

everything that is
is because the idea
religion.'

Religious Life (1912), Émile Durkheim set himself
finding a source of human social identity. He
sought to be the simplest form of documented
religion of the Aborigines of Australia. Aboriginal
art provided an understanding of the religious nature
of the social and permanent aspect of humanity'.
The idea that men and women to relate socially lies at the
heart of religion, in which religion embodies the beliefs

has been applauded and debated by sociologists,
anthropologists, philosophers, and theologians, and
discussions about the origin and nature
of religion. This new, lightly abridged edition provides an
introduction to Durkheim's ideas.

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Introduction and Notes by Mark S. Cladis

Illustration, (A66759) 1967, by Munggurawuy Yunupingu. North
10 cm. South Australian Museum, Adelaide. This is an Aboriginal
artwork. Images provided by the South Australian Museum.

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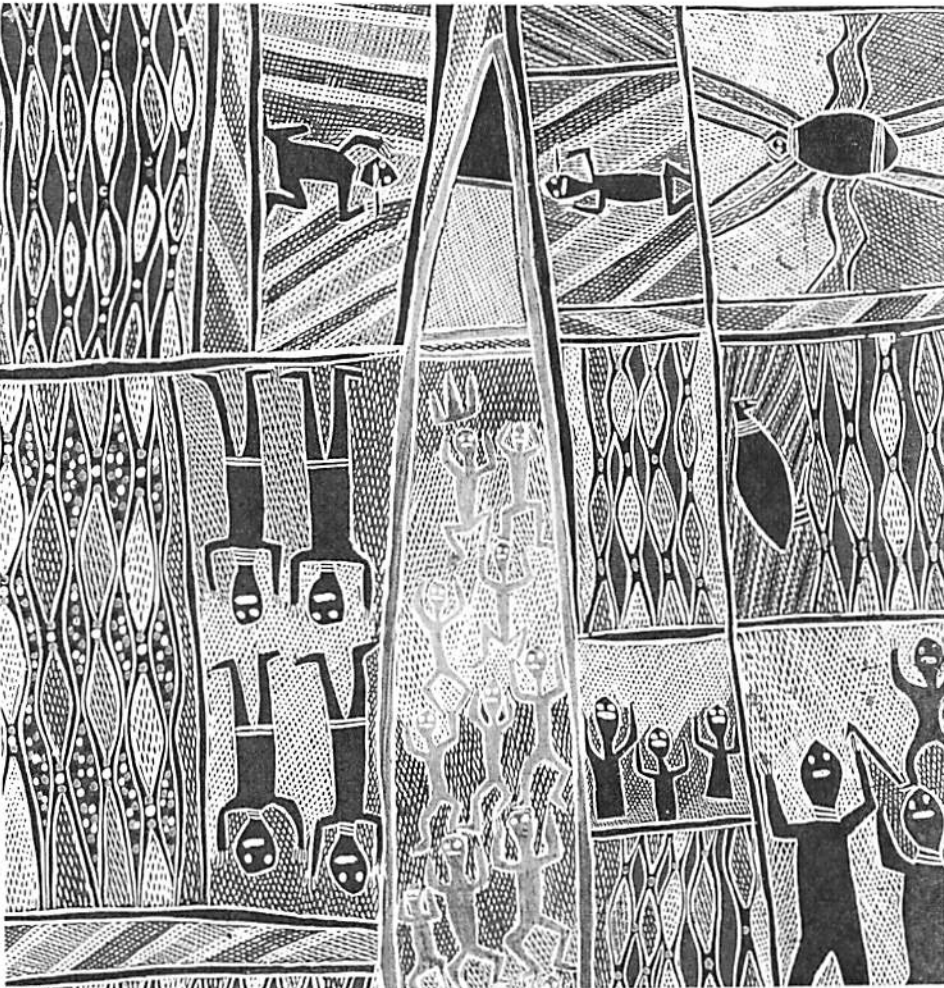
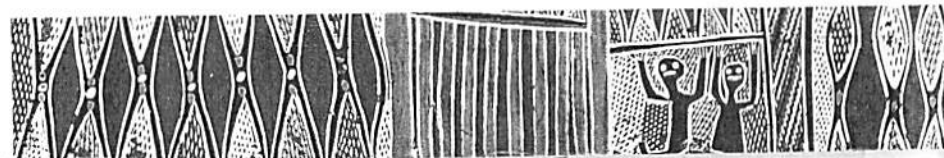
Durkheim
The Elementary Forms of Religious Life

