Philosophy of the Social Sciences

To Nicole

Philosophy of the Social Sciences: Towards Pragmatism

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This book is dedicated to Nicole, my wonderful sister.

Introduction

Philosophy of the social sciences is a meta-theoretical enterprise in so far as it reflects on the practices of social research. This reflection can take different forms. Most philosophers of the social sciences try to determine whether particular theories or methodological options are appropriate for *explaining* social phenomena. They may, for instance, investigate the coherence and explanatory power of evolutionary forms of explanation or of rational choice models, or they may wish, more broadly, to establish whether historical laws exist at all. My personal view is that the philosophy of the social sciences ought not to assume that the sole objective of social research is to explain an outer world. It should therefore also ponder alternative modes of knowledge acquisition. This perspective will become particularly apparent towards the latter part of the book, but it will also become clear in the earlier chapters that most philosophers of social science whom I discuss do not share my view. For many of them, social research is about explaining an external social realm; their task, then, is to reflect on this explanatory endeavour and the methodological strategies that accompany it.

This book has two objectives. The first aim is to advance a new approach to this discipline, one that is indebted to American pragmatism. The second aim is to present an advanced assessment of the main approaches in philosophy of the social sciences. The book is written so that it can be read in either way. Those interested in the latter should look at chapters 1 to 6; those interested in the former can read chapters 6 and 7, or, for those already familiar with pragmatism, chapter 7 only. This is not to say that chapters 1 to 6 are irrelevant to the concluding chapter. They are not, but it is possible to understand the last chapter without having read the preceding ones. The topics and authors covered in the first five chapters are chosen because their perspectives are central in the philosophy of the social sciences, not because they somehow fit into a narrative that ultimately leads towards my pragmatist view. The pragmatist stance developed in chapter 7 will develop a very different perspective to those advocated by the authors who appear in the preceding chapters. I will

argue that philosophy of social science ought to take a new direction and ask different questions.

The assessment of the main approaches in philosophy of the social sciences is treated in chapters 1 to 6. The way I approach this task is different from that adopted by others, and this needs some elaboration. Firstly, rather than simply introducing ideas, I also focus on the authors and schools of thought behind them. The philosophy of the social sciences is often presented in a strictly analytical fashion, as a set of core topics or questions to which different answers can be given.[1] Alternatively, philosophy of the social sciences is conceived as a critical overview of the various theoretical frameworks that would serve within a naturalist or quasi-naturalist model of social science (that is, a model strongly or loosely based on the natural sciences).[2] *Who* gives the answers is relatively unimportant in this reconstruction. I concentrate instead on a limited number of thinkers and try to show, for each of them, how their views in different areas are linked to each other. For instance, Emile Durkheim held that the scientific study of the social enables us to reach decisions about ultimate values, believed in the virtue of a functional analysis, and was, by all accounts, a holistic thinker. In his case (though not necessarily for others) these three positions are interrelated: his functionalism *avant la lettre* was holistic, and he believed it would facilitate the inference of 'what ought to be' from 'what is'. Furthermore, these three positions tie in with broader visions Durkheim held about the discipline of sociology, its scope, and its relationship to social policy. Likewise, both Karl Popper's falsifiability criterion (as a line of demarcation between science and non-science) and his rejection of holism underscore his discomfort with various forms of historicism. These different stances form a coherent whole.

As well as focusing on its key authors, I prefer to sketch the philosophy of the social sciences in relation to other subjects, in particular (though not exclusively) in connection to disciplines that it is discussing, such as sociology or history. In the analytical tradition, to which I was referring in the above, philosophy of the social sciences tends to be treated as separate from other intellectual activities. I prefer to draw out the interconnectedness, for instance, by showing how the aspirations of some practitioners, such as Durkheim or Max Weber, spilled over into the domain of the philosophy of the social sciences. Once people come to the foreground, neat demarcations tend to fall apart. This is the case, not only for the 'sociological classics', but also for contemporary thinkers. For many critical realists, for example, taking one position or another is not simply an analytical game; it has serious consequences for the discipline in which they are working. Tony Lawson has shown that economics would be radically transformed if it were to take on a realist agenda. This book pays attention to the ramifications of philosophy of the social sciences for social research.

