Wellness Seminar: The Fourth Industrial Revolution and Emil Durkheim’s *Le Suicide* (1897)


Automation and technology are driving substantial changes in the workforce. We are … at the beginnings of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Steam powered the first. Electricity, the second. Computers drove the third. The fourth is a confluence of artificial intelligence, nanotechnology, machine learning, quantum computing, 3D printing, 5G data transmission and other technologies that will fundamentally change our world ….

Introduction to Durkheim

In pre-19th century Europe, choices ranging from whom to marry, what profession to enter, and what religion to practice were made by ones family, clan, and social class. For many, the industrial revolution of the 19th century and the rise of consumer capitalism brought the promise of greater wealth and freedom of choice in all aspects of life. But this same period also witnessed a dramatic rise in suicide. In his seminal study *Le Suicide* (1897) and other works, the pioneering sociologist Emil Durkheim attempted to explain contributing sociological factors and in the process outlined four types of suicide (three of which are outlined below). Durkheim has his faults. Some of his statistics have been questioned and he fails to acknowledge the importance of class conflict, whose study had already been launched by Karl Marx in *Das Kapital. Kritik der politischen Oekonomie* (1867-83). However, Durkheim remains highly regarded as a diagnostician of the socio-political and psychological costs of rapid technological change.
I. Egoistic Suicide

Emile Durkheim first asked how the different religious confessions affect suicide. If we look at a map of Western Europe, for example, we see that where Protestants are most numerous the suicide rate is highest, that where Catholics predominate it is much lower, and that the aptitude of Jews for suicide is lower still, though to a lesser degree, than that of Catholics. How are these data to be explained?

In many of the societies under observation, Jews and Catholics are less numerous than Protestants; thus it is tempting to explain their lower suicide rates as the consequence of that rigorous moral discipline which religious minorities sometimes impose upon themselves in the face of the hostility of surrounding populations. But such an explanation, Durkheim observed, ignores at least three facts: first, suicide is too little an object of public condemnation for religious hostility to have this effect; second, religious hostility frequently produces not the moral conformity of those against whom it is directed, but rather their rebellion against it; and third, the reduced suicide rate of Catholics relative to Protestants is independent of their minority status. Even in Spain Catholics commit suicide less frequently.

The last point in particular suggested an alternative explanation -- that the cause for lower rates of suicide is to be found within the nature of religious confession itself. But such an explanation, Durkheim insisted, cannot refer to the religious percepts of the confession, for there Catholics and Protestants prohibit suicide with equal emphasis; rather, the explanation must proceed from one of the more general characteristics differentiating them, and that characteristic -- indeed, "the only essential difference between Catholicism and Protestantism" -- is that the latter permits free inquiry to a greater degree than the former.15

But if the proclivity of Protestantism for suicide must thus be related to its spirit of free inquiry, this "free inquiry" itself requires explanation, for it brings as much sorrow as happiness, and thus is not "intrinsically desirable." Why, then, do Protestants seek and even demand such freedom? Durkheim's answer: "Reflection develops only if its development becomes imperative, that is, if certain ideas and instinctive sentiments which have hitherto adequately guided conduct are found
to have lost their efficacy. Then reflection intervenes to fill the gap that has appeared, but which
it has not created." In other words, Protestantism concedes greater freedom of thought to the
individual because it has fewer commonly accepted beliefs and practices. Indeed, it was this
possession of a common, collective credo that, for Durkheim, was the essence of religious
society itself, and that distinguished it from those merely temporal bonds which unite men
through the exchange and reciprocity of services, yet permit and even presuppose differences;
and, precisely to the extent that Protestantism lacked such a credo, it was a less strongly
integrated church than its Roman Catholic counterpart.

