

Self-preservation and sociology's modern moral personality: Dual structure in Durkheim's *Suicide*

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journals.sagepub.com/home/chs**Feiyu Sun****Abstract**

According to Durkheim, suicide means a conscious choice of death. The only opposite of death is being, and there is no middle ground in between. Therefore, when Durkheim discusses suicide, he certainly touches on the issue of living, or a choice of self-preservation, in a cryptical way, as well. This veiled discussion has been unacknowledged by Chinese mainland sociology because the widely adopted Chinese version of Durkheim's *Suicide* loses most of the textual evidence of this clue in its translation. This paper offers a textual analysis of Durkheim's *Suicide* based on that textual evidence. Durkheim treats different types of suicide as extreme forms of different types of morals, and, in many places, he asks under what kind of moral condition one can achieve self-preservation. This paper argues that there is an inner connection between Durkheim's definitions of three types of suicide and his definition of sociology. As a social scientist who studies morality, he sees sociology as the expression of a particular modern morality, the same kind of moral condition that he calls for in his book. This paper shows that for Durkheim, this moral entity signifies for self-preservation both for the modern individual and for sociology.

Keywords

Sociology, suicide, self-preservation, moral personality

Department of Sociology, Peking University, China

Corresponding author:

Feiyu Sun, Office 105, Department of Sociology, Li Ke Wu Hao Building, Peking University, No. 5 Yi He Yuan Road, Beijing 100871, China.

Email: sunfeiyu@pku.edu.cn

To be, or not to be, that is the question.

– Hamlet, act 3, scene 1

In *The Structure of Social Action*, Parsons points out that the ‘order’ in Durkheim’s ideas implies ‘not merely uniformities in events but a control of human action with reference to certain norms of ideal conduct and relationship’ (Parsons, 1949: 347). He further explains that, for the Durkheimian actor, these are not only ‘factual’ orders, but also ‘normative’ ones.

Through this understanding, Parsons unites ‘social types’ and ‘moral norms’ in Durkheim’s theory and regards ‘the appearance of this relativism of social types’ as ‘a positive contribution of the first importance’ to the history of social science (Parsons, 1949: 372).

Over a long period of time, this was an important understanding of Durkheim. For many scholars, Parsons’ understanding is very important for the academic study of Durkheim’s ideas. In a book review on Jingdong Qu’s book, *Absence and Break*, Meng Li more explicitly states that Durkheim represents a fundamental ethos of early sociology. In short, this ethos involves ‘a strong sense of redemption’ (Li, 2001: 135). From Comte to Durkheim, we may say, sociology itself presents an entire style of ‘evangelism and apologetics’ (Li, 2001: 135). Along with Li, many scholars have described Durkheim as a moral scientist and discussed his theoretical orientation and his efforts in the area of morality (Chen, 2013, 2014; Sun, 2008). In the past five years, these topics have even become the mainstream of Chinese understanding of Durkheim’s social theory among China’s academics. In addition, when focusing on the classic work *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, Zhao (2014) has conducted an in-depth study of ‘the living condition of modern people’ that is revealed by this book. Based on previous studies, this paper will start with a close textual analysis of *Suicide* through a discussion of the three major types of suicide described in this book, in order to discern Durkheim’s understandings of both modern individuals and sociology.

In many of his works, Durkheim sees sociology as a modern science that addresses moral concerns through a scientific approach, and that identifies norms that lead to social actions. It is in this respect that the nature of sociology is closely associated with its methodology. To meet such expectations, according to Durkheim, sociology needs to satisfy its primary requirements, which are to establish its own research objects (social facts) and to discover social norms through rationality. This task can be crucial to the success or failure of sociology itself. The typical achievement of this kind of knowledge is Durkheim’s analysis of the three kinds of suicide. In his book, Durkheim describes three different types of moral temperament. According to him, ‘Every sort of suicide is then merely the exaggerated or deflected form of a virtue’ (Durkheim, 2005: 200). From this perspective, if the book *Suicide* has a relationship with individuals’ lives, and if Durkheim wants to discover scientific support for the individual’s personal choices concerning

ethical and moral actions, then this book must also be about the other aspect of a suicidal action, which is self-preservation.

Another perspective from which to understand the book *Suicide: Self-preservation*

When Parsons explains the meaning of the concept ‘order’ in Durkheim’s thought, he touches on a perspective from which to understand Durkheim that has been missed not only by Chinese but also by western sociology and almost all over the world. Parsons places Durkheim within a tradition of understanding Hobbes. He says, ‘The antithesis of the order of which Durkheim is here thinking is precisely this war of all against all, as he explicitly states’ (Parsons, 1949: 347).

In other words, Parsons assumes here that when Durkheim talks about norms and orders, there is a subtext of self-preservation. The explicit textual clues of this ‘self-preservation’ can be found in many places in the original French version of the book *Suicide* and its English translations. As for Chinese academia, the prevailing translation is that done by Yunwen Feng, which was published in 1996 by the Commercial Press (Durkheim, 1996). However, in this version, other expressions are frequently substituted for the concept of ‘self-preservation’ in the original text, resulting in a great loss of evidence for this clue.

In his original text, when discussing the topic of suicide, Durkheim frequently describes it from the opposite perspective, often referring to the ‘suicide rate’ as the ‘coefficient of preservation’ (*coefficient de preservation*).¹ What he tries to discuss here is under what circumstances a (modern) individual is more likely to preserve himself/herself. In the Chinese translation of *Suicide*, the disappearance of such clues makes it hard to understand this work as a sociological version of Hobbes’ ‘preservation.’ However, this should be seen as the core of Durkheim’s thoughts throughout his early period,² as well as the key to understanding *Suicide* and Durkheim’s sociological methodology. To understand this statement, however, we need to start by examining the developing process of Durkheim’s own thoughts.

From 1894 to 1895, the year when *The Rules of the Sociological Method* was published, Durkheim also presented a course lecture on Hobbes’ *De Cive* (Marsalek, 2012). In this course lecture, Durkheim (2011) stated that Hobbes’ contribution was to introduce a scientific approach to the study of politics and morality. Meanwhile, Durkheim also criticized Hobbes’ attempt to understand society from the individual perspective (Durkheim, 2011). Durkheim’s understanding of Hobbes’ ‘individual perspective’ contains the well-known definition of ‘individual person’ in *Leviathan*, which serves as the starting point for Hobbes’ discussion of ‘the natural condition.’ In *Leviathan*, from the perspective of desire, Hobbes interprets the transition from ‘equality’ to ‘diffidence,’ and to the war of ‘every man against every man’ (Hobbes, 1994: 76). In this state of war, in which everyone is against everyone, using all means for self-preservation becomes the primary principle, the ‘law of nature.’

For Durkheim, this starting point is of no help in understanding human society, because society is a social fact that ‘transcends individuals’ (Durkheim, 1984: xliii). However, the relationship between Durkheim and Hobbes is not that simple. On the one hand, Durkheim approves of Hobbes’ methods of social and political studies; on the other hand, although Durkheim does not admit Hobbes’ starting point, his expressions are almost a replica of ‘the state of war’ raised by Hobbes. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes states:

To this war of every man against every man, this also is consequent; that nothing can be unjust. The notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice, have there no place. Where there is no common power, there is no law; where no law, no injustice. Force and fraud are in war the two cardinal virtues. (Hobbes, 1994: 78)

In the ‘Preface to the second edition’ of *The Division of Labor in Society*, Durkheim describes the state of ‘anomie’ in modern industrialized and commercialized society. It is almost identical to the above-mentioned Hobbes’ account of the state of war. However, instead of discussing it from a theoretical level, Durkheim describes it in terms of social facts. Certainly, this is the basic background of *Suicide*, and also the condition of the social crisis Durkheim faced and described by the end of the 19th century. For French intellectuals, especially for Durkheim, between 1789 and the end of the 19th century, France had been experiencing a profound crisis associated with modern society, and suicide could even be regarded as the core topic at this time, as well as a main representation for all these social crises. That is to say, if we understand modern society as the ‘state of war’ mentioned above, then Durkheim’s interpretation of this kind of state is different from Hobbes’: Durkheim regards individuals in modern society as prone to suicide, which challenges Hobbes’ basic assumptions. It can be seen from Durkheim’s definition of suicide that suicide has already become an inner demand among modern individuals.