Organizing the book around questions or themes is a simpler task because there is more or less a consensus about the topics that are central to the discipline (holism versus individualism, naturalism versus anti-naturalism, etc.). To structure a manuscript around people or schools of thought is not a sinecure because it raises the question of whom to include and, more controversially, whom to exclude. I limit the analysis to six strands of thought, five among which are linked to an individual (Durkheim's 'scientific rationalism', Weber's attempt to transcend the opposition between hermeneutics and positivism, Popper's falsificationist agenda, critical realism, critical theory and Richard Rorty's neo-pragmatist proposal). This restriction has the advantage of offering an in-depth treatment and avoids bland discussions of various -isms. I will, for instance, demonstrate the extent to which the label of positivism is appropriate for Durkheim and where precisely he deviates from Comte's doctrine or from the later development of logical positivism. Given the small numbers involved, the criteria for selection are very important. Part of the rationale is linked to my own proposal in the final chapter, and indeed the chapters can be read as leading up to this. More importantly, however, I decided to select authors or strands of thought who have been decisive in the establishment of a social science or who have developed highly influential schools in the philosophy of the social sciences. Durkheim and Weber are examples of the former, Popper and critical realism of the latter. My decision to devote a chapter to pragmatism is based on the belief that, while it has hitherto been neglected, it is bound to become a decisive force in the philosophy of the social sciences, and, indeed, my own proposal will draw heavily on the intellectual tradition of pragmatism.

This brings me to the other objective of the book: I propose an outline of a pragmatically inspired philosophy of the social sciences. Not all histories of the philosophy of science assume that researchers might learn from the philosophical reflections that are being discussed, and some explicitly deny that researchers will benefit from reading about philosophy.[3] My historical overview is different from these views in that it is explicitly intended to help researchers think in a novel way about their research.[4] This proposal is partly based on a rejection of other strategies in the philosophy of the social sciences. One such strategy, known as naturalism, involves the search for *a single* scientific method appropriate for the study of both the social and the natural realms. Within this naturalist tradition, some believe they can find the key to scientific success by uncovering the logic of inquiry that is embedded in the history of the natural sciences and which can be emulated by the social sciences. Others prefer not to proceed historically and simply point out the logic of scientific inquiry, how it is superior to other forms of inquiry, and how it can be applied to the study of the social realm. Others again, such as Durkheim or Popper, argue along both lines by pointing out that the superior form of logic is also the one exhibited by natural scientists. Part of my argument is

that this naturalist pursuit of the essence of science is misguided because there is no such thing that all scientific activities have in common.[5] But another strategy is to view the social researcher as a 'social cartographer' – someone who maps the social world as accurately and completely as possible – a view that underlies both critical realism and Anthony Giddens's structuration theory. As pragmatists have pointed out repeatedly, this view of knowledge as a mirroring or picturing device is deeply embedded in Western thought. I will show that this way of proceeding is also inconsistent and leads to an intellectual impasse. Both strategies – the naturalist and the cartography model – take for granted what knowledge is for. For naturalists, knowledge is about explaining and predicting an outer world; for cartographers, it is about depicting that realm. Neither reflects on the possibility of other forms of knowledge or, more accurately, on which other objectives of social research may be aimed at. One such objective is what I call self-knowledge, referring to the ability of individuals to question or redescribe themselves and their cultural presuppositions. I think this is a highly neglected component of social research, and one that I wish to promote in what follows.[6]

The first chapter tackles Durkheim's vision of the social sciences. Although Durkheim (1858–1917) was not a philosopher of the social sciences, he wanted to establish sociology as a scientific and autonomous discipline and spent a lot of his time writing about what a scientific social science should look like. Durkheim's methodology is the example par excellence of a naturalist outlook in that he was convinced that the examination of society ought to emulate the methods that have been employed in the natural sciences and have led to such remarkable results. The success of Newtonian physics enthralled French social philosophers such as Auguste Comte, and Durkheim was no exception, though his fascination for the developments in physics was matched by his ongoing interest in biological evolution. If only sociology would employ the same procedures with similar rigour and determination as in the natural sciences, it would not only become a scientific enterprise, but it would also be of practical use to policy-makers and politicians. The problem is that the discipline is still dominated by social philosophers and metaphysicians who consistently fall short of investigating empirical facts and who prefer to philosophize rather than embark on proper research. Durkheim was not the only one to call for a science of society and regard it as a base for the rational steering of the social, but he had a very distinct view of what science was about, what natural scientists have done and what sociologists ought to be doing. None of the usual labels that have been applied to him, such as positivism, deductivism, inductivism or empiricism, really fit. He presented a powerful and original view, one that has been as influential as it is contentious, even though ultimately proven incorrect. This view centred round the idea that sociology studies empirical regularities and can do so either through causal or functional analysis. This sociological research will help to decide upon the

ultimate values appropriate for a given society. In this respect (and in this respect only) sociology will replace philosophy. Yet, the distinctiveness of Durkheim's sociology lay in his insistence that sociological regularities call for sociological explanations. As such, the myriad of psychological explanations is ultimately wrong.

