The Double Center of Gravity in Durkheim's Symbol Theory: 
Bringing the Symbolism of the Body Back In*

JACQUES JANSEN
THEO VERHEGGEN
University of Nijmegen

By studying Durkheim through a Schopenhauerian lens, the one-sidedly cognitivist and 
functionalist reception of his social theory can be balanced. Durkheim explicitly rejected 
such monistic interpretations. His dialectical approach was always aimed at an essen-
tially dualistic perception of man and society, wherein the lower pole, the individual, is 
central. In Durkheim's symbol theory, this position leads to two kinds of symbols: those 
that are bound to the human body, here called "this and that" symbols, and those 
people can choose freely, here called "this for that" symbols. This twofold symbol 
theory can already be found in medieval philosophy (e.g. Dante Alighieri) as well as in 
the work of Paul Ricoeur. For Durkheim the human person is the symbol par excel-
ence. By implication the rituals in which the person is (re)constructed, that is the rites 
of passage, should be central. The interpretation here opens up new perspectives for a 
more psychological interpretation of Durkheim's sociology.

Durkheim's explicit rejection of, in particular, a functionalist approach within sociology 
often remains unnoticed. In Durkheim's view ([1911]1953, p. 91), society should not be 
represented as "an organized body of vital functions," because it leads to reductionism. 
The striking point is that "in that body lives a soul" (p. 93). That soul should be the object 

to be analyzed. In his introduction to the English translation of Durkheim's Sociology and 
Philosophy, Peristiany acknowledges Durkheim's rejection of functionalism but he char-
acterizes Durkheim's theory as "sociological spiritualism" (1953, p. vii). In our view, 
Durkheim developed the prolegomena for a symbol theory that strikes a balance between 
the spiritual and the material aspects of man and society.

The starting point of this symbol theory is the idea that things around us have a deeper 
meaning because they are the bearers of collective values. The latter are appended mean-
ings that cannot be reduced to the thing (the bearer) itself, nor to its attributes. To use one 
of Durkheim's own examples: A flag, as such, is only a piece of cloth from which no 
emotional meaning can be derived. However, the emotional meaning of the flag can become 
so dramatic that people are willing to sacrifice their life for it. The flag is the bearer of the 
notion of collectivity; it represents the soul of society and, as such, the flag is sacred 
(Durkheim [1911]1953, p. 87).

Durkheim emphasizes that every culture, and by implication every religion, is a totality 
of things and meanings, of matter and spirit, that only come to life in their combination. 
Thus, religion has "a double nature": "[I]t is natural as well as human and material as well 
as moral"; moral powers are "closely akin to material things because they are conceived of 
in tangible forms" ([1912]1995, p. 224). In addition, in discussing the importance of the 
emblem of the clan, Durkheim even emphasizes the constitutive aspect of the emblem:

*Address correspondence to Jacques Janssen and Theo Verhegggen, Department of Social Psychology, Section 
Cultural Psychology and Psychology of Religion (NCPG), University of Nijmegen, P.O. Box 9104, 6500 HE, 
Nijmegen, the Netherlands; email: J.A. Janssen@psych.kun.nl, verhegggen@psych.kun.nl.

Sociological Theory 15:3 November 1997
© American Sociological Association. 1722 N Street NW, Washington, DC 20036
DURKHEIM'S SYMBOL THEORY

"the emblem is not only a convenient method of clarifying the awareness the society has of itself: it serves to create—and is a constitutive element of—that awareness" (p. 231). Without things there can be no meaning, and communication is impossible. At the same time, things cannot remain without meaning: people interpret the world around them and they accommodate it into a greater whole; as such, from the outset, every religion is at the same time a cosmology (p. 8).

BALANCING THE RECEPTION OF DURKHEIM

Steven Lukes (1973, p. 423) pointed out that Durkheim was developing a theory of symbolism, calling it a theory with a "markedly modern ring." Durkheim's legacy was preserved via symbolic anthropology (for example, Douglas [1973]) and within symbolic interactionism (Hinkle 1960, p. 279; Stone and Farberman 1967; Byrne 1976; Farr 1978). However, this preservation falls short in at least two important respects. We argue that traditional outlooks are based on either a one-sidedly cognitivist and/or a one-sidedly relativist interpretation of Durkheim's symbol theory.

As Mestrovic (1992) shows, most dominant Durkheim interpretations tend to overemphasize concepts and intentions as being crucial to his work, while underestimating the vital, nonrational, intuitive side of his theory. Collective representations, for example, are often thought to be almost exclusively constructions of the mind of individuals (Farr and Moscovici 1984, p. 67). To be sure, Durkheim does give cause for such a reading by placing the accent on the cognitive meaning of the symbol. The entire Book 2 (pp. 99–303) of The Elementary Forms of Religious Life ([1912]1995) is devoted to the cognitive aspect of religion, focusing on names, beliefs, meanings, opinions, notions, and words. However, what is forgotten is that, for Durkheim, collective representations essentially find their origin in highly emotional—even ecstatic—collective gatherings (pp. 212–16). As such, they are not deliberate constructions. Mestrovic (1992) reverses the popular notion that cognitions and conceptions are crucial for Durkheim by claiming, instead, that perceptions, pertaining to immediate experience and intuition, are the more important phenomena. They form the "other side" of the representation, because they pertain to the heart, not to the mind. In addition, Durkheim not only underlined the emotional aspect of the symbol, he also emphasized the behavioral aspect. People have to act, and rituals are of crucial importance in the formation of social life.

