if all men are mortal and if Socrates is a man, then I *must* by force of principle deduce that Socrates is mortal. This does not of course mean that all individuals will always conform to all norms of logic. For Frege, logic promulgates “ideal” norms, it does not describe how individuals will reason in actuality.

The existence of cognitive norms nevertheless poses some formidable epistemological problems. The following are three, among many others. The first is quite clearly that of knowing what exactly the norms of thought are. Frege, as we have mentioned, considers that truth is the most fundamental of the cognitive norms, being the equivalent for logic of what good is for ethics and beautiful is for aesthetics. But many other potential cognitive norms exist as well. One might cite coherence, justification, rationality, simplicity, precision, clarity and explicative comprehensiveness to name but a few. Observing such a multiplicity of cognitive norms raises a number of questions: what relationship do these norms have among themselves? Do some automatically exclude others? Are some more fundamental than others? In so saying, is it possible to draw up a taxonomy of cognitive norms? Considered another way, can one imagine a rigorous and exhaustive codification of these norms?

A second problem thrown up by the notion of cognitive norms is that of the relationship they might have with moral norms. I believe that all men are mortal, and that Socrates is a man. Hence I must normally deduce from these premises that Socrates is mortal. But in what sense *must* I arrive at that conclusion? In this particular case, does the verb “must” have the same sense as in the sentence: “You must lend assistance to people in danger”? Is it my responsibility, in the moral sense, to deduce “Socrates is mortal” from “Socrates is a man” and “All men are mortal”? Some authors do consider that cognitive norms are indeed a type of moral norm. This is so of William Clifford (1999) who espouses this thesis in an article with the revealing title of the “Ethics of Belief”. Other authors have a more nuanced conception of the link between these two types of norms. But yet others assert that these two types of norms have no association between them at all.<sup>3</sup>

A third problem associated with cognitive norms is to know to what types of mental states they apply. The mental state most easily susceptible to being regulated by norms is belief. What are to be found on both margins of a sound or unsound inference are beliefs, that is mental states that bear on a portion of reality.<sup>4</sup> But are other mental states, such as intentions or desires, also subject to norms? Certain epistemologists consider that desires carry “satisfaction conditions” (Engel 2001). For example, my desire to drink a glass of water is satisfied *if and only if* I do drink

a glass of water. These conditions all have the appearance of prescribing norms by which the realisation or non-realisation of desires may be judged. Viewed in this way, desires would be subject to norms in the same way as beliefs.

## Durkheim's theory of cognitive norms

It is true that the expression "cognitive norms" is not at all employed by Durkheim. However, the term "norms of thought" (*normes de la pensée*) does appear in a number of places in his work *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Durkheim 1995: 16, hereinafter *Forms*). In this work, Durkheim clearly espouses a normative conception of mental processes. What, following Kant, he calls the "categories of understanding", as well as a certain number of principles of elementary logic – such as the principles of identity and contradiction – exercise in his view a genuine normative pressure on cognitive contents. Thus, says Durkheim:

The necessity with which the categories press themselves upon us [...] is a special sort of moral necessity that is to the intellectual life what [moral] obligation is to the will. (Durkheim 1995: 17)

As we have seen, one of the problems raised by cognitive norms concerns the relationship they have with moral norms. Are the normative constraints that the former impose on mental processes of the same order as those that the latter impose on our actions? Or on the other hand, are they of a different order? In *Forms*, Durkheim replies in the affirmative to this question. In his opinion, there are categories that constrain the "intellectual life" in the same way that moral norms exercise influence over the will, as well as the behaviours that flow from it. A first important indication concerning the Durkheimian conception of mental norms is thus that for the sociologist, these norms constitute a "particular type" of moral norm.

The main problem for which *Forms* aims to propose a solution is that of the origin and nature of categories of understanding. The point of departure for Durkheim's reasoning is located in his challenging of previously proposed solutions to this problem. These were two: on the one hand the *a priori*ism of Kant, on the other the empiricism of Hume. The flaw in *a priori*ism, says Durkheim, is that it does no more than put a label on the problem. To assert that the categories are *a priori* ones amounts to indicating that they are distinct from experience, but in no way does it explain their origin. And while empiricism does have the advantage of offering a causal analysis of category formation, the weakness is that by deriving these categories from individual experience, it fails to provide for two of their fundamental properties: universality and necessity.