Chapter 2 explores Weber's methodological reflections. Weber (1864–1920) did not share Durkheim's ambition to implement and institutionalize the emerging discipline of sociology. His systematic use of general concepts and comparative analysis, however, made his writings essential to the introduction of a historically sensitive and theoretically sophisticated form of sociological research. Contemplative by nature, Weber wrote extensively on the methodology of the social sciences, and did so in a more sophisticated (though more confusing) fashion than Durkheim. Whereas Durkheim situated himself unequivocally within the naturalist camp, Weber brought a more nuanced perspective and tried to steer clear of the pitfalls of both naturalism and anti-naturalism. For Weber, it is not sufficient simply to establish regularities of social life because social explanation demands more. To make sense of the observed regularities, it is necessary to bring in a hermeneutic component, to relive *why* people acted in the way they did. Contrary to several members of the hermeneutic school, Weber does not see this re-enactment as incompatible with causal analysis. Re-enactment is the start of a causal network because people's goals and desires made them do what they did, and these actions in turn led to various effects, some of which were intended, some unintended. The unintended or unanticipated outcomes of purposive action are especially central to Weber's analysis. Weber differed from Durkheim in other respects as well. Whereas Durkheim held that judgements regarding ultimate values might be inferred from empirical research, Weber strongly disagreed: 'what is' cannot inform 'what ought to be'. This is not to say that, for Weber, social research has no bearing on social policy – it does, but in a more modest way. Empirical investigations may help to establish which means are more effective for obtaining given goals or the unintended effects of pursuing a particular objective. As such, social research provides a kind of technical assistance to policy-makers but nothing more than that.

Chapter 3 moves on to Popper's philosophy of the social sciences. Popper (1902–1994) is a prime example of a philosopher searching for that which all proper scientific activities have in common and which therefore constitutes science. Popper started his career as a philosopher of the natural sciences and his knowledge of the social sciences was always limited. While he was acquainted with social and political philosophy, he knew little about sociology or political science. He gradually learned about economics but remained generally uninformed about the other social sciences. It is ironic that he exercised a massive influence on the philosophy of the social sciences, especially in the 1950s and 1960s, though his popularity has always been greater among

natural scientists, partly because he portrayed their activities in an idyllic and heroic fashion. For Popper, scientists are imaginative and adventurous people who develop bold theories that are then put to the test. If a theory does not survive the test, then the search for a new theory is on. Theories, however, can be refuted only if they are refutable and, indeed, refutability (or what Popper famously coined 'falsifiability') is his chosen criterion to demarcate science from non-science. It is only because scientific theories are falsifiable that science can progress along the lines of trial and error. Most of the social sciences are not proper science since they construct and uphold theories that are immunized against empirical refutation. The main culprits are Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud and Alfred Adler – Popper admired all three as a young man and vilified them later on. The fact that their theories are non-falsifiable does not necessarily make them hopelessly redundant; they can still provide perceptive insights into the human psyche or society. Yet, as they stand, they are not scientific. For Popper the solution for the social sciences lies in methodological individualism: researchers must take individuals as the starting point of the analysis. They have to assume that people act purposefully and rationally though producing effects that they do not always intend. This does not mean that Popper believed people always acted rationally, but the assumption of rationality is a useful guide for social research, if only to find out where and when people deviated from it. The recent wave of rational choice theory in sociology and political sciences is perfectly in line with Popper's prescriptions.