This kind of understanding was not only Durkheim’s, but also held by many other intellectuals at that time, such as Walter Benjamin, for example. In his work about Charles Baudelaire, Benjamin takes an extremely strong tone in describing a social crisis concisely conveyed by the social phenomenon of ‘suicide.’ This crisis was first and foremost a modern state of alienation brought about by the development of industrial civilization. Benjamin cites Leon Daudet’s description of modernity in terms of the people who live and work in Paris:

A man needs work—that is correct. But he has other needs, too. Among his other needs is suicide, something that is inherent in him and in the society which forms him, and it is stronger than his driver for self-preservation. (Benjamin, 2006: 114)

In this condition of crisis, Benjamin sees suicide as the theme of modernism and a ‘heroic passion’ of modern individuals (Benjamin, 2006: 104). This does not only mean that suicide expresses their passions; for Benjamin, suicide has even become a

demand of the modern individual, a unique form of passion and inner need in modern life.

Durkheim holds the same opinion. In *Suicide*, his definition of suicide clearly implies that it is an intrinsic need of modern human beings, although this intrinsic need should be understood from the perspective of social reality. Durkheim points out that he is concerned with 'the general contemporary maladjustment being undergone by European societies.' This maladjustment is the 'collective emotion/disease that Europeans suffered' and that is implied by suicide (Durkheim, 2005: XXXV). Its typical representation is the Dreyfus Affair.

For Durkheim, the Dreyfus Affair is a concentrated reflection of the overall crisis in France at the end of the century. We should note that this incident, which occurred during the period when he was conceiving and writing *Suicide*, had a strong influence on Durkheim, who, like Dreyfus, was the son of Jewish parents. In his defense of Dreyfus, Durkheim argues that the debate around this 'Affair' has continued far beyond the event itself, and thus revealed a deeper rupture in France concerning the basic understanding of human beings. In this sense, Durkheim argues that the Dreyfus Affair was not merely an event of anti-Semitism, but it also represents a 'consequence and superficial symptom of a state of social malaise.' Durkheim notes:

When society undergoes suffering, it feels the need to find someone whom it can hold responsible for its sickness, on whom it can avenge its misfortunes; . . . these are the pariahs who serve as expletory victims. What confirms me in this interpretation is the way in which the result of Dreyfus's trial was greeted in 1894. People celebrated as a triumph what should have been a cause for public mourning. At last they know whom to blame for the economic troubles and moral distress. The trouble comes from the Jews. This charge has been officially proved. (Fenton, 1984: 119)

This ironic expression has already clearly revealed how saddened Durkheim was and his questioning of the deviation of the people's morality at that time. He believes that the Dreyfus Affair was not a single or accidental event, but a revelation of generalized moral issues. Related to this attitude, Durkheim strongly opposes the idea of defending the wrong judgment that Dreyfus' personal destiny should be subordinated to the interests of the state. From Durkheim's perspective, individuals and their rights are sacred. In an article replying to criticism of his '*Individualism and the Intellectuals*,' Durkheim explicitly points out that the value of individualism, if correctly understood, is the basis of morality in developed societies. Durkheim clearly distinguishes individualism from egoism. Out of this, the defense of individualism is also a defense of individuals' rights and liberties. Starting from the Dreyfus Affair, Durkheim believes that throughout this era, the most urgent problem that needs to be solved is not a single case related to the Jewish people, but a problem of maladjustment in the human heart. This is exactly the hugest problem reflected in the suicide phenomenon as a concentrating mirror. The Dreyfus Affair is just a representation of this problem on the surface.

In the face of this historical situation, Durkheim hopes, through a science of morality, to confront the sacred question inherited in the tradition of the history of thought and undertake the task of healing his society. While God has faded away, society can still hang onto sacredness. In the Dreyfus controversy, individuality has been degraded to physical needs. It is only in this way that society can hold onto sacredness. Durkheim's discussion of suicide from this perspective is meaningful because the most important manifestation of this 'instinct preference' is the concept of 'self-preservation.' While Durkheim understands suicide as a modern person's internal need, he does not deny that self-preservation is also their fundamental need. In *Moral Education*, he says:

In general, the prototype of selfish drives is what we call, improperly enough, the instinct of preservation—in other words, the tendency of every living creature to keep alive . . . For example, a suicide who jumps into the water makes every effort to save himself . . . The fact is that he clung to life more than he knew himself, no matter how miserable that life had been. Now I do not mean to say that pain can never triumph over this urge. But since it is strong, since the love of life is deeply rooted, one must have endured much suffering to end it. (Durkheim, 1961: 211–212)

It is very interesting that, coexisting with this instinctual preference for life, there is a 'social' demand for suicide. According to Durkheim's definition, suicide means a conscious choice of death. The only opposite of death is being, and there is no middle ground in between. Therefore, in *Suicide*, when discussing suicide, Durkheim definitely touches its opposite in a veiled way, as self-preservation. From this point on, we can interpret this work as having a dual structure. Suicide should be understood as a two-sided concept: one side is death and the other side is existence. By destroying the body, the suicidal action also threatens the sociality carried by an individual. Therefore, it can be seen as a corruption of the social moral order. However, in modern societies, suicide has eerily become an intrinsic need for the individual. The other side is existence, and Durkheim's purpose is to deal with the 'intrinsic need' mentioned above—in other words, in what sense will the instinct for self-preservation not be destroyed, and in what sense can an individual survive, especially in a society that is 'anomic.'

In this work, Durkheim defines suicide mainly through empirical facts. A common feature of these empirical facts is that the person committing suicide knows that he is putting himself to death, and he possesses the will to accomplish this self-destruction. This is a conclusion that seems to completely contradict rationality. If self-preservation is admitted to be a necessary element for understanding the modern individual, then it must be acknowledged that this violation of the principle of self-preservation is of profound theoretical significance, not only for sociology but for many other areas as well. Because Durkheim's definition of suicide breaks up the simple self-evident principle that has been taken as the 'basic starting point' of social and political theories for understanding the modern individual, we need to re-consider Hobbes' natural condition.

By discussing suicide, Durkheim emphasizes that it is only from beyond self-preservation that the principle of self-preservation can truly be understood. Therefore, Durkheim (2005: xliii) believes that his definition of suicide is helping one to understand suicide in the moral life as a whole, since it is through a series of intermediations that suicide is closely linked to other aspects of moral life. It is only from this perspective that Durkheim's concern can be understood: In what sense can an individual survive? Therefore, one of the basic logics of *Suicide* is to start with the social facts of sui generis like suicide, to discuss the collective tendency of morality that lies behind social facts.³

The method of studying suicide/existence

Suicide is certainly not the first work in which Durkheim discusses moral science. In the preface to the first edition of *The Division of Labor in Society*, Durkheim expresses the substantive concern of his academic thinking: 'This book is above all an attempt to treat the facts of moral life according to the methods of the positive sciences' (Durkheim, 1984: 25). Yet, he does not think that this means that there is a particularly close deductive relationship between science and morality. That is to say, it does not mean that morality can be directly deduced from scientific research. Durkheim (1984: 25) just hopes to 'establish a moral science.' On the other hand, this science cannot be seen as philosophy, as science and philosophy take their stands on very different ground. The basis of this science is that a specific morality is closely associated with a specific historical period. Durkheim argues that:

What above all is certain is that morality develops over the course of history and is dominated by historical causes, fulfilling a role in our life in time. If it is as it is at any given moment, it is because the conditions in which men are living at that time do not permit it to be otherwise. The proof of this is that it changes when these conditions change, and only in that eventuality... changes have occurred in the social structure that have necessitated this change in morals. Thus morality is formed, transformed and maintained for reasons of an experimental kind. It is these reasons alone that the science of morality sets out to determine. (Durkheim, 1984: 27)