OXFORD

Émile Durkheim The Elementary Forms of Religious Life

A new translation by Carol Cosman

OXFORD WORLD'S CLASSICS



The commonality of these ideas naturally extends to the conclusion we have deduced from them: our proposed explanation for the idea of the soul. Its general scope is, moreover, confirmed by the following facts.

We know that every individual harbours inside him something of the anonymous force that pervades the sacred species—he is himself a member of that species. But not as an empirical and palpable being. For in spite of the symbolic designs and marks with which he decorates his body, nothing about him suggests the form of an animal or plant. There is another being inside him in whom he recognizes himself but whom he none the less imagines as a kind of animal or plant. Is it not obvious that this double must be the soul, since the soul itself is a double of the subject it animates? Final proof of this identity is that the organs most prominently embodying every individual's fragment of the totemic principle are also where the soul resides. Take the blood, for example. The blood contains something of the totemic essence, as witness the role it plays in totemic ceremonies. At the same time, blood is one of the seats of the soul; or rather it is the soul itself seen from the outside. When blood is spilled, the soul escapes. Hence it overlaps with the sacred principle that is immanent in the blood. [. . .]

But here are more conclusive facts. If the soul is merely the totemic principle individualized, in some cases it must sustain fairly close relations with the animal or plant species whose form the totem replicates. And indeed, 'the Gewwe-Gal (a tribe of New South Wales) believe that each person has within himself an affinity for the spirit of some bird, beast, or reptile. It is not that the individual is thought to be descended from that animal, but that a kinship is thought to exist between the spirit that animates the man and the spirit of the animal.' [. . .]

IV

The idea of soul is a particular application of beliefs relating to sacred beings. In this way we have an explanation for the religious character this idea has displayed since it first appeared in history and still preserves today. The soul has always been considered something

¹ Fison and Howitt, *Kamilaroi and Kurnai*, 280.

sacred; as such it is opposed to the body, which in itself is profane. The soul is distinguished not only from its material envelope, as inside is distinguished from outside; it is not simply imagined as made of a more subtle and fluid material; but in addition it inspires something of those feelings that are always reserved for the divine. If it is not turned into a god, at least it is seen to have a spark of divinity. This fundamental feature would be inexplicable if the idea of soul were merely a pre-scientific solution to the problem of the dream: since there is nothing in the dream that might arouse religious emotion, the cause attributed to it could not be otherwise. But if the soul is part of the divine substance, it represents in us something other than ourselves; if it is made of the same mental material as sacred beings, it is natural that it should be the object of the same feelings.

The character that man ascribes to himself, then, is not pure illusion. Like the notion of religious force and divinity, the notion of soul is not without reality. It is quite true that we are formed of two distinct and opposite parts, like the sacred and the profane, and in a sense we can say that there is something of the divine in us. For society, that unique source of all that is sacred, is not restricted to moving us from the outside and having only a transitory effect; it is organized within us in a lasting way. It arouses in us a whole world of ideas and feelings that express it but which, at the same time, form an integral and permanent part of ourselves. When the Australian leaves a religious ceremony, the representations that common life has awakened or reawakened in him do not vanish at once. The figures of great ancestors, the heroic exploits which the rites commemorate, the great things of all sorts in which the cult has allowed him to participate—in short, the various ideas he has elaborated collectively—continue to live in his consciousness. And, through the emotions attached to them and by the special influence they exert, they are clearly distinguished from ordinary impressions made by his daily dealings with external things.