The "third way" suggested by Durkheim consists of contending that the categories are in effect social in origin. Like the empiricist approach, Durkheim's solution allows the elaboration of a causal explanation for the formation of the categories. But, in line with *a priori*ism, it nevertheless avoids the problem of the singularity and contingency of these, by having their genesis arise out of a *sui generis* social realm that is distinct from individual experience. From this perspective, cognitive norms are universal and necessary in nature *because* they are social (and not *despite the fact* that they are social). For Durkheim, these norms are thus not only, as has been seen, a type of moral norms, but they are also a type of social norms.

But what does the idea that these categories are of social origin mean? In Durkheim this assertion incorporates two neighbouring yet distinct theses. The first is that the categories are causally generated by social fact. When Durkheim asserts that the concept of time is absorbed into the minds of individuals by the existence of a social organisation of time, or that the concept of space

results from the spatial disposition of the clan around the totem, he is proposing causal explanations. Social categories thus pre-exist cognitive categories and constitute a model template on which these latter are fashioned.

A second thesis espoused by Durkheim concerns not the genesis of the categories but the source of their normativity. One may well grant that the causal origin of the categories lies in the social realm, but once formed these no longer owe anything to the society. Indeed, Durkheim several times suggests in *Forms* that once having emerged, such categories become relatively autonomous with relation to their social foundation (Durkheim 1995: 441). To take an analogous contemporary example, specialists in cognitive science are in general agreement in affirming that the capacity of the human brain to form concepts has a neuronal origin. Despite that, not all will necessarily deduce that the norms subtending these concepts arise strictly from nature. Some consider for example that these norms impose themselves upon us in “rational” fashion and not by virtue of the authority conferred by their biological substrate. The questions of the causal origin of the categories and that of the source of their normativity are thus in principle two distinct ones.

Even though he asserts that the categories are susceptible to becoming autonomous with relation to the society from which they have emerged, Durkheim holds that the source of their normativity is also itself social. According to him, the social realm is thus not only the origin of the categories, but it is also the “locus” from which they draw their normative force. The argument advanced by Durkheim in favour of this thesis is of a functionalist type:

To live [society] requires not only a minimum moral consensus but also a minimum logical consensus that it cannot do without either. Thus, in order to prevent dissidence, society weighs on its members with all its authority. Does a mind seek to free itself from these norms of all thought? Society no longer considers this a human mind in the full sense, and treats it accordingly. This is why it is that when we try, even deep down inside, to get away from these fundamental notions, we feel that we are not fully free; something resists us, from inside and outside ourselves. (Durkheim 1995: 17)

In Durkheim’s view, society is the tribunal which guarantees the application of the norms of thought by individuals. If any one individual should stray from these, it will bring “all its authority” to bear upon that person and in the final instance will deny them their human status.<sup>5</sup> The social world is thus not only the cause of the emergence of the categories, it is equally the guardian of their application throughout social life.

But the idea that cognitive norms find their origin in the social realm brings up a classic problem: that of relativism. Certain commentators, notably the sociologist of science David Bloor (1982), have advanced relativist readings of *Forms*, in particular of the theory of cognitive norms developed therein by Durkheim. The problem is a simple one: if cognitive norms are social in origin, and if societies are structurally and culturally diverse, then cognitive norms should be also. The dependence of cognitive norms on the social realm, far from guaranteeing their universality, would from this point of view imply their relativity.

Durkheim on occasion gives the impression of having anticipated and defused in advance this way of reading his sociology of knowledge. The solution he proposes to the problem of relativism, of which he was fully cognisant, resides in the thesis of the inclusion of society within nature:

[...] even if society is a specific reality, it is not an empire within an empire; it is part of nature and nature’s highest expression. The social realm is a natural realm that differs from others only in its greater complexity. It is impossible that nature, in that which is most fundamental within itself, should be

radically different between one part and another of itself. It is impossible that the fundamental relations that exist between things – precisely those relations that the categories serve to express – should be fundamentally dissimilar in one realm and another. (Durkheim 1995: 17)

Society is an integral part of nature, it constitutes, says Durkheim, its “highest expression”. From this perspective, holding that cognitive norms are of social origin comes to the same as affirming that they arise from one of the “realms” of nature, in effect precisely the social world. For Durkheim, the origin of cognitive norms is thus found in nature because it is found in the social realm. This idea provides a solution to the problem of relativism, for if the organisational modes of societies may diverge, nature, from which each of them is a specific emanation, will guarantee that they do not diverge excessively, that is to say that their differences will not exceed what they have in common.<sup>6</sup>