Durkheim's expectation of sociology is that it should be rooted in concrete social reality and attempt to understand the above issues at the level of practice. This is the premise for solving social problems: the solution of real problems can only be reached by a science rooted in reality. Thus, this study of moral science is closely related to Durkheim's concern about society, because Durkheim does hope to find 'the direction in which our conduct ought to go' through scientific research (Durkheim, 1984: xxvi). Indeed, science does not demand the way the individual behaves, but if there is a scientific discovery of morality, combined with a starting point of 'self-preservation,' then the relationship between science and life can be immediately established. The question of morality is nothing but how people should live and how people choose to live, and this is 'a system of facts that

have been realized, linked to the total world system' (Durkheim, 1984: xxviii). That is to say, there are two 'faces' of moral science: one is to respect moral reality as facts, and the other involves the aspect of practice, that is, to provide us with the 'means of improving' morality (Durkheim, 1984: xxix). However, the establishment of this moral science is not easy. It requires a stringent method, because the various feelings, foresights, and judgments are ready-made and long-lasting in everyone's mind. Therefore, 'We must rigorously subject ourselves to the discipline of methodical doubt' (Durkheim, 1984: xxix). Finally, in this preface, Durkheim states that the starting point of the study is that of 'the connection between the individual personality and social solidarity' (Durkheim, 1984: xxx). His question is very specific and directly reflects the phenomena he observed of the era, that is: 'How does it come about that the individual, whilst becoming more autonomous, depends ever more closely upon society? How can he become at the same time more of an individual and yet more linked to society?' (Durkheim, 1984: xxx). This question presents an undeniable phenomenon, which is that the process of European modernization is accompanied by the progress of individualization in the secular sense, resembling the emergence of individuals as a phenomenon of modernity. This is not only the starting point of *The Division of Labor in Society*, but also one of the main themes of *Suicide*. Therefore, if we take Durkheim's discussion of suicide as a major turning point in the western intellectual tradition, then this turning point is not only about the increased breadth and depth in discussions of suicide brought forth by the rise of social science in the western world. What Durkheim is trying to clarify in this work is a substantial social theoretical issue on the existence of modern individuals, as well as on the nature of social action. Meanwhile, since sociological research must be rooted in reality and this work is filled with empirical facts and data, Durkheim has to reflect on the issue of methodology.

Therefore, in Book I (the first four chapters of *Suicide*), Durkheim first deals with many explanations for suicide. His making this the beginning of the book has a profound methodological implication: the intention to legislate sociology. The preface to the English edition shows that Durkheim aims to refute the social theory raised by Gabriel Tarde. More specifically, Durkheim believes that it is necessary to refute and exclude personal or other 'extra-social causes' in the study of suicide. By clarifying the suicide rate as a social phenomenon *sui generis*, Durkheim shows that each individual's suicide is a part of the social suicide phenomenon as a whole. The latter is a social fact with its own boundaries and clear measures. When connected with the suicides of individuals, it can be argued that a holistic nature can be seen in each individual's suicide, or that a latitude of a whole can be found. At the least, this latitude is a certain social nature of the suicide phenomenon *sui generis*; at the most, if suicide is a social phenomenon, the study of suicide can help us to understand the society *sui generis* (Simpson, 2005: xiii–xxv). However, this understanding is not adequate. In Book I, Durkheim spends a considerable portion refuting several popular opinions about suicide, for which there are both academic and methodological implications. While Durkheim admits that there are indeed suicides caused by extra-social factors, such as maniacal suicide,

melancholy suicide, obsessive suicide, and impulsive or automatic suicide, he maintains that these are not the suicides he is going to study. Durkheim also points out that the social suicide rate has no direct relationship to mental disorders, nor to the tendencies of the neurasthenic. What Durkheim really wants to refute here is the opinion that suicide is related to physical factors based on the body, such as race and hereditary physique. It is clear that this interpretation is closely related to Durkheim's encounter with the Dreyfus Affair, that is, the specific physicality of an individual is degraded to a physical need, an 'instinct preference,' and only the society possesses sacredness.

In addition, Durkheim also refutes the view that people of certain races/cultures/regions, because of their particular 'nature,' are unsuitable for the developments of the time or society. Through a series of rebuttals, Durkheim demands that in sociology, method should be clearly defined in order to establish a solid relationship between concepts and their corresponding objectives. Moreover, these objectives must be carefully established (Durkheim, 2005: xl). This means that, as is mentioned above, to establish a conceptual system for scientific research, it must be at the expense of abandoning common sense: these are two different systems of thinking. From this perspective, Durkheim criticizes the above explanations interpreting suicide merely as a condition in which individuals are 'ill,' so the actions and consequences of suicide have no connection with society. This is not only a kind of social categorization that Durkheim explicitly criticizes, but also a manifestation of the fundamental role that is played by the modern social taxonomy.

In the chapter on 'The relationship between suicide and other social phenomena,' Durkheim uses a large number of examples to show that suicide is a challenge to authority, whether it takes place in religious or traditional secular societies, and whether it is a challenge to religious power or political power. According to Durkheim, suicide means an effort through which the person will try to dominate the meaning of his/her own life completely. This domination is strongly prohibited by powers in any society. Therefore, suicide, in fact, reflects an extreme conflict between individual and authority in establishing the meaning of individual existence. This conflict has been growing more and more intense as history progresses, since the authority has stricter and stricter controls over the individual's body. The concept of 'self-preservation' is increasingly being reduced to the level of society. In the case in which moral authority cannot maintain control, the cause of suicide in Durkheim's 'concept system' naturally emerges. Therefore, the general understanding of suicide refuted by Durkheim in Book I of this study actually expresses Durkheim's refutation of the interpretation of such a modern social taxonomy. This taxonomy shows that the rationally based self, or self-awareness, and power, are dividing the world into types of rational/irrational, normal/abnormal, and health/disease. 'We' and 'they' are the basic psychological identity mechanisms of the modern society. In the explanations of suicide that Durkheim criticized at the beginning of this book, we can clearly discern traces of the growth of this modern classification mechanism. When the social authority cannot accept an individual's ultimate dominance over his/her own life, these individuals will be

categorized as ‘them,’ which represents irrationality and non-consciousness. This is definitely not just a matter of expediency, but also a mechanism of producing society. The first thing that Durkheim must do is jump out of this kind of mechanism—he wants to understand, through the rational thinking of the sociology of suicide, the moral temperament embodied in any normal person. The reason is, ‘At any given moment, moral constitution of society establishes the contingent of voluntary deaths’ (Durkheim, 2005: 263).

Durkheim explicitly freed suicide from ordinary authoritative interpretation. He pointed out that the type of suicide discussed in this section is not due to a mental illness but to a social disease. He says, ‘Many voluntary deaths... the majority have motives, and motives are not unfounded in reality. Not every suicide can be considered insane, without doing violence to language’ (Durkheim, 2005: 12). Related to this judgment, he spends a lot of space in this book discussing the problem of the human heart, and thus the analysis of ‘emotion’ becomes a basic dimension in his understanding of suicide; this emotion is closely related to moral facts. That is to say, different kinds of suicide are closely related to different types of social moral facts: ‘Suicide is a close kin to genuine virtues, which it simply exaggerates’ (Durkheim, 2005: 338). In this book, social moral facts are, of course, referring to several types of moral reality related to egoism and altruism. That is to say, what Durkheim presupposed when discussing several types of suicide is actually several types of moral realities. These types of moralities are, first and foremost, embodied in the individual’s spiritual temperament and have a significant relationship with a person’s choice of survival or death.

This is a basic theoretical starting point for Durkheim and is also the essence of his methodology, because he needs to show through this section of the book why it is possible for sociology to study an extremely individual event—suicide—from a social perspective. In the section ‘How to determine social causes and social types,’ Durkheim shows that it is almost impossible to classify suicides according to morphological type or characteristics, but we can study it in relation to the social conditions that generate it. This kind of study of social conditions is not morphological, but an etiological study (Durkheim, 2005: 240). That is to say, we trace back from the phenomenon of suicide to the image of the society that shapes the image of an individual suicide. The premise of this research method is to emphasize the suicide or survival rate in society. Moreover, it requires that the types of suicide have a sufficient relationship with the moral temper of society. The fundamental theoretical basis for this investigation of social moral temper is that various types of social temperament will be concretely presented on the individual, that is, ‘It is society which, fashioning us in its image... society itself incarnated and individualized in each one of us’ (Durkheim, 2005: 170). When discussing the relationship between society and individual, the tone that Durkheim uses here is even similar to a discussion about the relationship between God and the individual:

The influence of society is what has aroused in us the sentiments of sympathy and solidarity drawing us toward others; it is society which, fashioning us in its image, fills

us with religious, political and moral beliefs that control our actions. To play our social role we have striven to extend our intelligence and it is still society that has supplied us with tools for this development by transmitting to us its trust fund of knowledge. (Durkheim, 2005: 170)

To put it more clearly, suicide is an expression of the collective ethos of a particular society for individuals. This expression even becomes a source of suicidal tendencies or demands on the individual, as Durkheim says:

Each social group really has a collective inclination for this act, quite its own, and the source of all individual inclination, rather than their result. It is made up of the currents of egoism, altruism, or anomie, which are widespread in modern society. The tendency to burnout, positive renunciation, or irritating irritability stems from these trends. These tendencies of the whole social body, by affecting individuals, cause them to commit suicide. It is in this sense that the understanding of an individual's suicidal behavior is an understanding of society. (Durkheim, 2005: 264)

Egoism: A phenomenological sociology on modern life and sociology

In the history of sociology, *Suicide* is often considered a benchmark for positivist research. Certainly, this book is full of all kinds of data, cases, and charts. Durkheim hopes to use this work to lay the foundation for empirical sociological study, and this work does shoulder the heavy responsibility. However, this classic image obscures the other side of the work: Durkheim also has spent massive amounts of space on the topic of 'human' and 'moral,' among which his discussion about egoism and altruism reveals the characteristics of phenomenological sociology. This paper argues that the combination of these two aspects makes *Suicide* a classical social theory work.