Durkheim then suggested that this explanation is consistent with at least three other observations.
First, it would account for the still lower suicide rates of Jews who, in response to the
hostility directed against them, established strong community ties of thought and action,
virtually eliminated individual divergences, and thus achieved a high degree of unity, solidarity,
and integration. Second, of all the great Protestant countries England has the lowest suicide rate;
and the Anglican Church also has the most "integrated" [with Catholic ritual, etc.] of Protestant
churches. And third, since knowledge is the natural consequence of free inquiry, we should
expect that suicide increases with its acquisition, and Durkheim had little trouble demonstrating
that this was the case. But this last demonstration did raise an anomaly: the Jews, who are both
highly educated and have low suicide rates. But for Durkheim, this was the proverbial exception
that proves the rule. For Jews seek to learn, not in order to replace traditional beliefs with
individual reflection, but rather to protect themselves from others' hostility through their superior
knowledge. "So the exception," Durkheim observed "is only apparent"; it even confirms the law.
Indeed, it proves that if the suicidal tendency is great in educated circles, this is due, as we have
said, to the weakening of traditional beliefs and to the state of moral individualism resulting
from this; for it disappears when education has another cause and responds to other needs.

Finally, it should be noted that the combined effect of these observations on religious
confessions and suicide was an implicit celebration of the Third Republic in general and its
program of secular education in particular. For, as Durkheim was pleased to make clear, the
long-acknowledged correlation between the growth of knowledge and suicide could not be taken
to mean that the former "causes" the latter; on the contrary, knowledge and suicide are
independent effects of a more general cause -- the decline of traditional beliefs. Moreover, once
these beliefs have declined, they cannot be artificially reestablished, and thus free inquiry and
the knowledge that results become our only resources in the effort to replace them. Finally, Durkheim had shown that the prophylactic effect of religion on suicide owed little to its condemnation of suicide, its idea of God, or its promise of a future life; rather, religion protects man from suicide "because it is a society. What constitutes this society is the existence of a certain number of beliefs and practices common to all the faithful, traditional and thus obligatory. The more numerous and strong these collective states of mind are," Durkheim concluded, "the stronger the integration of the religious community, and also the greater its preservative value."\(^{20}\)

But if religion thus preserves men from suicide because it is a society, other "societies" (e.g., the family and political society) ought to have the same effect. After developing a statistical measure of the immunity to suicide enjoyed by various groups,\(^{21}\) for example, Durkheim was able to show that, while marriage alone has a preservative effect against suicide, this is limited and benefits only men; the larger family unit, on the other hand, provides an immunity which husband and wife share. Similarly, when one marital partner dies, the survivor loses a degree of suicidal immunity; but this loss is less a consequence of the severing of the conjugal bond alone than of the more general shock to the family that the survivor must endure. Finally, the immunity to suicide increases with the size of the family,\(^{22}\) a fact Durkheim attributed to the greater number and intensity of collective sentiments produced and repeatedly reinforced by the larger group.

Similarly, the examination of political societies showed that suicide, quite rare in a society's early stages, increases as that society matures and disintegrates. During social disturbances or great popular wars, by contrast, the suicide rate declines, a fact that Durkheim claimed is susceptible of only one interpretation -- that these disturbances "rouse collective sentiments, stimulate partisan spirit and patriotism, political and national faith alike, and concentrating activity toward a single end, at least temporarily cause a stronger integration of society."\(^{23}\)

Suicide thus varies inversely with the degree of integration of the religious, domestic, and political groups of which the individual forms a part; in short, as a society weakens or "disintegrates," the individual depends less on the group, depends more upon himself, and recognizes no rules of conduct beyond those based upon private interests. Durkheim called this state of "excessive individualism" egoism, and the special type of self-inflicted death it produces egoistic suicide …. 
II. Altruistic Suicide

But if excessive individuation thus leads to suicide, so does insufficient individuation: thus, among primitive peoples, we find several categories of suicide -- men on the threshold of old age, women upon the deaths of their husbands, followers and servants upon the deaths of their chiefs -- in which the person kills himself because it is his duty. Such a sacrifice, Durkheim argued, is imposed by society for social purposes; and for society to be able to do this, the individual personality must have little value, a state Durkheim called altruism, and whose corresponding mode of self-inflicted death was called obligatory altruistic suicide.24

Like all suicides, the altruist kills himself because he is unhappy;25 but this unhappiness is distinctive both in its causes and in its effects. While the egoist is unhappy because he sees nothing "real" in the world besides the individual, the altruist is sad because the individual seems "unreal"; the egoist sees no goal to which he might commit himself, and thus feels useless and without purpose while the altruist commits himself to a goal beyond this world, and henceforth this world is an obstacle and burden to him. The melancholy of the egoist is one of incurable weariness and sad depression, and is expressed in a complete relaxation of all activity the unhappiness of the altruist, by contrast, springs from hope, faith even enthusiasm, and affirms itself in acts of extraordinary energy.