Moral ideas have the same character. It is society that has imprinted them in us, and since the respect it inspires is naturally attached to all that flows from it, the imperative norms of conduct are, by reason of their origin, invested with an authority and status that our other internal states do not have. And we assign them a separate place in our psychic life. Although our moral conscience is

part of our consciousness, we do not feel on an equal footing with it. We cannot recognize our own voice in this voice that makes itself heard only to us, giving orders to do some things and not others; the very tone in which it speaks to us announces that it expresses something inside us other than ourselves. This is the objective aspect of the idea of soul: the representations that are the fabric of our inner life are of two different and mutually exclusive kinds. One kind relates to the external and physical world, the other to an ideal world that we consider morally superior. We are thus really made of two beings who are oriented in divergent and virtually opposite directions, one of which dominates the other. Such is the underlying meaning of the antithesis that all peoples have more or less clearly conceived between the body and the soul, between the sensate being and the spiritual being that coexist within us. Moralists and preachers have often held that we cannot deny the reality and sacredness of duty without falling into materialism. And indeed, if we did not have the notion of moral and religious imperatives,¹ our psychic life would be flat, all our states of consciousness would be on the same level, and all feeling of duality would evaporate. Of course, to make this duality intelligible, it is not necessary to imagine some mysterious and unrepresentable substance opposed to the body called 'soul'. But here, as with the notion of the sacred, the error is in the literal character of the symbol employed, not in the reality of the fact symbolized. It is still true that our nature is double; there is truly a portion of divinity in us because we each contain a portion of those high ideals that are the soul of the collectivity.

The individual soul is therefore only a fragment of the group's collective soul; it is the anonymous force at the basis of the cult, but incarnate in the individual and wedded to his personality; it is *mana* individualized. The dream may well have contributed to certain secondary aspects of the idea. The inconsistency and instability of the

¹ If religious and moral imperatives constitute, as we believe, the essential elements of the idea of soul, we do not mean that these are the only elements involved. Other states of consciousness that have the same character, though to a lesser degree, cluster around this central core. This is true of all the higher forms of intellectual life, due to the special value and status society attributes to them. When we live the life of science or art, we feel we are moving in a circle of things above sensation; and incidentally, we shall have occasion to show this with more precision in our Conclusion. That is why the higher functions of the intelligence have always been considered specific manifestations of the activity of the soul. But they were probably not sufficient to form the notion of it.

images that occupy our minds during sleep, and their remarkable capacity to transform themselves into one another, may have provided the model of that subtle, diaphanous, and protean matter thought to constitute the soul. On the other hand, the facts of fainting, catalepsy, and so on may have suggested the idea that the soul was mobile and, beginning in this life, could leave the body for short periods; this in turn has been used to explain certain dreams. But all these experiences and observations could have had only an accessory and complementary influence which is even difficult to establish. What is truly essential to the notion comes from elsewhere.

But does this genesis of the idea of soul misconstrue its essential nature? If the soul is merely a particular form of the impersonal principle that permeates the group, the totemic species, and things of all kinds attached to them, it is itself basically impersonal. Therefore it must have more or less the same properties as the force of which it is merely a special mode—especially the same capacity to permeate, to spread contagiously, the same pervasiveness. Now, on the contrary, the soul is more easily imagined as a concrete, definite being, entirely self-enclosed and incommunicable to others; we make it the basis of our personality.

But this way of conceiving the soul is the product of a late philosophical elaboration. The popular representation, as it has spontaneously emerged from common experience, is very different, especially in the beginning. For the Australian, the soul is a very vague entity, taking unfixed and floating forms spread throughout the organism. Although it is more manifest at certain points of the body, there is perhaps none from which it is totally absent. Therefore it has a diffusion, a contagion, an omnipresence comparable to those of *mana*. Like *mana*, it can be divided and doubled infinitely while remaining complete in each of its parts; it is these divisions and these doublings that result in the plurality of souls. On the other hand, the doctrine of reincarnation, whose commonality we have established, shows how much impersonal elements enter into the idea of soul and how essential they are. For the same soul to take on a new personality in every generation, the individual forms in which it successively encloses itself must all be equally external and unattached to its true nature. It is a kind of generic substance that is individualized only secondarily and superficially. Moreover, this conception of the soul has not completely disappeared. The cult of relics demonstrates that

mana = force, power, prestige

Soul's
Lapsal
Soul's

Soul's
Cognate
Duality