Chapter 4 introduces critical realism, which first emerged in the 1970s and which has had a considerable impact in various social sciences, including sociology and economics. Like Popper's falsificationism, critical realism assumes a methodological unity between the social and the natural sciences. The starting point of this strand is that most social research functions according to positivist criteria and therefore does not move beyond the superficial realm of observed regularity conjunctions. To explain, however, must mean more than just pointing at regularities. It involves references to mechanisms, structures or powers that account for what has been recorded. Some of these mechanisms might not be immediately accessible to observation because their activities might be counteracted by the workings of other mechanisms. They exist nevertheless, and the task of science (including that of social science) is to gain reliable knowledge of them. This is possible with the help of a little imagination, for instance by drawing on analogies of and metaphors about what we already know. Scientists, indeed, learn about new phenomena by showing similarities with and differences from familiar phenomena. The task for social science is to remove the positivist straitjacket and delve for those underlying structures and powers which are not immediately visible but forever affecting the surface level. It is not surprising, therefore, that realists feel affinities with French structuralism, and indeed some of the 'first-wave'

realists come from a Marxist structuralist tradition. Critical realists feel uneasy, however, about the structuralist neglect of agency in human affairs (to the point of denial), and they prefer to link some of the structuralist insights with actor-orientated models of social action. In this sense, their intellectual endeavour is close to Giddens's structuration theory or Bourdieu's genetic structuralism. More recently, they have exhibited a growing interest in evolutionary theory and, in that respect, are moving away from the Giddens–Bourdieu line of thought.

Critical realists emphasize that social research has an emancipatory dimension. This component becomes even more central in chapter 5, which deals with critical theory. For critical theorists, research is not just about describing or explaining; it also provides a platform for a critique of contemporary society. This critique will ultimately provide people with tools to remove societal restrictions and to make for a better society. Critical theorists are hostile to any philosophy of the social sciences that reduces social research to a descriptive enterprise. Positivism is a particular target. Critical theory was initially associated with the writings of the Frankfurt School, a group of left-wing intellectuals, among whom Theodor Adorno (1903–1969) and Max Horkheimer (1895–1973) were particularly prominent. They wrote at a time when logical positivism was influential, not just in philosophy but also in the social sciences. While sympathetic towards aspects of the transition towards modernity, they were concerned about its negative features, notably the spread of instrumental rationality and the loss of substantive rationality. People exhibit instrumental or means–end rationality if they reach given goals efficiently; they exhibit substantive rationality if they critically reflect on and evaluate the goals they pursue. For Adorno et al., positivist sociology is just another expression of the predominance of means–end rationality: it is technically sophisticated, possibly allowing for control, but lacking in critical judgement. Jürgen Habermas (b. 1929) followed in this intellectual tradition: he too felt strongly about the critical potential of sociology and was sceptical of the positivist orthodoxy in social sciences. However, his work differed substantially from that of the early Frankfurt School. Habermas was far more sympathetic to the Enlightenment tradition and tried to uncover its positive dimension: the transition towards modernity went hand in hand with the emergence of procedures of open discussion and criticism. He drew upon pragmatist philosophy to elaborate on the link between knowledge and cognitive interests. Later he would use speech act theory to develop a critical theory centred on language.

Richard Rorty's pragmatism is different again. It is the subject of the penultimate chapter and a prelude to my own exposition in the concluding chapter. Although Rorty's impact on the philosophy of the social sciences is limited, I regard Rorty (b. 1931) as important because he opens the path towards a different way of thinking about the philosophy of the social sciences, freed from the pointless search for an elusive essence of science. Rorty's original

breakthrough in philosophy came with a sharp critique of epistemology (meaning any intellectual endeavour that aims to establish the atemporal base for superior forms of knowledge acquisition). Using Wittgenstein and recent developments in analytical philosophy, Rorty's point is that any attempt of philosophy to step outside language and find the master key to ethics or knowledge is ill-fated. In addition, the 'spectator view' of knowledge, which has impregnated contemporary philosophy and epistemology, is highly suspect. This view rests on a misguided representation of knowledge, as if it passively mirrors or reflects the essence of the outer world. Instead, Rorty suggests that we regard knowledge as active, as bringing something about. Later, Rorty finds allies among earlier generations of pragmatists, especially John Dewey. For him, Dewey came to radical conclusions regarding knowledge and truth that were remarkably similar to those of contemporary French deconstructionists such as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. Although Rorty draws on the likes of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Martin Heidegger, his argument is truly pragmatist, not just in the way he rebuffs transcendental forms of inquiry and the spectator theory of knowledge, but also in the way he adjudicates theories on the basis of practical success rather than truth, and the way he shuns theoretical debates that do not make any substantial practical difference. Most of these pragmatist ideas have significant repercussions for the philosophy of the social sciences. Rorty goes further, however. For him, many methodological disputes in the social sciences are pseudo-debates. The *Methodenstreit*, for instance, is not really a quarrel about methods because this would require a consensus regarding which goals to achieve. Naturalists and anti-naturalists simply want different things. Research objectives are central to Rorty's philosophical reflections on the social sciences. They underlie his uneasiness with the way left-leaning social scientists in the United States have moved away from the liberal pragmatism of Dewey and have embraced doctrinaire Marxism or, worse, a sterile and emasculated version of French deconstructionism.