Altruistic suicide thus reflects that crude morality which disregards the individual, while its egoistic counterpart elevates the human personality beyond collective constraints; and their differences thus correspond to those between primitive and advanced societies. But altruistic suicides do occur among more civilized peoples -- among the early Christian martyrs and the French revolutionaries -- and in contemporary French society, Durkheim insisted, there even exists a "special environment" in which altruistic suicide is chronic: the army Military suicide thus represents an evolutionary survival of the morality of primitive peoples: "Influenced by this predisposition," Durkheim observed, "the soldier kills himself at the least disappointment, for the most futile reasons, for a refusal of leave, a reprimand an unjust punishment, a delay in promotion, a question of honor, a flush of momentary jealousy, or even simply because other suicides have occurred before his eyes or to his knowledge."26 The "contagious" suicides ascribed by Tarde to psychological causes Durkheim thus insisted, are rather explained by the moral constitution which predisposes men to imitate one another's actions.
III. Anomic Suicide (anomic from Fr. anomie: a + nom = without constraints)

Egoistic and altruistic suicide [i.e., suicide in solidarity with others], as we have seen, are the respective consequences of the individual's insufficient integration [egoistic suicide] or excessive integration [altruistic suicide] within the society to which he belongs. But quite aside from integrating its members, a society must control and regulate their beliefs and behavior as well; and Durkheim insisted that there is a relation between a society's suicide rate and the way it performs this important regulative function. Industrial and financial crises, for example, increase the suicide rate, a fact commonly attributed to the decline of economic well-being these crises produce. But the same increase in the suicide rate, Durkheim observed, is produced by crises resulting in economic prosperity; "Every disturbance of equilibrium," he insisted, "even though it achieved greater comfort and a heightening of general vitality, is an impulse to voluntary death." But how can this be the case? How can something generally understood to improve a man's life serve to detach him from it?

No living being, Durkheim began, can be happy unless its needs are sufficiently proportioned to its means; for if its needs surpass its capacity to satisfy them, the result can only be friction, pain, lack of productivity, and a general weakening of the impulse to live. In an animal, of course, the desired equilibrium between needs and means is established and maintained by physical nature - the animal cannot imagine ends other than those implicit within its own physiology, and these are ordinarily satisfied by its purely material environment. Human needs, however, are not limited to the body alone; indeed, "beyond the indispensable minimum which satisfies nature when instinctive, a more awakened reflection suggests better conditions, seemingly desirable ends craving fulfillment." But the aspirations suggested by such reflections are inherently unlimited there is nothing in man's individual psychology or physiology which would require them to cease at one point rather than another. Unlimited desires are, by definition, insatiable, and insatiability is a sure source of human misery: "To pursue a goal which is by definition unattainable," Durkheim concluded, "is to condemn oneself to a state of perpetual unhappiness."

For human beings to be happy, therefore, their individual needs and aspirations must be constrained; and since these needs and aspirations are the products of a reflective social consciousness, the purely internal, physiological constraints enjoyed by animals are insufficient
to this purpose. This regulatory function must thus be performed by an external, moral agency superior to the individual -- in other words, by society. And since the constraints thus applied are borne unequally by a society's members, the result is a "functional" theory of stratification resembling that of Kingsley Davis and Wilbert Moore\(^3\) -- society determines the respective value of different social services, the relative reward allocated to each, and the consequent degree of comfort appropriate to the average worker in each occupation.

This classically conservative doctrine is tempered by two qualifications. First, the scale of services and rewards is not immutable, but rather varies with the amount of collective revenue and the changing moral ideas of the society itself; and second, the system must secure some degree of legitimacy -- both the hierarchy of functions and the distribution of these functions among the population must be considered "just" by those subject to it. These caveats entered, however, Durkheim insisted that human happiness can be achieved only through the acceptance of moral (that is, social) constraints.