### Rule following in Wittgenstein

In contemporary epistemology, the problem of the nature of cognitive norms is the object of several different conceptions. One such is the Kantian conception, which places emphasis on the “legislative” character of the link between the categories of understanding and reality. Another is that of Frege, who considers, in Platonic fashion, that cognitive norms exist independently of their perception by human minds. A third potential approach to this problem is that of Wittgenstein and of the tradition initiated by him. The interesting aspect of this approach is that it makes an association between cognitive norms and social norms, and asserts that the former constitute a particular case of the latter.

Wittgenstein’s conception of cognitive norms is inscribed within the framework of the philosopher’s reflection on the notion of a rule, that is, on what is implied by the fact of following a rule. Wittgenstein addresses this problem in particular in paragraphs 138 to 242 of his *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein 1983). The question of knowing what might be supposed from obedience to a rule has been the object of innumerable epistemological debates throughout the second half of the 20th century. It echoes another problematic, that of “private language”, which consists of contemplating whether language can be private at all, or whether it is of necessity public, being social.

According to some of his interpreters, most prominently Saul Kripke (1996), Wittgenstein is the author of a “sceptical paradox” concerning the nature of norms.<sup>7</sup> Imagine that I am following a rule designated “addition”, which also is the designation for the sign “+”. Throughout my whole life, I have applied this rule for only a finite number of operations. It goes without saying that I cannot have carried out the total number of possible additions, since they are by definition infinite. Yet, even if I have applied the addition rule to only a finite number of cases, I know that it is valid for an indefinite number of occurrences. It is in this that the addition rule is effectively a rule: if I have assimilated that operation I am thought to be capable of applying it to any number of cases yet to be taken up.

Let us imagine I have been asked to carry out the addition “68 + 57”. But let us suppose, for the sake of hypothesis, that I have never accomplished this operation before, and that up till now I have never added numbers higher than 57. I carry out the addition and I get “125”. This result is correct. But now let’s imagine that I come across a sceptical philosopher who tells me that I have made a mistake. This sceptic claims that the rule that I applied to adding 68 and 57 is not the same as the one I had used up until then for numbers less than 57. He adds that if I had used the same rule as before, the result obtained would not have been “125” but “5”.

What resources do I have available to contradict a sceptic of this kind? There is obviously no point in asking him to redo the calculation in my place, for what he is contesting is not that “ $68 + 57$ ” makes “125” according to the current way I am applying addition. What he is contesting is whether my current and earlier applications of the rule are identical, and the impossibility of my demonstrating that I am indeed following the same rule as before. The only option open to me in a case of this sort is to have recourse to my memory, and to affirm that the rule I am now applying is indeed the same as the one I put into effect in all my earlier calculations.

The problem is that it is never totally impossible that I might be wrong on my own account, that my memory might be playing tricks on me, or that I might be completely mistaken regarding the types of operations I had undertaken up until the present. What I thought were additions may well have been something quite different. Consequently, nothing can absolutely guarantee the identity between the operation I am presently carrying out and the past operations that I had the impression, perhaps wrongly, of repeatedly effecting.

Wittgenstein’s sceptical paradox (as asserted by Kripke) may be formulated as follows: the way in which an individual may be thought to continue applying a rule in the future is never entirely determined. Expressed otherwise, no interpretation of a rule – be it addition or other – can fix in unequivocal fashion the correct use of that rule in the future. Wittgenstein (1983: § 201) thus declares: “[...] therein lies our paradox: no line of conduct can be determined by a rule, since any line of conduct may be considered as conforming to the rule.”

Wittgenstein’s paradox separates in reality into two distinct problems (Engel 2001):

- a. *The infinity problem*: how to be sure that an infinite number of operations will exemplify a single and unique rule, and not an infinite number of rules? In other words, what guarantees that each one of my applications of addition does not consist each time in the use of a *new* rule?
- b. *The normativity problem*: how to determine the correct way of continuing a finite sequence of operations, such that I can be considered as following a given rule? In other words, what is the *right* way of pursuing a finite sequence of operations?

Wittgenstein’s opinion is that these two problems have no solution, hence the paradox. There is no way of determining if an individual carrying out a sequence of actions is each time following the same rule, or if each of his actions engages a new rule. Furthermore, there is no single and unique way of carrying out a sequence of operations such that it will be the only valid sequence given the operations performed up to that point. There exists therefore, according to Wittgenstein, a form of “sub-determination” of the rule.