The other aspect that has been overstressed is the idea that there is no intrinsic relation between the bearer of a message and the message itself; in other words: anything can mean anything. Essentially, this leads back to a functionalist interpretation: Things are reduced to their symbolic function. A churinga is simply the bearer of the clan emblem; the stone, as such, is irrelevant. According to Lévi-Strauss (1963, p. 60), who advanced this interpretation, Durkheim's totemism must be characterized as a "contingent explanation" based on "arbitrary signs" and also as a "functionalist theory of totemism" (totémisme fonctionaliste, as the original French title of chapter 3 reads). In the wake of such a position, a relativist and a cross-cultural approach follow. Relativism is implied in the idea that any arbitrary object may come to symbolize any arbitrary concept (cf. Geertz 1973); in short: "anything goes." To be sure, Durkheim's outlook on culture is relativist in a way. Over and over again, he stresses that the meaning of things is not determined a priori: "The sacredness exhibited by the thing is not implicated in the intrinsic properties of the thing: it is added to them" (Durkheim [1912]1995, p. 230); see also Durkheim [1911]1953, p. 86–

1 It is remarkable that these authors, who all emphasize Durkheim's significance as a pioneer of symbolic interactionism, do not refer to each other. Apparently, a symbolist outlook on Durkheim is not an ongoing tradition. It has to be discovered over and over again.
But, as we hope to demonstrate, there is clearly a neglected nonrelativist element in his sociology, too.

In a sense, Durkheim is also cross-culturally oriented. In his view humankind is a product of history whose nature varies geographically and over time (Durkheim in Lehmann 1993, p. 68). However, Durkheim was at the same time looking for universal aspects and elements of human behavior. The title of his 1912 masterpiece reveals at least a more general outlook: he is searching for elementary forms, not just cultural differences. Lévi-Strauss (1962, p. 138) recognized what he calls “le meilleur Durkheim” (“the better Durkheim”), the Durkheim who speaks of the formal character of the human mind, not influenced by the particular organization of society. Of course, Lévi-Strauss’s “better Durkheim” resembles Lévi-Strauss, whose approach is based upon the universal characteristics of the human mind. But this universalistic approach is explicitly and one-sidedly cognitivist, as summarized in Lévi-Strauss’s famous dictum: “animals are good to think” (1963, p. 89). Durkheim would have endorsed Tambiah’s (1969) extension of Lévi-Strauss’s totemistic theory that “animals are good . . . to prohibit.” Our mapping of the world is always normatively and emotionally founded.

In Durkheim’s terms, any cosmology is a religion. In this process, not just the mind but in fact the whole human body is involved. Mary Douglas (1973) rightly put forward the human body as a natural symbol, but in her view, again, cross-cultural variation is central. She criticizes Lévi-Strauss for his universalistic point of view. In our opinion, it is not Lévi-Strauss’s universalistic approach but his limitation to cognitive processes that contradicts Durkheim’s symbol theory. We believe that it is possible to offer a reading that has the best of both worlds, so to speak; one that balances the elements dealt with above, for they are all indeed significant in Durkheim’s rather complex symbol theory. In this reading, the human body will be attributed the role of the central, constitutive, and universal element for any culture or society.

STUDYING DURKHEIM THROUGH A SCHOPENHAUERIAN LENS

Our starting point in balancing the outlook on Durkheim’s symbol theory is Mestrovic’s (1991; 1993) interpretation of Durkheim. In Mestrovic’s view, Durkheim’s thought is a reflection of the fin-de-siècle spirit, ubiquitous in the Middle-European social scientific climate of a century ago. In this climate, Schopenhauer was the most influential philosopher (Simmel [1907]1986; Ellenberger 1970). Without discussing his philosophy in detail (for a discussion of Schopenhauer’s influence on Durkheim, see Mestrovic 1988, 1989a; Verheggen 1996), it is important to note that Schopenhauer proposes a fundamental unity between the principle of living and being—the will—and its epistemological counterpart the representation. For Schopenhauer, the world is will and representation. In this antagonistic unity, the “lower pole” is associated with the will, with matter, instincts, the body, emotions, the profane, and nonrationality. The higher pole, the representation, is associated with the mind, reflection, reason, the sacred, and culture in the sense of civilization.