Egoism

Durkheim's research on egoistic suicide analyzes data and empirical materials respectively from religious, domestic, and political society. Durkheim's famous explanation is that if the suicide rate is low, or if a certain social environment can obtain a greater probability of self-preservation, this means that in these societies there is a divine nature of 'social solidarity,' or sacred social environment within which the individual is also 'coated' with sociality/sacredness.

Therefore, understanding egoistic suicide requires further analysis of egoism and individualism. This is, of course, the most famous distinction made by Durkheim. In the article 'Individualism and intellectuals,' Durkheim points out that individualism and egoism are two different things. Unlike egoism, his individualism sees individual motivation as the source of evil. In *Suicide*, Durkheim

interprets egoism as excessive individualism (Durkheim, 2005: 168). This understanding of egoism, as the most important part of his theory, runs throughout the whole book on suicide. It is well known that this excessive individualism is one of two 'infinite diseases' of modern people. Durkheim's discussion of infinite disease clearly indicates a characteristic of a phenomenological sociology. He emphasizes that this disease of excessive individualism is due to the over-developed ability to reflect: thought continuously goes back to itself, taking itself, rather than any external object, as the object of reflection. This results in an infinite dream. For Durkheim, this can be seen as a consequence of the over-development of individualism in a modern sense. Along with the development and intricacy of the division of labor in modern society and the development of modern science, the thinking structure of the modern ordinary individual is becoming more developed, sophisticated, and complex. Each individual becomes more and more like a modern intellectual, using a lot of imagination and concepts to understand the world. However, the more the modern individual uses pure concepts and imagination to understand his/her world, the farther away the world is from this individual. In addition, this way of understanding his/her world has its own mechanism of growth and reproduction. As a result, thinking and being a thinker are more isolated in the world because 'self-absorption is not a good method of attaching one's self to others' (Durkheim, 2005: 242). Furthermore, if a person wants to think about others, he must suspend his relationship with others, 'and more so' when reflecting on him- or herself (Durkheim, 2005: 242).

Therefore, in this phenomenological sociology of the modern individual, Durkheim discovered that one important characteristic of modernity is that it reflects on excessive development. Reflection means detachment, and detachment and engagement cannot coexist. Reflection requires cessation of engagement. Life or human consciousness cannot be completely detached from its own life/conscious stream and undergoes thorough and objective reflection. However, the basic feature of modern thinking since the Enlightenment is the excessive development of reflection—modern people have unlimited ability to reflect. This reflection in the context of the modern era even has its own sacredness. Confronting such a situation, in contrast, Durkheim adds:

All internal life draws its primary material from without. All we can think of is objects or our conceptions of them. We cannot reflect our consciousness in a purely undetermined state; in this shape, it is inconceivable. Now consciousness becomes determined only when affected by something not itself. Therefore, if the individualization of consciousness goes beyond a certain point, if it is too completely removed from other beings, it will no longer be associated with the source of nutrients it normally receives, and it will no longer be useful. Because it creates a gap around it, it also makes itself blank, and there is nothing to think about except its own misfortune. In addition to its own emptiness and the depression caused by it, it has no object of thinking. It is satisfied with this emptiness with a pathological joy, sinking into this emptiness. And describe it with a word of his hero. (Durkheim, 2005: 242–243)

This hero is Raphael, or Raphael of Lamartine. Durkheim cites Lamartine's work detailing this state:

Its characteristic is a condition of melancholic languor which relaxes all the springs of action. Business, public affairs, useful work, even domestic duties inspire the person only with indifference and aversion. He is unwilling to emerge from himself. On the other hand, what is lost in activity is made up for in thought and inner life. In revulsion from its surroundings consciousness becomes self-preoccupied, takes itself as its proper and unique study, and undertakes as its main task self-observation and self-analysis. But by this extreme concentration it merely deepens the chasm separating it from the rest of the universe. The moment the individual becomes so enamoured of himself, inevitably he increasingly detaches himself from everything external and emphasizes the isolation in which he lives, to the point of worship. (Durkheim, 2005: 242)

Durkheim quoted this passage from page 6 of the French version of *Raphael*. Concepts of 'infinity' and 'suicide' not only appeared in this substantive paragraph of Raphael, but also in the writings of many other famous thinkers or writers toward the end of the century, such as Schopenhauer and Hartmann (Meštrović, 1991: 78). For Durkheim, this is a general typical ethos by the end of the century. Durkheim discovered a happy illusion of modern people, which has a fascinating aspect in that this illusion is related to modern people's understanding of the soul as a pathway from the transparency of the outside to the depth and darkness of the interior. We can recognize one part of it, but we cannot understand it thoroughly. Durkheim calls the happy illusion 'a lively melancholy, full enough of thoughts, impressions, communing with the infinite, half-obscurity of my own soul, so that I had no wish to abandon it' (Durkheim, 2005: 243). In such a state, the individual acquires a sense of heroism in the modern sense in that he enters his own illusion infinitely, away from real life, and thus believes in obtaining sacredness: 'I desired no longer to see men, but only nature and God' (Durkheim, 2005: 243). This is an expression of the ultimate modernist traits in the individual, because this description of the soul reveals that consciousness cannot really grasp the whole state of the soul. For Meštrović (1988: 94–95), it seems that, like the Freudian theory of unconsciousness, this theory also comes from Schopenhauer's understanding of the will. However, as a sociologist, Durkheim insists that the relationship with society is the key to understanding the individual's life. Thus, he says, 'In this case the bond attaching man to life relaxes because that attaching him to society is itself slack' (Durkheim, 2005: 173). One of the reasons for this weakening relationship is the tremendous development of individual self-reflection and even the advancement of science, that is, modern knowledge (Durkheim, 2005: 245). In Durkheim's view, on the one hand, the individual has acquired a greatly developed ability to reflect; on the other hand, the individual in this new era could not find a kind of social reality in which to undertake this reflection in the chaotic society of that

time, and the individual could not bear the burden of 'ignorance' that he found, because if mind . . .

. . . cannot discover the claims to existence of the objects of its questioning—and it would be miraculous if it so soon succeeded in solving so many mysteries—it will deny them all reality, the mere formulation of the problem already implying an inclination to negative solutions. (Durkheim, 2005: 245)

Simply put, the individual does not know what to do, and the modern society, which is inherently deficient, neither has taught nor can teach him this. Egoism cannot solve the problem of the meaning of life, because egoism causes the actor to detach too much from reality, making the actor irrelevant to the society in which he lives. The more this is so, the less the actor is able to understand himself, and the more mysterious he is to himself. On the other hand, from the perspective of the duality of human beings, if society, which is higher than the individual, and that the individual expresses and serves, is separated from the individual and the bond between them is too weak, then the individual obviously cannot draw strength from it and survive through it.

The essence of self-preservation for Durkheim

People cannot be completely detached from social reality and being self-reflective. Durkheim's understanding of the human being is that the individual must attach to something 'beyond' himself/herself in order to survive. That is to say, the meaning of life must be something that transcends life, and life cannot provide a foundation for itself:

The individual alone is not a sufficient end for his activity. He is too little. He is not only hemmed in spatially; he is also strictly limited temporally. When, therefore, we have no other object than ourselves we cannot avoid the thought that our efforts will finally end in nothingness, since we ourselves disappear. But annihilation terrifies us. Under these conditions one would lose courage to live, that is, to act and struggle, since nothing will remain of our exertions. The state of egoism, in other words, is supposed to be contradictory to human nature and, consequently, too uncertain to have chances of permanence. (Durkheim, 2005: 169)

Durkheim believes that in order to survive, individuals must preserve life within social reality. For Durkheim, the essence of civilization lies in the 'social.' At this point, society and survival are inseparable. If a person is not civilized, he cannot survive:

Yet this social man is the essence of the civilized man; he is the masterpiece of existence. Thus we are bereft of reasons for existence; for the only life to which we could cling no longer corresponds to anything actual; the only existence still based upon

reality no longer meets our needs. Because we have been initiated into a higher existence, the one which satisfies an animal or a child can satisfy us no more and the other itself fades and leaves us helpless. So there is nothing more for our efforts to lay hold of, and we feel that they lose themselves in emptiness. (Durkheim, 2005: 171)

Thus, in this regard, as the radical form of individualism, egoism must be one of the fundamental factors for understanding suicide. As Durkheim says: 'Egoism is not merely a contributing factor in it; it is its generating cause' (Durkheim, 2005: 173). According to Durkheim's basic principles raised through the analysis of egoistic suicide, in order to preserve life, it is necessary to make society have 'sufficient continuity to acquire a personal aspect, a history of its own, to which its members may feel attachment' (Durkheim, 2005: 345).