If Wittgenstein’s sceptical paradox has no solution in effect, it nevertheless includes an implicit presupposition. Obedience to a rule has been considered to this point as a strictly individual activity. According to Wittgenstein, the problems of infinity and normativity are impossible to resolve under these conditions. But on the other hand, if individuals are considered as social beings, the paradox can allow for a solution. For Wittgenstein, it is society that determines the correct or incorrect uses of a rule. It is society that decides what should be the onward projection of a sequence of operations in order that the individual might be considered to be following a given rule. It is equally society that guarantees that a given sequence of actions means following a single rule rather than several rules. The source of normativity is thus in Wittgenstein’s view (1983: § 199) fundamentally social. As he says:



Is what we call “obeying a rule” something that it would be possible for only *one* man to do, and to do only *once* in his life? [...] To obey a rule, to make a report, to give an order, to play a game of chess are customs (uses, institutions).

In considering addition, Kripke makes use of a trivial example to illustrate his interpretation of Wittgenstein. But his conclusion is valid for all types of rule. It is valid in particular for rules or cognitive norms. The correct or incorrect application of a concept, that is, the norms which govern its usage, is for Wittgenstein socially determined.<sup>8</sup> For example, if I am able to apply the concept “cat” to sundry occurrences of cats, and if I am able, at least in principle, to avoid applying it to sundry occurrences of dogs, it is because the social realm regulates my use of this concept (and of all others). In summary, for Wittgenstein, concepts have the form of rules, and rules draw their normativity from society.

### Social norms and cognitive norms

Durkheim and Wittgenstein were unaware of each other’s writings. The first – and only – work of Wittgenstein published during his lifetime, the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, appeared in 1921, four years after Durkheim’s death. In reverse, nothing in the biographies of Wittgenstein or in the literature devoted to him suggests that he may have had contact with the work of the founder of the French school of sociology.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, their approaches to the problematic of the norms of thought are in many respects similar. Within their respective disciplines, these two thinkers arrived at an analogous thematisation of the link between social norms and cognitive norms.<sup>10</sup>

Durkheim and Wittgenstein both considered that cognitive norms are a type of social norm. For them both, the rules subtending activities of the mind are an emanation of those that govern the social realm. We have seen that in Durkheim this thesis contains two mutually linked yet distinct ideas. On the one hand, cognitive norms derive causally from social norms, in the sense that they are their product. On the other hand, society is the source of authority which guarantees the application of these norms by individuals.

A distinction of this order does not apply with Wittgenstein. The philosopher’s analysis is not directed to the causal origin of cognitive norms, that is, to the way by which these appear in the mind. For Wittgenstein, that is an empirical question whose answer must be provided by the positive sciences and for which philosophy is not in a position to offer a solution. His theory thus concerns only the source of their normativity, in other words the locus from where the cognitive norms draw their normative force. But like Durkheim, Wittgenstein contends that the locus in question is society. In his view, it is this latter that fixes the conditions for the correct or incorrect application of the norms of the mind.

It is clear that the starting-points for Durkheim’s and Wittgenstein’s analyses are not the same, which also implies a difference in the “style” of reasoning undertaken by the two thinkers. As we have seen, Durkheim takes up on his own account the problematic of the origin of the categories of understanding in the manner formulated by Kant. His object is to show that sociology is capable of providing an empirical solution to a problem that philosophy up till then had posed only in *a priori* fashion. It is thus in opposition to Kant and his school that Durkheim developed his personal conception of the norms of thought.

The problem from which Wittgenstein’s analysis takes its point of departure is different. The principal target of the philosopher’s reasoning is the conception of cognitive norms after a Platonic model,<sup>11</sup> a variant of which, as we have seen, was espoused by Frege – one of the

adversaries Wittgenstein opposed in his *Philosophical Investigations*. According to this conception, the mental process of which the norms of thought are the object is both individual and intellectual. In opposition to this “intellectualist” approach, Wittgenstein defends the idea that cognitive norms are practices, and like all practices, they are fundamentally social in nature.