A refraction of this antagonistic unity is Durkheim’s notion of the “dualism of human nature” ([1914]1960), or homo duplex—a tension-filled truce between the strivings of the individual and the demands of society. According to Mestrovic (1991; 1993), the crucial point is that for Schopenhauer and Durkheim the lower pole of this dualism is stronger than the higher pole. At the same time, the fin-de-siècle version of the homo duplex doctrine also holds that both poles are always important: matter and mind, emotion and reason, individual and society, and so forth. Therefore, reason and cognition can never fully overcome the “lower” instincts and emotions. As such, the fin-de-siècle view is a direct reaction against the influential Enlightenment ideals in which reason was thought to triumph over passion.
DURKHEIM’S SYMBOL THEORY

Mestrovic’s interpretation sheds new light on Durkheim’s starting points and therefore on his whole work. It enables us to counterbalance the common opinion, predominant in the Anglo-American literature, that Durkheim was a strict follower of the Enlightenment ideals, and a scholar true to the tradition of Kant, Hegel, and Comte. Of course, there is a kernel of truth in these views, but there is another equally if not more important center of gravity in Durkheim’s thought. This is the anti-Enlightenment fin-de-siècle spirit, in line with Schopenhauer’s antirationality stand.

One can deduce several principles from this view that are relevant to our study of Durkheim’s symbol theory. As Mestrovic has shown convincingly in his 1997 book on Postemotional Society, these insights can also help us better understand our own era. He extrapolates Durkheim’s emphasis on emotions to counterbalance popular, postmodern studies of Western culture in which the role of emotions is downplayed or even neglected. Instead, Mestrovic contends, in order to give a more complete account of our societies, one has to understand how our emotions become manipulated by the media and by politicians. Below, we want to give another twist to this striking use of Durkheim’s sociology by focusing on the role of the act, the ritual (in particular the funeral rite) in our own fin-de-siècle. But let us first focus on the role Durkheim attributed to the lower pole of the homo duplex.

DURKHEIM’S EMPHASIS ON THE “LOWER POLE”

The lower pole of humankind’s double nature is associated with the principle of living, with the body and with bodily functions. Throughout Durkheim’s entire magnum opus on the elementary forms of religious life ([1912]1995), these elements are perceptible.

Much like Schopenhauer, Durkheim starts out with the notion that life is “above all to act... for the pleasure of acting” ([1911]1953, p. 86). This is a clear refraction of Schopenhauer’s claim that life is a manifestation of the “will” whose aim it is to live, for the sake of living itself ([1818]1969; [1836]1992). Living (vivre) becomes the preamble for both thinkers, without immediately tying it to a cognitive meaning or a practical function. This noncognitivist and nonfunctionalist attitude manifests in yet another way, namely in the primacy given to acting over thinking. A profound illustration of this point is Durkheim’s emphasis on praxis in religion: “The true function of religion is not to make us think,” but “to make us act and help us live”; what people do is more important than what people think, “It is action that dominates religious life” ([1912]1995, p. 419, 421). Only when the whole human body is involved in the acting out of a ritual is the creation of symbols and the creation, in fact, of the life world possible. Morals are created in an effervescent atmosphere, on the clouds of ecstasy. In contrast to Weber’s approach, Durkheim’s theory of religion has been strikingly characterized as “a big bang theory” (Champion and Hervieu-Léger 1990, pp. 64-65).

The act brings us to its vehicle—the body. Here, again, one finds Schopenhauerian elements in Durkheim’s 1912 classic. Similar to Schopenhauer’s conceptualizing blood as the primary representation of the will to life, for Durkheim blood is a sacred liquid in itself ([1912]1995, pp. 125, 137–38, 307), as already observed by Mestrovic (1989b).

Although Durkheim stresses in a number of places that things that bear meaning do not possess this meaning intrinsically, he seems to make an exception for the body as the bearer of life itself. Blood, hair, and bodily fat take part as pars pro toto in the sacredness of the body (Durkheim [1912]1995, pp. 137–38). This focus on the body is not only ubiquitous in The Elementary Forms; it can be found throughout Durkheim’s whole oeuvre. For instance, Durkheim claims that the body is the ultimate substratum for society. He argues often that society only exists in and through individuals, which is to say, only by
means of collective representations penetrating the individual’s conscience (Durkheim [1885a]1978:97; [1885b]1975, pp. 351–52; [1887]1975, p. 304; [1893]1984, pp. 39, 287, 287n16; [1898]1982, pp. 251–52; [1900]1960, p. 363; [1906a]1953, p. 55; [1906b]1973, pp. 636–38; [1912]1995, pp. 211, 252, 351; [1914]1960, p. 325; [1955]1983, p. 97). The individual is the cornerstone of society, or culture; at the same time, society adds a new dimension to this substratum. Every society, every culture imprints its own characteristics on the members (i.e., individuals here) that it comprises. Collective phenomena, such as traditions, habits, and language, are not only interwoven with phenomena at the level of the individual psyche, they are also incarnated in the individual’s body. A similar idea has become significant in contemporary culture theory, for example, in the “habitus” concept (Bourdieu 1990). Culture shapes the body, and vice versa. The crux of Durkheim’s argument is that the socioculturally embedded body—in other words, the combination of organism and adherence to culture (referred to by Mauss ([1950]1979) as the “total social fact”)—constitutes the symbol par excellence: the person. This is the term Durkheim ([1912]1995) uses to define the intersection of body and culture.