However, this discussion of individualism is obviously not enough. The complexity of the problem lies in the fact that this egoism, as extreme individualism, still carries the attributes of individualism. A basic feature of modern society is that with the development of individualism, society develops divinity in ordinary individuals and is essential to our understanding of the meaning of the individual (Durkheim, 2005: 298–303). In the social sense, the victim of suicide is not only the dead person himself/herself, but also the sociality in the person. That is, an individual's suicide threatens the universal sociality by destroying his own life and by denying the meaning of his own existence. Durkheim says:

But today he has acquired a kind of dignity which places him above himself as well as above society. So long as his conduct has not caused him to forfeit the title of man, he seems to us to share in some degree in that quality *sui generis* ascribed by every religion to its gods which renders them inviolable by everything mortal. He has become tinged with religious value; man has become a god for men. Therefore, any attempt against his life suggests sacrilege. Suicide is such an attempt. No matter who strikes the blow, it causes scandal by violation of the sacrosanct quality within us which we must respect in ourselves as well as in others. (Durkheim, 2005: 299)

This sacredness is not external to the individual, but is embodied in the basic emotions of each person. Durkheim thus comes up with a fundamental law of individualism: precisely because each individual embodies the ideal sanctity of all human beings, the dignity of each individual as an individual is hard to transcend. However, Durkheim also stresses that our dignity as a moral existence 'has not for that reason become our property, and we have not acquired the right to ignore it' (Durkheim, 2005: 302). Therefore, in Durkheim's view, suicide hurts not only the individual but also the sacredness of all human beings that exists within and also above ourselves. It is the authority that maintains the collectiveness of its members that is threatened.

Therefore, we can clearly discover two clues from the book: the first clue is the dominance of abstract society over individuals. However, we must not simply understand this decisive role. It does not simply mean society deciding over the

individual. At the same time, we must also understand that the differentiation and division of labor described by Durkheim are not just about social dominance: It is precisely in this state of modernity that moral individualism becomes possible. The second clue is moral individualism itself. Durkheim's individualism must be moral in this sense. In Durkheim's view, a good society lies in its 'open practices' of morality in Kant's sense. These two clues also imply a relationship between the individual and society that Durkheim understands: 'More individual, more social.' A healthy relationship between the individual and society is made possible by the moral state Durkheim describes at the end of the book. This moral state is the religion of human nature. In his article, 'Individualism and intellectuals,' Durkheim has a detailed description of this. Durkheim believes concerning this religion:

Far from limiting itself to flattering our instincts, it fixes before us an ideal which infinitely surpasses nature. For ours is not naturally a wise and pure reason which, purged of all personal motives, would legislate in the abstract its own conduct. Doubtless, if the dignity of the individual came from his personal characteristics, from the peculiarities which distinguish him from others, we might fear that it would shut him off in a sort of moral egoism which would make any solidarity impossible. But in reality, he receives dignity from a higher source, one which he shares with all men. If he has a right to this religious respect, it is because he partakes of humanity. It is humanity which is worthy of respect and sacred. Now it is not all in him. It is diffused among all his fellowmen and consequently he cannot adopt it as the aim of his conduct without being obliged to come out of himself and relate to others. The cult, of which he is at once both object and agent, does not address itself to the particular being which he is and which bears his name, but to the human person (*la personne humaine*) wherever it is to be found, and in whatever form it is embodied. Impersonal and anonymous, such an aim, then, soars far above all individual minds (*consciences particulieres*) and can thus serve them as a rallying point. (Durkheim, 1973: 48)

Durkheim believes that everyone possesses a sacred thing, which is humanity, and thus it becomes inviolable (Durkheim, 1973: 48). His humanism is not a delusion, but a practical conclusion in his social philosophy. Individualism can only be studied from this perspective. Defending our individual rights is defending the most important and sacred thing in society. Individuals, society, and the state are thus inseparable. The destiny of the individual is the destiny of the state. Each individual is the most authoritative representative of the country. Therefore, Durkheim says that we have so many kinds of suicides today, not for individual reasons, nor because of individuality or any particular situation, but because of the problems in the country and society. It is precisely because we lack a moral sentiment that connects us to each other today that we neither obey ourselves nor obey our society, and thus commit suicide. According to Durkheim (1973: 54), the social and political problem in France at the time was precisely that, on the one

hand, ‘*Et propter vitam vivendi perdere causas* —To destroy the reasons for living for the sake of life’; on the other hand, because of the over-disenchantment in modern times, the French person as an individual does not know how to use the freedom won in the struggle and hardships in the past century. As a result, ‘We felt that wind of sadness and discouragement rise over the land which daily grew stronger and eventually finished by disheartening the least resistant spirits’ (Durkheim, 1973: 55). How can self-preservation as an ‘instinct preference’ counter this powerful force? We found in the first chapter that suicide, like self-preservation, has become an inherent need of modern human nature. The reason is not only Hobbesian anomie, but also the demands of modern society and its products (egoism). Therefore, the essence of self-preservation is, of course, not the self, but the non-self.

Rules of egoistic suicide and sociology

Durkheim’s description of egoism is almost identical to his points in *The Rules of Sociological Method*. Conversely, his requirements for sociology in *The Rules of Sociological Method* are almost identical to the discussions of self-preservation in *Suicide*. Durkheim says that the basic rule of the research method of sociology is to ‘consider social facts as things,’ and the most important obstacle to be overcome is ‘preconceptions.’ Durkheim’s description here is exactly the same as his words on egoism:

If this has been true for the natural sciences, how much more had it to be true for sociology... It is above all in sociology that these preconceptions, to employ again Bacon’s expression, are capable of holding sway over the mind, substituting themselves for things. (Durkheim, 1982: 62)

However, society cannot be studied through concepts. The study of sociology cannot be realized in this way. Durkheim continues:

The apparent justification for this view derives from the fact that since the details of social life swamp the consciousness from all sides, it has not a sufficiently strong perception of the details to feel the reality behind them. Lacking ties that are firm enough or close enough to us, this all produces the impression upon us that it is clinging to nothing and floating in a vacuum, consisting of matter half unreal and infinitely malleable. This is why so many thinkers have seen in the social organization mere combinations which are artificial and to some degree arbitrary. (Durkheim, 1982: 63)

Thus, if sociology wants to become a science, if it wants to survive and develop, it must not explore concepts or ideas or fantasies; rather, it must firmly root itself in society and reality. For sociological studies, ‘Social phenomena are things and should be treated as such... To treat phenomena as things is to treat them as data, and this constitutes the starting point for science’ (Durkheim, 1982: 69).

Thus, for Durkheim, sociology must draw nourishment from outside itself; otherwise, sociology will not exist. Here, Durkheim's definition of sociology and its studies is identical to his definition of the modern individual and his/her actions in the sense of duality. This definition is both of modern self-preservation for the modern individual and of the basic possibility for sociology. In his book *The Rules of Sociological Method*, Durkheim repeatedly emphasizes this, because the development of sociology itself is particularly prone to phenomena that only start from non-scientific concepts. However, this will inevitably lead to the withering and dying of sociology. For Durkheim, objective science must start from 'sense-perceptions and not from concepts that have been formed independently from it' (Durkheim, 1982: 81).