One of the interesting points on which Durkheim and Wittgenstein differ concerns their ways of conceiving the problem of the universality of cognitive norms. One criticism that one can address towards Wittgenstein’s theory is that the recourse to the social dimension does not remove in any way the indeterminacy of the rule that it was his object to dissipate. For Wittgenstein, as we have said, it is the social realm which determines the answer to the question of knowing whether an individual is following *this particular* rule and not another. Society in a certain way raises the individual to the rank of a competent applier of the norm, by making him or her capable of distinguishing between its correct and incorrect applications. In this sense, the correctness or incorrectness of the application of a rule is socially determined.

But the problem with this thesis is that it is not obvious why society would succeed where the individual has failed (Blackburn 1993). For a community of individuals is also itself susceptible of error concerning the type of rules it obeys. In other words, the sceptical doubt in relation to the rule of addition (or any other rule) could just as perfectly be addressed to a collectivity. And, in such a case, who would guarantee that the norms followed are the right ones? Who would fix the standard of correctness for any given rule? The only possible response is: another society, which would be located in the same position of “exteriority” as the first society is in relation to the individual. The difficulty there is that one then becomes engaged in an infinite regression, as this second society would itself need a third society to fix its own rules, and so on. Taken overall, therefore, the recourse to the social dimension in no way can remove the sceptical doubt. All it does is displace it to a different level.

As we have seen, Durkheim dispels the relativist threat hanging over his theory of thought norms by means of the thesis of the inclusion of society within nature. According to the sociologist, societies are a part of nature, which supposes that despite the differences observable between them, their operation, and in particular the cognitive norms that hold sway within them, are not excessively different one from another. This argument bears witness to the presence, in Durkheim’s thought, of a form of epistemological *naturalism*, that is, of a theory that embeds mental processes within natural processes (in effect, by way of social processes). In certain respects, Durkheim’s epistemology can be compared to the naturalist theories of knowledge developed in certain sectors of the cognitive sciences and of current philosophy of the mind.<sup>12</sup>

Durkheim’s naturalist argument is attractive to the extent that it enables an interruption of the infinite regression that threatens theories relating cognitive norms to social norms, notably that of Wittgenstein. By declaring that norms of thought are universal because they are social, hence natural, the sociologist provides them with a solid grounding. On the other hand, there is nothing more foreign to Wittgenstein than this naturalism, one of his objects being to rid epistemology of the quest for this type of “ultimate grounding” (whether in nature or otherwise). From the moment that this argument is admitted, Durkheim’s analysis ceases to be a social theory of knowledge to transform itself into a naturalist theory of knowledge. It thereby opens itself up to the objections traditionally advanced against this type of theory.

Translated from the French by Colin Anderson



## Notes

1. The article on norms in the *International Encyclopaedia of the Social and Behavioural Sciences*, compiled by Karl-Dieter Opp (2001), also is devoted to the norms of action.
2. On Kant's conception of cognitive norms, see Brandom (1994).
3. For a presentation of these different positions, see Engel and Mulligan (2003).
4. We are using here the notion of "belief" in the sense conferred on it in epistemology. It is not synonymous here with "religious belief".
5. This idea has a clear Foucauldian ring to it, though to the extent of our knowledge the analysis of parallels between Durkheim and Michel Foucault still remains to be undertaken.
6. On this argument of Durkheim's, see also Keucheyan (2003).
7. It should be noted that Kripke's interpretation of Wittgenstein has been contested, to the extent that, to designate it, it is sometimes referred to as the interpretation of Kripkenstein. We will not go into this debate in this article, but see in this respect Baker and Hacker (1984).
8. One should note that some authors, notably Philip Pettit and Vincent Descombes, have used this argument of Wittgenstein to found a new form of sociological holism. See in this regard Demeulenaere (2000).
9. See for example Monk (1991).
10. The reasons for this proximity of ideas may perhaps be found in the common familiarity of both Durkheim and Wittgenstein with classical British anthropology. Wittgenstein (1979) notably composed some Remarks on Frazer's "Golden Bough". One might also note that the closeness between Durkheim and Wittgenstein on the question of norms of thought was picked up, though without further elaboration, by Lukes (1972).
11. Initially, the question that occupied Wittgenstein's attention was that of the normative properties of meaning, and only subsequently those of thought processes.
12. For a presentation of these theories, see for example Pinker (2003). The question of Durkheim's relationship with naturalism is complex. It may be noted that among the current upholders of naturalism, Durkheimian sociology is generally considered to be radically contrary to this latter, which is far from being self-evident. See in this regard Tooby and Cosmides (1992).

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