**DURKHEIM’S DIALECTICAL STYLE**

Before developing our argument further, we need to first focus attention on Durkheim’s specific style of argument. Evans-Pritchard (in Hertz [1906]1960, p. 17) points out that contradictions can always be found in Durkheim’s work because he wrote so much; a slip of the pen is inevitable in the long run. We think, rather, that several contradictions are central to Durkheim’s way of arguing and indispensable to an understanding of his social theory.

For example, with respect to the relationship between individual and society, it is as if Durkheim gives two versions: one for those who underestimate society and one for those who underestimate the individual. Depending on the adversary, the line of reasoning, or at least the emphasis, is altered. Particularly instructive in this connection is his use of the word “but” (mais). Durkheim is fond of this little word: it appears on nearly every page and often several times. We read that society is an entity in its own right, but only in and through the individuals. Then we are told that society consists of nothing except individuals, but cannot be reduced to them.

This is characteristic of Durkheim. Lukes (1973, p. 34) calls the style polemic. Filloux (1965/1966, p. 42) points out that the polemics were merely a form of tactics. It appears to us that Durkheim was in the habit of vehemently arguing both cases (hence the polemics) before subsequently reintegrating the two positions into his own framework (the tactics). This can be characterized as a dialectical style; as a constant search for the middle road between two previously constructed extremes. The strength of Durkheim’s impressive style, which convinced a great many people, lies in his “dialectical brilliance” (Alpert 1973, p. 200). Cleverly and convincingly, Durkheim walks the via media: “it is in my nature to present my ideas by the point rather than by the hilt” (Durkheim [1897b]1975, p. 400). However, Durkheim’s form of dialectics must be distinguished from, for instance, Hegel’s. It is the via media rather than a higher level synthesis that Durkheim seems to pursue. The alternative that Durkheim comes up with to explain certain phenomena is not born out of two inferior theses, but is rather a different (and, clearly superior for Durkheim, in terms of explanatory power) third option.

2 The formula is almost identical each time and reads: “La société n’existe que dans et par les individus.” Strictly speaking, the individual is an abstraction and refers to a human being isolated from culture, which is not really a human being but merely a blank body (Alpert [1939]1993 and Filloux 1965/1966). Only when Durkheim talks about a person does he mean a true human being, that is the encultured body.
DURKHEIM'S SYMBOL THEORY

Not unjustifiably, Lukes (1973, pp. 30–34) devotes a critical paragraph to Durkheim's mode of argument, suggesting that the tricks of classical rhetoric can be found throughout. Lukes (p. 32) seems to have a point in claiming that "the explanations [Durkheim] reviewed may not be jointly exhaustive—that the rejected explanations may not include all possible candidates except Durkheim's." However, Lukes is wrong to reproach Durkheim for reviewing and rejecting explanations that "may not be mutually exclusive" (ibid.). This would only be a criterion for Durkheim if the aim of the explanation were to develop a synthesis out of a thesis and an antithesis. Durkheim's aim, however, is the middle road, so he need not postulate that individual and society, body and mind, sociology and psychology are mutually exclusive. More important, Durkheim did not postulate that they were mutually exclusive, as can be demonstrated with reference to the dichotomies of the homo duplex concept mentioned above. It is by misaligning his method with, for instance, Hegelian dialectics that people come to misinterpret his work. However controversial Durkheim's style will remain, it proved fruitful with regard to the issue at hand, since his symbol theory is yet another example of the dialectical argument.

To be sure, when we stress the importance of the lower pole, we do so, like Mestrovic (1992, p. 4) "for the sake of balance." Any monism, wherein one of the poles is given primacy, is rejected by Durkheim. This is also true for his notion of symbols. Thus he starts from the symbol given as an indivisible, dualistic whole.

DURKHEIM'S TWOFOLD SYMBOL THEORY

We now place Durkheim's symbol theory in a different light and try to show the merits of this alternative interpretation. The pivotal insight in Durkheim's symbol theory is to be found in The Elementary Forms of Religious Life and in two articles that render his sociology in a nutshell (Durkheim [1911]1953; [1914]1960). Here we find Durkheim looking for a middle road between two moncausal explanations, or monisms. One is the monism that seeks to explain people's behavior toward certain objects solely in terms of the objects themselves, on a material level (specified by Durkheim as "naturalism"). Thus, for instance, the explanation for the sacredness of certain objects is sought in their size (mountains) or their impressiveness (thunder and lightning). Durkheim points out that this explanation does not hold: people sometimes look for sacredness in the smallest of things: in ants and worms, in sticks and stones. The other monism looks for explanations on the spiritual level, so that meaning is all that counts ("animism"). Durkheim rejects that one-sidedness, too (Durkheim [1912]1995, pp. 45–84; [1914]1960). He seeks to develop a symbol theory that steers clear of both extremes. Symbols are combinations of objects and meanings, combinations of inner nature and outward appearance. Both the object and its meaning are important, but the combination is decisive.