Sociology must root itself in social reality, for only in this way can it have vitality. In defining this social fact, Durkheim makes it through the distinction between normal and abnormal social phenomena. He defines the normal and abnormal as 'those that are entirely appropriate and those that should be different from what they are' (Durkheim, 1982: 81), respectively. In this definition, the two words, 'normal' and 'abnormal,' are presupposed by norms, rules, and health, that is, the sacredness of society that Durkheim defines. Durkheim says that the phenomena of normal and pathological have often been confused (Durkheim, 1982: 87–93). How then, can we use scientific methods to carry out sociological studies? Science can help people to think about moral issues, but we cannot ignore practices. The emphasis on rules or sacredness must be implemented in specific social situations: 'The conditions of health and sickness cannot be defined in *abstracto* or absolutely' (Durkheim, 1982: 92). The normal social reality in a specific era and space is not without moral implications. Sociologists need to remember this:

Consequently, to know whether the term is merited for a social fact, it is not enough to observe the form in which it occurs in the majority of societies which belong to a species: we must also be careful to observe the societies at the corresponding phase of their evolution. (Durkheim, 1982: 92)

On the other hand, just like Durkheim's other requirement for self-preservation being conveyed by altruism suicide, individuals cannot be fully integrated into society.⁴ Sociology must also have its own abstraction. As a science, sociology does not simply mean social facts, because to use the method of 'observing' means that the observer must maintain a certain distance from the entity he observes. Therefore, Durkheim says:

Those facts which appear in the most common forms we shall call normal, and the rest morbid or pathological. Let us agree to designate as the average type the hypothetical being which might be constituted by assembling in one entity, as a kind of individual abstraction, the most frequently occurring characteristics of the species in their most frequent forms. We may then say that the normal type merges into the

average type and that any deviation from that standard of healthiness is a morbid phenomenon. (Durkheim, 1982: 91–92)

If sociology wants to become a science, it must be able to engage in abstraction and scientific rationality and also be self-aware methodologically. In other words, sociology also requires a certain distance from the society being observed. Only in this way will there be ‘insight’ and scientific ideas. However, at this level, Durkheim’s discussion is mainly reflected in his understanding of anomic suicide. That is to say, if Durkheim’s understanding of sociological methodology is reflected in his analyses of three types of suicide, then for the egoistic type, his sociological requirements are mainly expressed on the social level, and for the anomic suicide, mainly on the scientific level. Sociology must have its scientific norms, but we cannot understand the concept of anomie in such a simple way.

Anomie and the basic requirements of sociology

According to Meštrović (1988), today’s understanding of the term ‘anomie’ has been influenced mainly by Parsons and Merton. Mestrovic argues that Durkheim never uses the concept of ‘normlessness.’ His understanding of the concept of anomie is also different from that of normlessness. Meštrović highlighted Schopenhauer’s influence on Durkheim. This influence was largely ignored by the sociological tradition after Merton. In Mestrovic’s view, the concept of anomie, and the related ‘suicide’ concept, is closely related to Schopenhauer’s understanding of will: ‘As Henry Durkheim⁵ implies, if morality is Durkheim’s religion, then for him, anomie is a secular version of sin’ (Meštrović, 1988: 62). Mestrovic found that the core of Durkheim’s theory is an understanding of human nature that is similar to Schopenhauer’s concept of will.

Mestrovic argues that Durkheim’s concept of anomie and Freud’s concept of id, ego, and super-ego (ID/ES) were both influenced first by Schopenhauer and then as sociological achievements born in France and Germany. This work, which is different from the mainstream understanding of Durkheim in the history of sociology, has a textual basis and is not a single case. In another tradition, Jingdong Qu (2017) dissected the study of anomie from the perspective of existential phenomenology. This research starts on the path of existential phenomenology and understands anomie as Heidegger’s *Un-verborgenheit*. Furthermore, from the dual perspectives of daily life and power history, Qu locates anomie within the actor’s Dasein, being-in-the-world. He sees this research as a sociological study. This has paved the way for us to understand the close relationship between Durkheim’s anomie and sociology as a moral personality. It is in this sense that Meng Li’s comments on this work belong under the topic of “the ‘Absence of Society’ or the ‘Crisis’ of Sociology.” This concept explains the most profound dilemma of Durkheim’s sociology: ‘Anomie’ means ‘insufficient social presence in the individual and the absence of society’ (Qu, 2017: 34). Thus, this concept exposes the

fundamental dilemma of sociology: How can sociology discuss the absence of society? Can modernity be discussed in modernity?

It is because of the understanding of the above two traditions that we find that the concepts of anomie and anomic suicide reveal Durkheim's basic setting of sociology: just because of anomie, sociology is able to rethink society and discuss the question of how it is possible, as well as how sociology is possible. These two issues are closely related to one another, because whether Durkheim can understand a 'society' from complex social phenomena, statistical data, and empirical materials through a phenomenological reduction means whether sociology can be established at all. For Durkheim, having an independent object for research is a necessary condition for the existence of sociology. In addition, the concept of anomie provides him with an unusual perspective because such a perspective does not seem to have an object. However, just as we found in the analysis in the first section of this article, Durkheim's empirical understanding of suicide lies in the anomie state of the French society in which he lived and that he studied. Durkheim interprets the anomie state as a Hobbesian war state and discovers the inherent need for suicide within the natural state of man. Therefore, the concept of anomie especially requires the morality of sociology itself.

Along with *Suicide*, Durkheim's most famous discussion of anomie is in the preface to the second edition of *The Division of Labor in Society*. In this preface, Durkheim spends tremendous space describing anomie in the modern industrial and commercial society. As mentioned earlier, this is basically a replica of the Hobbesian state of war. For Durkheim, it is a pathological phenomenon. Durkheim pointed out that the state of crisis and the state of anomie in modern industry and commerce are constant and normal. This has created a modern sense of infinity in man's desire (Durkheim, 2005: 216–217). As industry and commerce are increasingly occupying a basic position in modern society, the chaos will be extended to other fields endlessly and increasingly occupy dominant positions and extend to the human mind: greed is aroused without ending and is unable to calm down. The basic characteristic of this desire is 'beyond,' that is, constantly surpassing the satisfaction that has been obtained. Once the desire is fulfilled, it will further surpass reality and require more. The process is endless, and reality is meaningless compared to this endless future. What the actor is eager for is eternal freshness, the next moment without ending. Therefore, the actor has no real power to face even the tiniest setback, because the meaning does not lie in the present or the past. This has the same structure as modern science. This perspective from Durkheim is obviously characteristic of phenomenological sociology, and it suggests that Durkheim clearly recognizes that in the state of anomie, the next moment at every moment does not provide a solid foundation for the existence of life. What Durkheim wants to emphasize is obviously the individual's adherence and attachment to stable values and social morality. These are two different perspectives on the same thing, because the existence of modern people cannot have a

solid foundation. The individual needs to experience a sense of belonging in the next moment, which does not yet exist. However, the pains and frustrations are in the present. That is to say, the person who placed the sense of belonging in the next moment has nowhere in which to resolve the painful feelings of this moment. For Durkheim, this difficult setback is the limit, one of the conditions that shape life. However, for those people who put all their hopes in the future, things in the past have disappeared and lost any meaning. Therefore, there is no possibility that the past (history) will help him to resolve current difficulties. The person who suffers from this infinite disease is unable to recognize himself because his expectations for the future make him unable to reflect. Therefore, once a setback occurs, in his own opinion, when it is impossible to obtain new satisfaction in the future, this current life is nothing compared to the past life. Thus, it is not surprising that self-harm is caused by certain triggering events. Because the person's life is all tied to the next moment and in the current or repetitive or fixed now, he cannot see the future, and of course he regards his life as having no value.

In *Suicide*, Durkheim used Faust in Goethe's works as an example of the spiritual temperament of such a modern person. Durkheim (1930: 274; 2005: 208) describes this typical temperament as follows: 'Unlimited desires are insatiable by definition and insatiability is rightly considered a sign of morbidity... Inextinguishable thirst is constantly renewed torture.'

This is a person who suffers from infinite disease. This kind of person is too excited, has unlimited desires, and strives to get rid of all restrictions. Passion overwhelms the border and cannot be fixed on any kind of goal. This state can even become the 'human nature' that some people conceptualize and is the basis of certain realities (Durkheim, 2005: 208). The desire for the infinite even becomes a symbol of moral distinction in daily life; however, it can only be presented in terms of unlimited 'will.' This 'will' has only one rule, that there is no rule, and there is no such rule that causes people to suffer. The progress of ruthlessness, coldness, and rapidity becomes a kind of belief. In the '*Individual Forms of the Different Types of Suicide*', Durkheim described the state of anomic suicide with the help of Goethe's novel, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. Werther claims to have a torrent-like heart, indulges in infinity, and commits suicide due to loss of love. For René of Chateaubriand, when his inner desire is not satisfied, he laments, 'Is it my fault if I everywhere find limits, if everything once experienced has no value for me?' (Durkheim, 2005: 250). The reason for this pain is that there is no limit, so people cannot stand any setbacks.