Chapter 6 ends with some critical notes on Rorty, forming a prologue to the concluding chapter. In chapter 7, I discuss a way forward for the social sciences. I suggest that we move beyond the spectre of naturalism that has been haunting the social sciences for a long time, not just because it erroneously assumes that there is something that all sciences have in common, but also because it reduces knowledge to just one type (adequately referred to by Habermas as an empirical-analytical form of knowledge). I elaborate on the possibility of a social science that aims at self-referential knowledge acquisition. This research explores and questions deep-seated presuppositions prevalent in contemporary culture and strives to become aware of other forms of life. This view of the social sciences, therefore, is perfectly in line with the pragmatist perspective that language and knowledge, rather than acts of representation, allow people to increase the scope of human possibilities. Various

forms of social research, in a wide range of disciplines, have already explored this self-referential knowledge. Nietzsche's genealogical method is an obvious illustration, which has recently found applications in several academic subjects such as history and sociology. There are also less well-known or at least more discipline-bound examples, such as the emergence of post-processual archaeology and the critical turn in anthropology. These examples show that, rather than being a mere theoretical construct, the pursuit of self-referential knowledge acquisition can form highly successful research strategies in a multitude of fields.

1
Emile Durkheim's Naturalism

Introduction

One of the intellectual achievements of the French sociologist Emile Durkheim was to develop a coherent empirical method for the study of the social. He was not the first to make such an attempt. Others had preceded him in France and elsewhere, but they either lacked precision (as was the case for Auguste Comte) or they conceived of sociology as an aggregate of psychological mechanisms (like John Stuart Mill and Herbert Spencer). Durkheim managed to distinguish sociology from other sciences, not only in terms of its subject matter but also in terms of how it ought to be approached. He designed a distinctly sociological method – different from economics and psychology. Unlike many others, he did not merely theorize about the method he proposed; he also put it into practice. His methodological writings were informed by his sociological investigations and vice versa. This interplay is obvious in the case of *Rules of Sociological Method* (*Les Règles de la méthode sociologique*)[1] and *Suicide* (*Le Suicide*);[2] the former includes guidelines about how to conduct sociological research and the latter applies them to explain suicide patterns. His other research monographs also include many references to methodological problems. For instance, several sections of *The Division of Labour in Society* (*De la division du travail social*)[3] are devoted to methodological issues, ranging from arguments in favour of sociological explanations to assaults on *a priori* accounts of ethical problems. These reflections then feed back into his analysis of empirical phenomena.

Throughout his life, Durkheim was preoccupied with turning the emerging discipline of sociology into a science. Although he came from a religious Jewish background, he quickly substituted a secular, rationalist outlook for his original faith. This adherence to rationalism explains his dislike of the literary and speculative intellectual style that dominated Parisian intellectual life. He preferred conceptual and methodological rigour, and he felt uncomfortable with sociological analysis that indulged in conjectural or

metaphysical reasoning. It is not surprising, then, that he explored systematically the possibility of a naturalist programme for the social sciences. The doctrine of naturalism assumes that the social and natural sciences have a great deal in common. Others had contemplated this naturalist perspective before him, but very few came near the boldness and clarity of Durkheim's approach. Durkheim promoted *methodological* naturalism: the philosophical position that the methodological rules that apply in the natural sciences could and should be employed in the social sciences. A number of presuppositions underscore this naturalist project. For instance, it assumes that most, if not all, natural sciences operate with roughly the same logic or according to similar procedures, and it presupposes that there is methodological unity *within* each discipline in the natural sciences. This naturalist approach has had a huge impact on the development of social sciences and in particular on sociology; it was particularly dominant in the first half of the twentieth century and is still prevalent today.