Symbolic anthropology and symbolic interactionism are right in claiming that, for Durkheim, the idea or the concept becomes anchored in a thing or an organism. At first

---

3 One could argue whether the dichotomy Durkheim considered to be primary to human life, namely the distinction between the sacred and the profane, consists of mutually exclusive poles. On the one hand, Durkheim contends that the sacred absolutely excludes the profane; no other dichotomy is that radical ([1912]1995, p. 36). However, it is possible for the profane to become sacred, albeit through "a delicate operation that requires precautions and a more or less complex initiation" (ibid.:38). Thus, the profane "become[s] sacred in itself in some measure and to some extent" (ibid.). It remains a complicated issue and we agree with Pickering (1984, p. 119) that on this issue "dichotomies and paradoxes abound in Durkheim's thought." It is as if for Durkheim, the sacred-profane dichotomy is indeed absolute and radical on a conceptual level—it makes it possible for humans to think. On a practical level, in daily life, the sacred-profane dichotomy serves as the point of reference for our mapping and categorization of our world. But the distinctions and dichotomies were thus conceived of as much more ambiguous. Thus, for instance, sometimes the body is profane, but at the same time it contains the sacred blood. We therefore reject Pickering's equation of society, culture, the soul with the sacred per se, and the individual, nature, body as profane (1984, p. 120). Sacredness and profaneness are on a practical level relative values.
sight, he stresses the fictional and provisional aspect of the signifier in symbols. People can use the same material to signify many things. The material itself has no meaning at all, nor does it prescribe the meaning of the symbol. Anything is suited to be sacred. To phrase this another way: the category of the sacred can be attached synthetically to any object, and sacredness is contagious. However, there is an important exception to the rule that any idea can be attached to any object, namely a category of symbols wherein the signifier has a reality of its own. This is precisely the category of symbols with which Durkheim is mainly concerned in *The Elementary Forms*: it is the category of “things” pertaining to the human body that becomes constitutive for the cultural practices of a group, including the practice of symbolizing and giving meaning itself. We already pointed out that, for Durkheim, the blood is the *pars pro toto* for the body and the representative of the body’s life force. It seems to be the intrinsic signifier of life and sacredness. Durkheim follows Robertson-Smith’s influential lectures on the *Religion of the Semites* (1894) in stating that blood, hair, bodily fat, and so forth all carry the notion of sacredness (Durkheim, [1912]1995). What is important here is that aspects of the body are intrinsically sacred.

Why would the body deserve a specific symbolic status? An answer that forces itself out of the preceding argument is that the body is indispensable and inescapable: one cannot act, one cannot even live without taking into account and dealing with the body. If forced to choose, one’s own body is the first and nearest option for symbolizing “life”: if the blood flows, life flows; if the body vanishes, life vanishes. It is a necessary symbol, as Durkheim seems to claim. In this respect, with regard to the human body, a relativistic view of the construction of symbols does not seem to hold. This notion is also underpinned by the fact that Durkheim regarded the person, that is, the encultured individual or encultured body, as *the* symbol par excellence (Durkheim, [1912]1995, pp. 272–76).

But what about other symbols? How can things that have no intrinsic value become important, even sacred, within the framework of a given culture? A psychological explanation based on the individual’s expediency is rejected by Durkheim ([1911]1953). A functionalist sociological explanation in terms of the interests of society would then seem to be the obvious alternative. Objects would be seen as valuable and meaningful because of their contribution to the preservation of the community. But Durkheim explicitly rejects this explanation, too. Society is more than “a system of organs and functions,” it is “the focus of an internal moral life” (Durkheim [1911]1953, p. 91).4 Durkheim mirrored Schopenhauer in asserting that life as such has meaning, for its own sake, not just in a functional sense. In that context, the combination of object and attached meaning is to a great extent arbitrary (that is, not determined by any single cause), but once the synthesis has been achieved, it governs even those who originally made it. However, the particular nature of one’s own organism still stands out. Therefore, it appears that there are at least two sorts of symbols. A short illustration may clarify this idea.

### TWO KINDS OF SYMBOLS: DANTE ALIGHIERI AND PAUL RICOEUR

In *Convivio* (II1 2–4), Dante Alighieri contends that symbols can be constructed in two different ways, a distinction he took from the scholastic tradition of Thomas Aquinas (Hollander 1969, pp. 15–56). He distinguishes between the “allegory of poets” and the “allegory of theologians.” In the allegory of poets, the literal meaning is not important.