All of this has a realistic foundation. Through empirical materials, Durkheim says that the reality in Europe at the time, including France, is represented by two points: the economic progress that frees industrial relations from all restrictions, and the liberation of desire brought about by 'the apotheosis of well-being' (Durkheim, 2005: 216).

Based on this experience, Faust becomes a natural representative of anomie. However, his attitude toward this spiritual temperament is the same as that of egoism:

Yet human nature is substantially the same among all men, in its essential qualities. It is not human nature which can assign the variable limits necessary to our needs. They are thus unlimited so far as they depend on the individual alone. Irrespective of any external regulatory force, our capacity for feeling is in itself an insatiable and bottomless abyss. (Durkheim, 2005: 208)

When discussing the relationship between family and suicide rates in the chapter on egoistic suicide, Durkheim specifically emphasized that we cannot discuss the issue of self-preservation from a utilitarian perspective: emotional issues are the key. This is, of course, the essence of Durkheim's sociology. On the other hand, passions cannot be overwhelmed, but must have rules to limit them; people can only rely on society to establish boundaries for passion:

Men would never consent to restrict their desires if they felt justified in passing the assigned limit. But, for reasons given above, they cannot assign themselves this law of justice. So they must receive it from an authority which they respect, to which they yield spontaneously. Either directly and as a whole, or through the agency of one of its organs, society alone can play this moderating role; for it is the only moral power superior to the individual, the authority of which he accepts. It alone has the power necessary to stipulate law and to set the point beyond which the passions must not go. Finally, it alone can estimate the reward to be prospectively offered to every class of human functionary, in the name of the common interest. (Durkheim, 2005: 209)

Egoistic suicide is due to the loosening tie between the individual and society. People cannot find the basis of life (Durkheim, 2005: 219). Altruistic suicide is due to closeness between individuals and society; the foundation of life that people find is far beyond the life itself. Although for Durkheim, both anomic suicide and egoistic suicide resulted from the 'insufficient presence in individuals' (Durkheim, 2005: 219), 'the sphere of its absence' is different. It is not about how individuals attach to society, but rather about how society regulates individuals: 'In egoistic suicide it is deficient in truly collective activity, thus depriving the latter of object and meaning. In anomic suicide, society's influence is lacking in the basically individual passions, thus leaving them without a checkrein' (Durkheim, 2005: 219). Thus, egoistic suicide happens mainly in the intellectual world, while anomic suicide happens mainly in the industrial or commercial world.

As described above, Durkheim (2005: 250–251) believes that egoistic suicide and anomic suicide are two different aspects of the same modernity. Moreover, the three types of suicides can usually be mixed together in daily life. Each one is

unlikely to occur in an isolated and pure state, but may appear as part of a composite form, or characteristics of several may be present in one suicide.

If the important meaning of former types of suicide for understanding sociology is that sociology must prevent thinking on the basis of prejudice, must prevent its own immersion into its own world, and must place itself into society, then, the anomic suicide shows the other side of the dual structure: Durkheim's sociology must be cautious about the inner passion of the subject. This passion includes two aspects: the passion for facts and the passion for methodology. In *Phenomenological Sociology*, Ferguson (2006) says, 'Modern philosophy . . . tends toward self-contemplation; to thinking about thinking.' This is not only a characteristic of modern philosophy, but is also the inherent growth mechanism and crisis of modern human beings and sociology as a modern subject. Since sociology is supposed to prevent prejudice in everyday life, it also needs to prevent problems arising from the internal development of its conceptual system and the rational system of the discipline. The crucial focus of this issue is that if sociological research completely obeys desires or wills, this will result in increasingly loosened links to reality.

This does not mean that sociology does not require methodology. On the contrary, the scientific nature of sociology is mainly reflected in its methodological self-awareness. Durkheim explicitly refuted the attitude of contempt for methodology. This is considered of vital importance for sociology to become a kind of modern science, especially because method can limit people's passions and prejudices. Durkheim believes that methods are needed for sociology to become a modern science. This is because using or not using specific rules means having totally different understandings of the 'social facts' (Durkheim, 1982: 103).

For Durkheim, the goal of understanding society is very difficult. Sociology must realize that its own discoveries are not only derived from the methods it uses but, more importantly, it must also understand that society itself has its own rules, which is the premise of the establishment of sociology:

The study of facts . . . one must come to understand that they are of one definite sort and not another; that is to say, they have a constant mode of existence, a nature from which necessary relationships are derived. In other words, one must have arrived at the notion of laws; the sense that there are laws is the determining factor of scientific thought. (Durkheim, 1973: 5)

It is difficult for science to grasp its inner substantive tasks and avoid external problems, because such troubles are very specific and extremely influential. Durkheim's understanding of good sociological research is very similar to his discussions about suicide. By the end of Chapter III, 'Rules for the distinction of the normal from the pathological,' Durkheim uses sentences that could almost be used to describe the disease of infinity to describe those actions and thoughts that his method of sociology will regulate (Durkheim, 1982: 104). Then, by

declaring that his method of sociology is 'healthy,' Durkheim almost treats sociology the way he treats suicide or self-preservation. He says that the practical dilemma that is caused by the wrong method would be . . .

. . . avoided if what is desirable is declared to be what is healthy, and if the state of health is something definite, inherent in things, for at the same time the extent of our effort is given and defined. There is no longer need to pursue desperately an end which recedes as we move forward; we need only to work steadily and persistently to maintain the normal state, to re-establish it if it is disturbed, and to rediscover the conditions of normality if they happen to change. (Durkheim, 1982: 104)

How is one to achieve this method? By the end of this book about method, Durkheim argues:

For, so long as it remains embroiled in partisan struggles and is content to elaborate, with indeed more logic than commonly employed, common ideas, and in consequence presumes no special competence, it has no right to speak authoritatively enough to quell passions and dispel prejudices. (Durkheim, 1982: 163)

That is to say, the crisis of sociology also lies in research from the perspective of concepts that are influenced by prejudices from politics, common sense, and so on. On the basis of such a condition, Durkheim asks people to confront things to 'discard concepts which they are in the habit of applying to a particular order of things, to rethink these things with renewed effort' (Durkheim, 1982: 163). What Durkheim worried about has already regenerated in another form in today's 'over-developed' sociology: concepts generate concepts, methodology creates methodology, and such emergences are endless. The original intention of sociology is to study society. However, in order to achieve this goal, today's sociologists spend far more effort on tools than on research topics. Tools replace goals, and tools themselves become goals. This process never ends and is, of course, unable to achieve an understanding of the 'laws' of the outside world.

However, the modernity presented by Durkheim's anomic suicides and the resulting understanding of sociology clearly does not stop there. One of Durkheim's expectations of sociology is that it responds to the modern social state of 'fleeting.' This state of 'fleeting' refers not only to modern society, but also to the state of sociology itself, which is the other side of 'passion.' As a part of modern science, sociology also has the characteristics of being unsatisfied with every moment, having an endless desire for infinity. The object of this desire is 'social facts.' However, this alone does not guarantee the vitality of sociology, because its ultimate state is anomie in the name of norms and normal. This state of sociology is a representation of modern society. In *The Division of Labor in Society*, Durkheim presents a rich discussion of the anomic state of division of labor. This discussion also involves scientific issues. According to Durkheim, the relationship between anomie and science is brought about by the division of labor.

In the sense of methodology, for the division of intellectual labor, the more developed the profession is, the more the science is divided into various detailed studies that have no link with one another, no longer forming a solid whole. Such science is 'carved up into a host of detailed studies that have no link with one another, no longer forms a solid whole' (Durkheim, 1984: 294). However, the development of this situation will lead scientists to concentrate on the development of the subject itself, meanwhile forgetting its meaning: 'Each special science has an absolute value, and that the scientist must devote himself to his special research without caring about whether it serves any purpose or leads anywhere' (Durkheim, 1984: 294). Specific to sociology, this infinitely detailed division of intellectual labor causes an infinite desire for social facts in various subdivisions, which obviously leads to the 'forgetting' of the original integral meaning of its subject. Durkheim clearly states that the collective consciousness of science 'diminishes' (Durkheim, 1984: 301) along with the growing development of the division of intellectual labor. This is especially true in the field of moral science, where various sciences follow the internal order established by their respective methodological rules, 'as if the various orders of facts that they are studying formed so many independent worlds' (Durkheim, 1984: 304). However, the facts in reality are in sufficient contact with each other, and 'the same is true for corresponding sciences' (Durkheim, 1984: 304). For Durkheim, this state of being is too specialized: merely paying attention to the facts and losing unity is also a kind of anomie.