It is important to put Durkheim's naturalism within the intellectual context at the time. Nineteenth-century France was preoccupied with how to maintain or restore solidarity, consensus and cohesion within society. After the French Revolution and the repression that followed, intellectuals became very sensitive to the various issues surrounding social order. Order was no longer regarded as something that could be taken for granted: if it existed, it was not because of religious providence, but because people made it happen. If, however, social order can be achieved, it can also be undone. Recent historical events had shown the fragility of social order – the extent to which it can rapidly dissolve into chaos – so the question arose as to how to bring about a type of solidarity or cohesion that fits a modern society. Most philosophers realized that it made no sense to restore the mechanisms of solidarity that preceded the French Revolution. It was futile to seek a return to the *ancien régime*; a modern society needed modern ties. Rationalist philosophers such as Auguste Comte looked to science for a solution; a scientific account of the workings of society would allow for accurate prediction and effective control. Durkheim thought along similar lines: if we are able to study society like natural scientists study their objects, then we will be better placed to find the right solutions for our problems today. In *Division of Labour*, he applied this scientific approach to make proposals for the running of society. Whereas societies without division of labour are characterized by mechanical solidarity based on similarity of sentiments, contemporary societies have reached such levels of complexity that they can no longer rely on this form of solidarity. They require organic solidarity, predicated on complementary and interdependent roles.

Durkheim lived all his adult life through the Third Republic – a precarious period in French history fraught with social upheaval and political scandal. The socio-political context of the Third Republic helps to explain why

Durkheim was so preoccupied with the lack of sufficient integrative and regulative forces in contemporary society. This concern, which was shared by other French intellectuals at the time, was central to *Division of Labour* and *Suicide*. Durkheim believed that his scientific approach – a combination of causal and functional analysis – would enable us to steer society away from various calamities. It is telling that he employed a medical vocabulary to talk about contemporary society: society is described as 'unhealthy', some of its institutions as 'pathological'. The right scientific method would establish what is 'normal' versus what is 'pathological' – what ought to be kept and what should be eradicated. With the help of this method, he wanted to show that anomie (as the lack of normative regulations) was both widespread and destructive in modern France. In short, methodological considerations are not simply a matter of academic interest; they are crucial to the making of an ordered society. The future of French society (and of any contemporary society for that matter) depends on the right sociological method.

Like many social scientists in the nineteenth century, Durkheim was fascinated with the progress of the natural sciences. In awe of the achievements of Newtonian physics, he used the method of physics as a yardstick for sociology. He was aware that the differences between the social and the physical world were such that sociologists could not quite emulate the methods of physics, but he thought that they should try to come as close as possible. His admiration for Newtonian physics strengthened his belief in the virtues of methodological rigour and observable phenomena. It also fuelled his disdain towards anything remotely speculative or metaphysical. Besides physics, biology was an important source of inspiration for him. He accounted for societal evolution by drawing on analogies with biological evolution, with division of labour as an evolutionary 'solution' to rapid population growth and increasing moral density. Like organisms, societies become increasingly complex with time. Durkheim's use of biological metaphors also underscored his holistic approach to the social, according to which society needs to be understood in its entirety. Society cannot be seen as an aggregate of its components; there is more to society than simply the sum of its individuals. Durkheim regularly compared societies to biological organisms in which various components play a significant part in maintaining the whole. Societies are portrayed as having a need for integration or regulation, and sociological analysis ought to establish which parts of society are fulfilling these central functions.

Durkheim regarded himself as a social scientist who was interested in philosophy in so far as it helped him to establish the right methodological pathway. This is particularly obvious in his *The Rules of Sociological Method*. This book, which originally appeared in the *Revue philosophique*, is not Durkheim's most subtle work. Rather than developing the highly sophisticated arguments that can be found in *Division of Labour* or *The Elementary Forms*

of Religious Life, he intended to state forcefully a case for the new science of sociology. Sociology was still associated with Auguste Comte, not quite as unacceptable as in the first half of the nineteenth century, but certainly in need of a proper defence, hence Durkheim's blunt and didactic style. Durkheim, however, had written on methodology long before *Rules*. His inaugural lecture in Bordeaux in 1887, entitled 'Course in Sociology' (*Cours de science sociale: leçon d'ouverture*), dealt with the methodology of the social sciences.[4] In this lecture, he set out the main principles of a new science of society and elaborated on its differences from previous philosophical perspectives on society. He also explained how Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer were its founding fathers, and what role the new science could serve in contemporary French society. In 1892 he completed his dissertation on Montesquieu, which showed how the French philosopher already employed the methodology of the new science, though in a rudimentary and incomplete fashion.[5] After *The Rules of Sociological Method*, Durkheim published other articles about methodology. Among them, 'Sociology and the Social Sciences' (*Sociologie et sciences sociales*) explored the complex relationship between the new science and its neighbouring disciplines. This article put forward taxonomies of its various subdivisions. It also set out the key methodological rules that ought to accompany any sociological study and how it may differ from a historical study.[6]