---

4 It is interesting to note that the English translation given by Pocock reads: “the center of a moral life” (Durkheim [1924]1953, p. 91). Pocock added the French text in italics and between brackets: “foyer d’une vie morale.” But the crucial adjective “intime” has been omitted. The original French phrase is: “foyer d’une vie morale intime.” Mastrovic (1992) notes that the literal meaning of “foyer” is “hearth,” as in a fireplace, denoting warmth and energy, not captured by the English translation “center.”
The signifier has no meaning or reality in itself; it just serves to express the signified. So, for instance, when one says that Orpheus tamed the wild beasts by playing his flute, one only wants to express that a wise man can bring cruel people to repent (Dante's example). Orpheus does not exist, he has no flute, and he cannot tame the wild animals, which—by the way—do not really exist. This poetical allegory is an allegory of "this for that" (Singleton 1954, p. 89): as we grasp the deeper meaning (the signified), the signifier disappears. However, Dante's own poem is not just a fantasy. His voyage, he contends, was real. This is an example of what Dante called a "theological allegory." Now the signifier is real. If one says that Christ died for our sins, a moral meaning is added to a person's life. But that person is real: He was on earth, He is in heaven, as Dante believed. In this case, the allegory is an allegory of "this and that" (ibid.).

By way of Dante's distinction we can illuminate the two sorts of symbols within Durkheim's thought. The poetical allegory is associated with the "arbitrary" symbol in which any object can represent any idea or concept. But, like Durkheim, we are particularly concerned with that other variant in which the signifier is real. Dante's theological allegory can be associated with the special category of symbols we identified within Durkheim's work: symbols pertaining to the (real) human body. Its intrinsic meaning cannot be denied nor can it be arbitrarily applied to concepts. The sacred qualities attributed to many aspects of the body are inherent and inescapable. Parallel to the homo duplex concept, and in line with Durkheim's form of dialectics, the body is a symbol of this and that; both poles (the object or thing as well as the concept, holiness) are involuntary.

One need not go back in time as far as Dante. A modern theory that bears great resemblance to our interpretation of Durkheim's symbol theory is found in Paul Ricoeur's work. Ricoeur distinguishes between the "universe" of the metaphor, that is "the already purified universe of the logos," and the universe of the symbol "that hesitates on the dividing line between bios and logos" (in Ulin 1984, p. 109). Let us first clarify what this means. Ulin explains that for Ricoeur "bios" refers to "the undifferentiated force of life which is the foundation of all existence" (ibid.). Although this appears to be metaphysical, Ulin writes that it is not as abstract in Ricoeur's application as it might first appear. Ricoeur is trying to show that symbols do not simply arise through human conventions or culture, but, on the contrary, have prelinguistic origins. Through the symbol, he attempts to transcend the familiar dichotomy between nature and culture by rethinking this relationship dialectically. . . . According to Ricoeur, the bios is manifested in psychoanalysis as desire or energy, while in religion it is manifested as the sacred. (Ibid.)

What is important here is Ricoeur's division between a conventional realm to which metaphors belong and a realm that is prior to "the control of humanity." Symbols belong partially to the latter. This means that there is something nonconventional and primeval in the symbol, which is rooted in life, as Ricoeur says. In other words, "the [metaphor] is free invention of discourse; the [symbol] is bound to the cosmos" (in Ulin 1984, p. 110).

Clearly, "bios" can be associated with Schopenhauer's will. This is evident from the linking of bios with nature, psychoanalytic energy, and drives. Inversely, logos can be

---

5 We are aware of the fact that, technically speaking, allegory and symbol refer to different domains. It is beyond the scope of this article, however, to deal with this distinction in detail. Dante's allegories merely serve as an (in our view helpful) illustration of the two kinds of symbols in Durkheim's theory.
6 Again, we wish to add that we merely use Ricoeur's "metaphor," on the one hand, and "symbol" in relation to Durkheim's work on the other, to illustrate the apparent existence of two linguistic domains with different origins. We do not want to contend that metaphor, allegory, and symbol are merely synonyms.
associated with representation, convention, and so forth. According to Ulin, Ricoeur’s symbol theory is an attempt to bridge the distinction between object and subject as well as the distinction between nature and culture. That is completely in line with Durkheim’s starting points: In a dialectical sense, the symbol is grounded in both the universe of the will and the universe of representation. Again, both aspects are crucial; it is the tension between the two that counts. So we find the central idea we distinguished within Durkheim’s symbol theory reflected in Ricoeur’s thought.