This 'cult of truth,' which means infinite passion and desire for facts, is intrinsically consistent with infinity and will eventually lead to anomie in science, because this kind of acquisition of facts has no end, and eventually becomes an infinite loop. In addition, this kind of intellectual anomie can lead to pathological consequences, such as suicide (Meštrović, 1988: 84). As for sociology, this type of suicide refers to the fact that the subject loses its vitality—what withers is not just imagination. In reading of *The Rules of Sociological Method*, Meštrović (1988) found that the definition of science and social facts is common: it lies in the restrictions and constraints on the will. This reading shows that methods can be used to restrict passion, but limiting the passion of the method itself is also strongly needed.

Conclusion

The inscription on the title page of the English translation of *Suicide* reads: 'To those who are the same as Durkheim, who interprets rational life/life itself as a moral devotion/obligation.' Also, in *The Division of Labor in Society*, Durkheim says, 'Methodological rules are to science what rules of law and morality are to conduct' (Durkheim, 1984: 303). This article believes that this understanding and this sentence basically cover Durkheim's core sociological thinking and constitute the main starting point from which to re-understand Durkheim's work.

In *Leviathan*, when discussing the 'civil state,' Hobbes once said, 'Men have no pleasure (but on the contrary a great deal of grief) in keeping company where there

is power able to overawe them all' (Hobbes, 1994: 75). In this sense, *Suicide* is a book against *Leviathan*. Because the person in Durkheim's vision is a rationalized person, the basic characteristic of this rationalized person is to have a sense of moral responsibility in Kant's sense, and he will put it into practice. In turn, sociology itself should take this kind of person as its basic starting point. *Suicide* has a dual structure in this sense. It tells about the self-preservation of human beings and of sociology: suicide also means self-preservation, and the moral personality gained from the thoughts on self-preservation is also closely related to the fate of sociology. The elements of this dual structure are closely combined, forming the inner clue of *Suicide*.

Durkheim always understands society as an organism with a soul. If sociology is about the laws of society, or the internal mechanisms of the organism, if this knowledge is concerned with the issue of ethics and morality, that is, how the individual confronts the problems of survival, then his discussion in *Suicide* is very clear and firm: individuals must be able to survive only in accordance with particular moral norms; otherwise, it is impossible to live, nor is life worth living. This is because although the inner need for death and need for self-preservation are contradictory, they both exist in the same body of the individual. Durkheim is convinced that 'pleasure does not accompany states of consciousness that are either too intense or are too weak' (Durkheim, 1984: 181). That is, happiness lies in an intermediate state: 'Not without reason does human experience see the *aurea mediocritas* as the condition of happiness' (Durkheim, 1984: 182). It is under this consideration that Durkheim associates self-preservation with suicide through concepts such as 'joys,' 'pleasure,' and 'happiness' (Durkheim, 1984: 187–195), indicating that these states of existence are the opposite of suicide.

This view is exactly the same as Durkheim's attitude toward sociology in *The Rules of Sociological Method*. The two research attitudes that Durkheim opposed—the research attitude characterized by fantasy, over-reasoning, and over-conceptualization and the emotionally affected attitude—are consistent with his attitude toward egoistic and anomic suicide. Furthermore, the individualism he advocated in *Suicide* and its educational methods also have intrinsic logical consistency with the proposition for sociology in *The Rules of Sociological Method*. For Durkheim, this is why science can have sacredness.

This sacredness of science is not vain talk, but a practice among the people, especially those engaged in science. This kind of researcher must first become a believer and practitioner of the science he is engaged in. Only in this way can the whole of science be constituted. In Durkheim's words:

Yet it is certain that to have some idea of science that is in any way exact one must have practised it and, so to speak, have lived it. This is in fact because it is not wholly contained in the few propositions that it has definitively demonstrated. (Durkheim, 1984: 299)

In *The Division of Labor in Society*, Durkheim proposes two scientific classifications, one of which is the existing science we have acquired, and the other of which is directly related to those people who engaged in science:

Beside this present-day science, consisting of what has already been acquired, there is another, which is concrete and living, which is in part still unaware of itself and still seeking its way: beside the results that have been obtained, there are the hopes, habits, instincts, needs, and presentiments that are so vague that they cannot be expressed in words, yet so powerful that occasionally they dominate the whole life of the scientist. All this is still science: it is even the best and major part of it, because the truths discovered are very few in number beside those that remain to be discovered, and, moreover, to master the whole meaning of the discovered truths and to understand all that is summarised in them, one must have looked closely at scientific life whilst it is still in a free state, that is, before it has been crystallised in the form of definite propositions. Otherwise one will only grasp the letter of it and not the spirit. (Durkheim, 1984: 299)

With regard to these more confusing words, Durkheim explains:

Each science has, so to speak, a soul that lives in the consciousness of scientists. Only a part of that soul takes on substance and palpable forms . . . But the same is not true for that other part of science that no symbol translates externally. Here everything is personal, having to be acquired by personal experience. To have a part in it, one must set to work and confront the facts. (Durkheim, 1984: 299)

This is what Durkheim tried to prove in *Suicide* with empirical methods. When we apply this interpretation to sociology, the only conclusion can be that for researchers, doing sociology is a kind of self-cultivation, and sociology itself implies a structure of moral personality. Individuals in society can achieve self-preservation in a truly sociological way, and only something like moral individualism can protect sociology from withering and losing its vitality.

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Notes

1. For example, the expressions in the French version of *Suicide*, page 184 (Durkheim, 1930: 184) are missing in its Chinese translation. Similarly, page 179 of its original version, compared to pages 178–179 in the Chinese ones.
2. This understanding from Durkheim is reflected in various works before and after the publication of *Suicide*. As is widely known, *Suicide* is not the only text in which Durkheim discusses suicide. In his other texts, Durkheim also has included discussions about suicide, such as in *The Division of Labor in Society*. In the preface to this book's first edition, Durkheim (1984, xxvi) made it clear that his goal was to 'demonstrate in it how science can help in finding the direction in which our conduct ought to go, assisting us to determine the ideal that gropingly we seek.' This kind of science is not only closely related to our performance in daily life, but also related to the issue of our preservation. Durkheim went on to say that, on this ultimate question of continuing our existence, 'we believe that science is not mute' (Durkheim: 1984, xxvii). In this work, Durkheim continued to analyze this sentence throughout the theme of suicide. In his 'Montesquieu's Contribution to the Rise of Social Science' of 1892, Durkheim (1960) also claimed that his expectation for science is that it should show people 'the normal form of social life in each type of society' (Durkheim, 1960: 8). This kind of science about society discovers, at the social level, 'what is desirable, also what should be shunned and how dangers are to be avoided' (Durkheim, 1960: 8). Through this work, science can have a huge impact on life, that is, help people to gain 'good mental and physical health' (Durkheim, 1960: 7–8), which is the most desirable, but also the most unavailable thing for human beings. Through the study of Montesquieu, Durkheim points out that the real value of Montesquieu's work is that he 'is concerned, not with instituting a new political order, but with defining political norms' (Durkheim, 1960: 17). Durkheim believes that this is the main function of science. He asks, 'What is the function of science if not the definition of norms?' (Durkheim, 1960: 17). In the third chapter of *The Rules of Sociological Method*, Durkheim makes it clear that his understanding of science is in fact an understanding of sociology, and that sociology closely relates to the ethical actions of individuals (Durkheim, 1982: 85–86). In response to the view that the difference between science and the meaning of individuals is irrelevant, Durkheim asks, 'For what good is it to strive after a knowledge of reality, if the knowledge we acquire cannot serve us in our lives?' (Durkheim, 1982: 85)
3. Of course, more detailed analyses are needed if we want them, through the concept of 'preservation,' connecting Durkheim's *Suicide* with the history of modern European thought, especially with Hobbes' 'self-preservation.'
4. Durkheim's discussion of 'altruism' suicide is short, but it also shows a clear attitude toward moral choice. After affirming that there is a phenomenon of 'no self' in modern society, Durkheim says that if altruism suicide expresses a contempt for one's own life, then these types of suicide actors will inevitably pay no attention to the lives of others, and this is contrary to modern society, so individuals cannot fully integrate into society. It is at this point that 'egoism' suicide is described in a positive sense. It shows the trait of modern society: attaching importance to life (Durkheim, 2005: 200).
5. The son of Emile Durkheim's brother, Felix Durkheim.

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