But what has this to do with suicide? Briefly, when society is disturbed by some crisis, its "scale" is altered and its members are "reclassified"\(^3\) accordingly; in the ensuing period of dis-equilibrium, society is temporarily incapable of exercising its regulative function, and the lack of constraints imposed on human aspirations makes happiness impossible. This explains why periods of economic disaster, like those of sudden prosperity, are accompanied by an increase the number of suicides, and also why countries long immersed in poverty have enjoyed a relative immunity to self-inflicted death.

Durkheim used the term anomie to describe this temporary condition of social deregulation, and anomic suicide to describe the resulting type of self-inflicted death; but in one sphere of life, he added, anomie is not a temporary disruption but rather a chronic state. This is the sphere of trade and industry, where the traditional sources of societal regulation -- religion, government, and occupational groups -- have all failed to exercise moral constraints on an increasingly unregulated capitalist economy. Religion, which once consoled the poor and at least partially restricted the material ambitions of the rich, has simply lost most of its power. Government, which once restrained and subordinated economic functions, is now their servant, thus, the orthodox economist would reduce government to a guarantor of individual contracts, while the extreme socialist would make it the "collective bookkeeper" -- and neither would grant it the
power to subordinate other social agencies and unite them toward one common aim. Even occupational groups, which once regulated salaries, fixed the price of products and production, and indirectly fixed the average level of income on which needs were based, has been made impotent by the growth of industry and the indefinite expansion of the market. In trade and industry, therefore, "the state of crisis and anomy is constant and, so to speak, normal. From top to bottom of the ladder greed is aroused without knowing where to find ultimate foothold. Nothing can calm it," Durkheim concludes, "since its goal is far beyond all it can attain." And thus the industrial and commercial occupations are among those which furnish the greatest numbers of suicides.

Notes

15. 1897b: 157. Here Durkheim was not denying the idealistic nature of Roman Catholicism by contrast, for example, with Greco-Latin polytheism and Hebrew monotheism; rather, he was arguing that Protestantism stresses religious individualism and freedom of personal interpretation, while "all variation is abhorrent to Catholic thought" (1897b: 158).

16. 1897b: 158.

17. Durkheim thus acknowledged the role of minority status, not because religious hostility imposes some "higher morality," but because it forces the minority to achieve greater unity and integration (cf. 1897b: 159-160).

18. 1897b: 168.

19. Cf. the similar point in The Division of Labor (1893: 409).

20. 1897b: 170.

21. This was Durkheim's famous "coefficient of preservation"--the number showing how many times less frequent suicide is in one group than in another at the same age. Thus, when Durkheim said that the coefficient of preservation of husbands of the age of 25 in relation to unmarried men is 3, he meant that, if the tendency to suicide of married persons at this time of life is represented by 1, that of unmarried persons must be represented by 3. When the coefficient of preservation sinks below 1, Durkheim described it as a "coefficient of aggravation" (1897b: 177).

22. Durkheim thus rejected the Malthusian connection between limitation of family size and general well-being: "Actually [this restriction] is so much a source of the reverse condition that it diminishes the human desire to live. Far from dense families being a sort of unnecessary luxury appropriate only to the rich, they are actually an indispensable staff of daily life" (1897b: 201).

23. 1897b: 208.

24. "Obligatory" altruistic suicide is the essential type, from which two others derive -- i.e., "optional" altruistic suicide, in which a concurrence of circumstances makes self-inflicted death praiseworthy, thus encouraging it without requiring it; and "acute" altruistic suicide (of
which "mystical" suicide is the "perfect pattern"), in which the individual kills himself for the pure joy of sacrifice and self-renunciation (cf. 1897b:222-225).

25. This is not to say that a melancholy view of life automatically increases the inclination to suicide. Christians, for example, have a gloomy conception of this life combined with an aversion to suicide, a conjunction Durkheim attributed to their "moderate individualism" (cf. 1897b: 226).


27. 1897b: 246.

28. 1897b: 247. This argument -- that desires are simple and few in the "state of nature," but multiply with advancing civilization -- is one that we (and presumably Durkheim) owe to Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1755).


31. Durkheim used the term "repressive anomy" to describe the condition produced by a reclassification downward in the social hierarchy, and "progressive anomy" to describe its upward counterpart (cf. 1897b: 285).

32. 1897b: 256.