TWO KINDS OF RITUAL: THE NATURE OF THE FUNERAL RITE

Durkheim’s emphasis on the act is accompanied by the assertion that the construction of symbols is an ongoing process. He states that it is necessary for the group to meet on a regular basis to create and recreate the shared symbols in rituals—that is to say, in effervescent activities (Durkheim [1912]1995). Without continual reassertion of the symbols, they would vanish; people have to speak to preserve their language. The important point is the essential role allocated to the act, rather than to a cognitive process (although the latter is, of course, indispensable): people need to do things in order to affirm and reaffirm cultural arrangements and engagements. It will require no further comment that the role of the expressive body is fundamental in these cultural acts. Effervescent rituals literally pierce one to the very marrow. For Durkheim the constitutive part of symbols is not the idea but rather the act, associated with the body, emotions, instincts—in short, with the Schopenhauerian will. In other words, the constitutive part of symbols is associated with the lower pole of the homo duplex concept as used by Durkheim ([1914]1960; [1912]1995).

The active nature of the continuous construction and reconstruction of symbols is beautifully demonstrated in the classic Greek semiology of the stoa (Kretzmann 1967). There, the “signified,” that is the meaning (for example, the concept of holiness) to which the “signifier” (for example, blood) refers, is indicated by an incomplete participle, a “participium passivum imperfectum.” It is called the σήμανομενόν (sēmainomenon), which means “being signified”. As distinct from the “participium passivum imperfectum,” the “participium passivum perfectum” is named “sēmainon” (σημαίνων). A speaker/reader of contemporary English might mistakenly be inclined to understand each passive participle as a perfect participle, that is a “participium passivum perfectum.” As a consequence, “the signified” is interpreted as a completed process. In the “sēmainomenon” we find an ancient example of the idea that the symbol is a continuous (re)construction. It also implies the notion that culture as a whole is not an end product. Each construction is continually threatened. Each construction has to be reconstructed continually, reenacted time and again.

At the end of his study on religion, Durkheim distinguishes among negative, positive, and piacular rites. Negative rites deal with prohibitions that must be observed in preparation for the central ritual, for instance people must fast or wash hands before the ritual. In the positive ritual people participate in the soul of the group, for instance by a communion. This central rite is accompanied by joy and enthusiasm. In the third kind of ritual, the funeral, sorrow and mourning are the central emotions.

We propose another division that seems more convenient: If we distinguish two kinds of symbols, then we should start from two kinds of rituals as well. There is the ritual that (re)constructs the “this for that” symbol, and there is the ritual that (re)constructs the “this for that” symbol. Human beings, although makers of “this for that” symbols, are “this and that” symbols themselves. In our view, the primordial construction is the “this and that” construction of the person that takes place in rites of passage (Van Gennep [1901]1960) through which the human being is accommodated into a symbolic order: an individual becomes a person, that is, a member of society, an enculturated body.
DURKHEIM'S SYMBOL THEORY

Hertz ([1906]1960) was the first to stipulate the importance of rites of passage in his essay on the collective representation of death. Nowhere is the duality of humankind so apparent as when one of its poles vanishes. Thus, death is not just a physical event, it “destroys the social being grafted upon the physical individual” (p. 77). While society has done its utmost to preserve the duality of the human being, death terminates all endeavors. It is, as Hertz says, “tantamount to a sacrilege” (ibid.). In our perception death represents the sacrilege par excellence because in destroying the body it destroys the symbol par excellence. Consequently, society shakes on its foundation and its members tremble in despair. Durkheim underscored the importance of the funeral rite as a rite of passage and the importance of the ideas of Hertz and Van Gennep. This is striking; given that in Durkheim’s theory the person is the central symbol, one would expect the rites of passage to be the central ritual.

As did Durkheim, we give special attention to the funeral rite as a third kind of ritual. The sacrilege of death requires special reparation, that is, a special rite. Hertz describes the funeral as primarily a ritual of reconstruction. People refuse to accept the inevitability and irrevocability of death. They cry and mourn about the deceased body and, in doing so, about the wounded group. Nowhere else is the effervescence so intense. Durkheim ([1912]1995) and later Canetti (1962) vividly described the funeral rites of the Australian aboriginals, in which people scream and even severely wound each other, intensifying anger and grief. The dead body is central in these rites, as Hertz ([1906]1960, p. 78) says, but he adds that “the last word must remain with life.” Society recreates itself beyond death.

The funeral rite can be described as the painful transformation of a “this and that” symbol into a “this for that” symbol. Only when the “this and that” symbol disappears completely, can the “this for that” symbol emerge. The living human being thereafter lives on as a memory, referred to by a grave, by a funeral monument, by ashes and bones.

In most religions the funeral is only the first stage of a transformation process that is completed by resurrection or reincarnation. In the Christian faith, resurrection of the body is central. Only when the body revives and reunites with the soul is the human being perfect again. Since they remain separated until the final judgment, soul and body are imperfect, merely representing a “this for that” symbol, merely referring to each other. In the Christian faith, reconstruction is completely achieved in “the resurrection of the flesh,” restoring the “this and that” symbol on a higher level. Mutatis mutandis, the same process is completed by reincarnation. Although the “this and that” symbol is transformed into a “this for that” in the funeral, it is restored to a “this and that” symbol by reincarnation.

