

Durkheim: social facts as memes?

Sociology is another area to which meme theory might be applied. For over sixty years, critical reception to Émile Durkheim's theory of "social facts" has almost always been adverse. By contrast, the thirty years since Richard Dawkins first introduced memes have yielded generally favourable criticism of his hypothesis. Yet I suggest that the essence of Durkheim's theory bears a striking resemblance to the idea of memes as autonomously existing transmitters of cultural information, and furthermore that to consider his social facts as memes is to resolve their most serious problems.

"A social fact is every way of acting, fixed or not, capable of exercising on the individual an external constraint; or again, every way of acting which is general throughout a given society, while at the same time existing in its own right independent of its individual manifestations."

Durkheim's starting point is the uncontroversial assertion that there are certain duties and priorities that are defined externally to the individual member of society, and that he inherits rather than chooses. His language of communication and the currency he uses, for example, are both decided for him. Durkheim says that such aspects of society *exist* outside the individual. Moreover, they exercise coercive power over him, since he cannot choose not to conform to them. If he were to decide to speak a different language, for instance, then he would no longer be able to communicate; if he tried to break the law then he would be punished; if he abandoned the common dress code then he would be ridiculed. Society imposes such practices on him independently of his will, claims Durkheim. The fact that he may choose to conform to them most of the time will mean that he does not notice their imposition - but as soon as he rebels in any way, their constraints will be felt.

Such phenomena are "social facts", distinct from and existing independently of both biological and psychological facts. They are not biological in nature "since they consist of representations and of actions", and they are not facts of psychology because the latter "exist only in the individual consciousness". Instead, their medium is society, and their source is *external to* its individual members.

We are to take literally the autonomous existence of social facts, and this point is emphasized by Durkheim's distinction between the facts themselves and their incarnations in individual members of society. The first mistake to avoid is the thought that any feature of society will, if enough people have it in common, be a social fact; there is more to the collective aspect of social facts than this.

Even a thought that *everyone* has will not necessarily be a social fact. Rather, if it is a social fact then everyone will have it: "it is a group condition repeated in the individual because imposed on him".

The repetition of certain ways of thought and action will give them a rigidity and an isolation from the particular events in which they are manifest. They acquire a reality in their own right, and are never wholly reproduced in the individual's application of them, since they exist even at times when *nobody* is applying them. This is because "collective habits" are manifest not only in the successive performances of them but also, more permanently, in verbal communication, education, and written records. Thus we can contrast the social fact with its "reincarnation" in the individual: "the social fact is a thing distinct from its individual manifestations".

Durkheim claims that evidence for this distinction, and for the independent existence of social facts, is provided when those facts are measured statistically. Currents of public opinion alter from time to time: the annual birth, marriage or suicide rate, for instance, will vary between decades and between cultures. When such statistics are compiled, the individual cases are contained indiscriminately within such figures, so that the individual circumstances that resulted in the relevant phenomenon are neutralized. The statistic obtained thus isolates the social fact from its individual occurrences, demonstrating its existence "independent of the individual forms it assumes in its diffusion".

The claim that there exist social facts, independent of the members of society about which they *are* facts, may be received with incredulity. Such "facts" can seem rather mysterious and unconvincing. It seems to me that Durkheim's main error has been to fail to recognize the nature of the "independence". The initial distinction, between two types of thought and action, seems right: some thoughts would not be thought unless *you* had done so and some acts would not have taken place unless *you* had so acted, whereas there is other information that would exist even if you did not believe in it, and other activities that would go on even if you never took part. It seems true, too, that the latter kind of thought and action are often coercive in nature (e.g. the claim that it is wrong to steal, and the act of using English pounds for commerce in England).