An uneasy relationship with positivism

It is ironic that, while secondary sources have often labelled Durkheim's methodology as positivist,[7] Durkheim was anxious throughout his life to distance himself from that label. Instead Durkheim used 'rationalism', 'scientific rationalism' or 'rationalist empiricism' to describe his viewpoint, and by doing so distinguished it from what he called the 'positivist metaphysics' of Comte and Spencer.[8] Although he later expressed the need for some changes to 'traditional rationalism' he did so without abandoning its core ideas.[9] The fact that he chose 'rationalism' to refer to his view is partly indicative of his loathing for what he saw as the literary obscurantism that permeated the Parisian intelligentsia and with which he had become acquainted during his student days at the Ecole normale. Rationalism, as both conceptual clarity and scientific method, opposes the 'dilettantism' and 'mysticism' of contemporary intellectual life. Sometimes Durkheim opposed the scientific sociological method to what he called 'art', which is unmethodical and stirred by emotions.[10] A rationalist method consists of finding 'relationships of cause and effect' based on observations so as to steer society effectively. Durkheim pointed out that the principle of causality has been applied effectively in various domains of inquiry, ranging from the physical world to psychology.

It is therefore legitimate also to apply it to the social realm.[11] This is not to say that Durkheim believed that sociology would ever obtain certainties as there are in mathematics, logic, or even the natural sciences. He considered it unlikely that sociology will ever discover the indisputable truths that can be found, say, in geometry. Nevertheless, it would provide a type of knowledge that is preferable over philosophical speculation, metaphysics or religion, because it is grounded in empirical experience. As such, it is well placed to provide reliable guidance for effective future action.[12]

Durkheim was, of course, deeply influenced by the positivism of Auguste Comte, Hippolyte Taine and Ernest Renan.[13] He accepted Comte's view that, in the course of recent history, the positive method had been applied to increasingly complex domains of reality (respectively physics, chemistry, biology and psychology). As a consequence, it was probably only a matter of time before this method could be applied to society as well.[14] Durkheim agreed with the positivist school that sociology ought to emulate the methods of the natural sciences, hence his insistence that social facts should be treated like things. Sociology ought to adopt a similar objectivity to the natural sciences, and aim at law-like generalizations, using the comparative method. Like various positivists, he drew a distinction between science and metaphysics and emphasized that sociology is irrelevant with regard to metaphysical questions. It is wrong to assume, as some do, that the uncovering of societal laws undermines the notion of free will.[15] Like Comte, Durkheim held that in various spheres of life philosophical speculation has become superseded by science, as can be inferred from his view that, instead of *a priori* arguments about ethics, we should study empirically the extent to which various societies need different ethical systems. Like Comte's positivist school, he believed that the scientific study of society, rather than being contemplative, is a stepping stone towards the steering of the social, hence his interest, for instance, in distinguishing normal versus pathological forms. As society has become increasingly complex, its reliance on scientifically based steering has intensified.[16]

Durkheim felt strongly, however, that positivist knowledge was not sufficiently embedded in the empirical realm, and that it had become what it had tried to replace, a new orthodoxy and a new religion. It is probably indicative of Durkheim's stance *vis-à-vis* Comte that he initially used the term 'social science' ('*science sociale*') rather than Comte's neologism 'sociology' ('*sociologie*'). From the beginning, he was keen to distance himself from Comte's project, which he did not consider sufficiently scientific. For Durkheim, Comte did not carry out proper empirical research, and so failed to recognize the rich diversity among societies.[17] He recognized only one 'social species', and treated his law of three stages as a dogma rather than a scientific fact. Durkheim decided that there is no guarantee, as Comte believed, that societal evolution would continue evolving in the same direction as it has done so