So we distinguish three kinds of rituals based upon the distinction between two kinds of symbols. The funeral rite is special because it represents a combination of two kinds of ritual: a “this and that” symbol is transformed into a “this for that” symbol and in most religions the process is completed by a subsequent transformation into a “this and that” symbol of a higher order.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

A human body is always a body culturally embedded in a context. In that sense we agree with Douglas (1973:11), who observes that natural symbols do not exist: The meaning of the signifier is never predictable from the characteristics of the signifier as such. This does not imply, however, that the signifier is a will-less, unresisting element. On the contrary, we saw that it is an active and constitutive part of the symbol. Its importance becomes 7 After resurrection the process of meaning giving is complete, that is perfect and completed (as a “participium perfectum,” a “sémainon”).
dramatically clear when the carrier of the symbol is the human body, preeminently in the case of death. Recall Durkheim’s claim that society can only exist in and through individuals. Death, therefore, is the greatest threat to society and requires the most profound reparation. In those religions in which the deceased person is fully restored at a higher level, the terror of death is managed in an ultimate and complete way.

In modern, technical societies, as Ariès (1983) puts it, death is denied and tabooed. Funerals are often “lonely and pathetic, plastic and impersonal, with nothing left to do” (Walter 1990, p. 281). Durkheim’s symbolic theory calls attention to the importance of action and emotion as constituting elements of human life. There is no rational alternative for funerals as there is no rational alternative for life. It would be worthwhile to study the quality of the funeral ritual in relation to the quality of social life. In line with Durkheim’s social theory, we would expect a substantial correlation. In other words, we see contemporary denial of death and the decline of the funeral rite as symptoms of today’s anomic society.

We can understand Alpert’s (1957/1958, p. 662) claim that Durkheim’s polemic style of reasoning was bound to give rise to misunderstandings and, more specifically, that it many times led to “the unwarranted charge that he [Durkheim] neglected psychology and ignored biology.” By contrast, bringing the body back into Durkheimian theory can revive several classic issues. It would require further investigation to deal with them fully; let us summarize two of the main implications that should be studied.

First, the centrality of the human body in Durkheim’s sociology opens new perspectives for a psychological interpretation of his sociology. Durkheim himself referred to his social theory as *socio-psychologie* or *psychologie collective* (Durkheim 1893, p. 341; [1911]1924, p. 47). According to Stoetzel (1963, p. 59), who refers to Davy, Durkheim even coined the term “social psychology”. Filloux (1965/1966, p. 46) opts for the designation “cultural psychology.” Durkheim would have supported the plea of today’s cultural psychology for the restoration of the body as the universal carrier of any culture (Kempen 1996). Durkheim’s theory is a prelude to ideas that emerge in modern social psychology, as formulated, for instance, in the so-called Terror Management Theory (Pyszczynski, Greenberg and Solomon 1997). According to this theory, human intellectual abilities have a survival value in that they enable people to adapt to a constantly changing environment. The same capacity creates a uniquely human problem, that is the awareness of the unavoidability and inevitability of death. People cannot live in the face of death. They face up to the problem symbolically by developing a cultural worldview that provides self-esteem. Of course this is just a way to incorporate the body in a social theory, but it is in line with Durkheim’s endeavors. Durkheim and Hertz describe the funeral ritual as the recreating of society. As Hertz ([1906]1960:78) put it: “the collective consciousness does not believe in the necessity of death, so it refuses to consider it irrevocably. The last word must remain with life.” Terror Management Theory appears to be a psychological application of Durkheim’s sociology. Durkheim can be “a perfect totem” for this rapprochement between sociology and psychology (Mestrovic 1988, p. 18).

Second, by focusing on the body, associated with drives, passions, and the will, and by giving primacy to the act instead of the thought, the concept of the unconscious becomes salient. We saw that, just as Schopenhauer, Durkheim emphasized the lower pole of human existence. Since Schopenhauer identifies the will with the unconscious (Ellenberger 1970), one may expect Durkheim to have a notion of the unconscious, too. Mestrovic (1984) demonstrates that the unconscious is indeed an important issue in Durkheim’s work. With respect to its implications for science, Mestrovic contends that “Durkheim’s concept of the unconscious has not been incorporated into sociological theory. This is because positivistic methodology assumes that everything it purports to study can be consciously ‘observed,’
and that incorporation of the unconscious into research is supposedly ‘unscientific’ because the unconscious cannot be “observed” (1988, p. 94).

Remarkably, there is a very recent trend within social and cultural psychology that acknowledges the fact that the bulk of people’s daily behavior is hardly—if at all—consciously reflected upon (Greenwald and Mahzarin 1995; Bargh 1992). After almost a century, unconscious, automatic, and unreflected behavior is again becoming the object of scientific investigation. For Durkheim, social science necessarily has to deal with both poles of the homo duplex, since the tension between them is the essence of the human being. The person, the symbol par excellence, is the antagonistic unity of matter and spirit, society and individual. As Durkheim might have said, the person is a “this but that” symbol.

REFERENCES