Familiarly, Durkheim's mistake is to confuse the true fact that the existence of such ways of thinking and acting is independent of *you* (a particular individual), with the false assertion that they do not depend for their existence upon *any* form of realisation. It seems hard to believe that a way of thinking or acting could exist if *nobody* had ever taken part in it. In order for this to be the case, it

would have to have some other medium of existence. Durkheim has already mentioned that social facts exist not only in individuals' applications of them, but in education and written records too. A social fact could therefore survive in a book, or in some other semi-permanent record - but the record must still be a record *of* something.

The question thus arises of the *source* of social facts, and another problem for Durkheim's thesis is that it is only one generation deep. He claims that an individual will inherit and be coerced by social facts about a previous generation, but makes no attempt to explain how those facts came into existence. Yet in order to be inherited, they must be inherited *from* somewhere.

It appears to me that social facts' difficulties are resolved if we view them through the lens of meme theory. In particular, the independent and coercive nature of the phenomena characterized as social facts, which is so problematic for Durkheim's account, is plausibly explained by memes.

There are striking similarities between the two postulates. Memes, it has been argued, exist autonomously: the representational content that is their basis exists independently of the individuals in whom they are replicated. Like social facts, they are types rather than tokens. Similarly, both postulates exist over and above their individual manifestations, amongst which there may be quite a degree of variety. In the case of memes, their individual manifestations have been compared to genes' phenotypic effects, and one of the most significant aspects of a meme is this executive power: its ability to produce certain effects - ways of acting and thinking - in its possessor. Another way of phrasing this property might be to describe memes as coercive. Once more the parallel can be drawn with social facts.

Another feature that social facts share with memes is their one-way effect on society: a popular idea or way of acting will be popular *because* it is a meme/social fact; an idea or way of acting will not merely become a meme/social fact *because* it is popular. A useful analogy may, at this point, be drawn with genes. It is in general true that people with replicas of the same gene will be related. On the other hand, a chance mutation that gives me a gene identical in structure to one of yours does not mean that I am related to you.

I do not think that Durkheim would object to the comparison being drawn: recall his denial that social facts were merely biological, on the grounds that they are "representations". Moreover, the distinction that he takes so much trouble to draw, between a social fact and its individual manifestations, is exactly parallel to that between a meme and its phenotypic effects.

On the other hand the latter contrast is less mysterious than Durkheim's: the crucial point is that a meme is a *replicator*, whereas a social fact is a single, collective phenomenon. In order for a "way of thinking or acting" to retain its existence independently of the individuals who apply it, surely it needs to be replicated in those individuals, rather than shared amongst them. Returning to genes, this is what gives *them* their longevity. A particular one of my genes will not literally survive after my death; rather, its replica in my children will remain. It is *this* ability - the ability to make copies of itself - that gives a gene its autonomy.

Meme theory also solves Durkheim's two main problems: his implausible claim that social facts exist independently of *any* manifestation, and the single-generational nature of his theory. It seems true that culture is the medium of social facts, but what is culture? In replicator terms, it is a meme pool: a combination of all the different meme banks (brains, books, etc.). Compare this with the gene pool, which is a combination of all the different gene banks (organisms) in a population. In the case of genes, it is in sexual reproduction that they mix and mutate, producing different combinations of recessive and dominant genes, and hence new phenotypes. Similarly, then, in the case of memes it is the process of interaction and replication that gives rise to mutations, different combinations and the resulting new phenotypes.

Therefore if we regard social facts as memes, then the claim that they exist in the medium of culture means merely that they are protected by residing in larger "stores" of content, and that those stores enable them to survive and replicate, via interaction with other "stores". Thus it is true to say that a social fact has an existence independent of any particular store in which it has been replicated, but false to say that it would still somehow exist if there were no copy available for replication in *any* store.

There is already a huge store of memes resident in any culture; so Durkheim is right to say that any individual is the subject of many social facts in the creation of which he has played no part. On the other hand, replication goes on all the time, via such activities as teaching and conversation. The social facts that affect me were not simply established in my parents' generation, and will not be passed on unchanged to my children's generation. The source of the new social facts that are emerging all the time is the interaction between existing social facts: the interactions between memes.