

Robert Bellah's Symbolic Realism: A Contemporary Modification to Durkheim's Epistemology

ABSTRACT: By privileging practice over idea, a Durkheimian perspective fails to account for how the abstract realm of conceptual ideas, symbols and beliefs can become sacrilized and thereby effect subsequent action. Bellah's theory of symbolic realism faithfully extends Durkheim's theory to explain how symbols can evolve out of practice to become powerful determinants of action. By avoiding the pitfall of privileging practice over ideas, symbolic realism allows for a flexible account of cultural historical variation in Durkheim's theory of practice.

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Robert Bellah's symbolic realism provides an account for cultural maintenance that explains not only how practice evolves, but also how symbols and beliefs evolve. Although Emile Durkheim was the classical theorist who most inspired Bellah, he realized that Durkheim's model did not recognize the transcendental power of symbols to affect practice. Therefore, Bellah's theory optimizes Durkheim's original account for society, that belief is generated by practice, into a more flexible account for how culture and society develops.

Bellah is one of many post-Durkheimian scholars dedicated to understanding his works. Among the various reinterpretations of Durkheim's work, the most recent theoretical contribution has been Anne Rawls's extensive analysis of *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. She argues that Durkheim's theory of knowledge has two components: sociology of knowledge and an epistemology based on practice. Rawls argues that it is this latter component that has been repeatedly misunderstood and entirely overlooked by post-Durkheimian interpretations (Rawls 2004: 6). She contends that contemporary sociology has fallen into a "fallacy of misplaced abstraction" creating an unstable hierarchy that favors abstract concepts at the expense of enacted practice (Rawls 2004: 324-326, 332).¹ This is the realm of sociology of knowledge, which privileges concepts over action. She urges the field (of sociology) to distance itself from such a strong focus on belief and to honor Durkheim's epistemological approach that privileges practice.

I agree with Rawls's argument that radical postmodernism treats symbols as the ultimate reality; this approach has created an analytical cul-de-sac wherein belief is treated as the prime unit of analysis. But by attempting to bring sociology back to

¹ She points out Baudrillard's argument that treats symbols as reality. I agree with her that this branch of post-modern sociology has veered too far into the conceptual realm (Rawls 1997: 27; Baudrillard 1994).

Durkheim's epistemology of practice, Rawls perpetuates the very divide that she is critiquing. As the saying goes, "plus ca change, plus c'est la meme chose". Her critique reinforces the problematic notion of analytical hierarchy in sociology—base or superstructure, micro or macro, positivist or idealist approach, and practice or ideas? One side always privileges their analytical method by accusing the other side of inadequacy. But by picking a side and privileging one method, Rawls, and all the other post-Durkheimian scholars who perpetuate the false dichotomy of practice "versus" belief, miss the big picture.

By privileging practice over idea, a Durkheimian perspective fails to account for how the abstract realm of conceptual ideas, symbols and beliefs can become sacrilized and thereby effect subsequent action. This analytical inadequacy makes it difficult to account for historical variation in practice. Sociology of knowledge attempts to address this inadequacy by focusing on concepts. Unfortunately, the sociology of knowledge purists have lost sight of the fact that, as Durkheim contends, symbols are rooted in practice.²

Rawls' solution, like other post-Durkheimian scholars, fails to look into the work of Robert Bellah, who bridges the sociology of knowledge and epistemology by refusing to privilege practice over ideas or vice versa. I argue that Bellah's theory of symbolic realism faithfully extends Durkheim's theory to explain how symbols can evolve out of practice to become powerful determinants of action; whereas Durkheim privileges practice over idea, Bellah's theory treats practice and ideas as mutably reciprocal. By avoiding the pitfall of privileging practice over ideas, symbolic realism allows for a flexible

² The division in sociology that Rawls is critiquing is an attempt to bridge practice and symbols, yet the solution she offers—Durkheim's theory of practice as more important than ideas—is a return to the original dichotomy that the sociology of knowledge camp attempted to solve, but has failed to comprehensively answer.

account of cultural historical variation in Durkheim's theory of practice. In what follows, I will show how Bellah agrees with Durkheim that beliefs are rooted in practice, and demonstrate how symbolic realism curtails the privileging of practice over belief in organic solidarity. By doing so, Bellah sets up practice and symbols as mutually interdependent.

Both Bellah and Durkheim agree that symbols are important and necessary to society (Durkheim 1995: 223, 232; Bellah 1970: 203). Most importantly, Bellah remains faithful to Durkheim's principal tenet that enacted practice creates the "conditions of life" which give rise to ideas (Durkheim 1995: 231). These ideas can then shape reality, but they have to be "attach[ed]...to material things that symbolize them" (Durkheim 1995: 229). Affirming Durkheim's prime tenet of material action, Bellah conceives of religion as "always embedded in the whole range of human action" (Bellah et. al. 2006: 6, 1965: 24). Symbolic realism is genuinely rooted in Durkheim's epistemology, because Bellah clearly maintains that beliefs originate in practice.

However, symbolic realism challenges Durkheim's assertion that orders of practice take over shared beliefs in organic solidarity. In *Division of Labor in Society*, Durkheim argues that an organic solidarity predicated on a "forced division of labor," creates excessive individualism (1960: 379-380).³ In a society where a differentiated labor structure promotes and entrenches individualism, traditional beliefs no longer carry weight (1960: 379). As a result, the power of collective beliefs to constrain individuals wanes. This was Durkheim's critique of modernity, that rational individualism was valued over collective activity in organic solidarity.⁴

³ By way of contrast, in mechanical solidarity the beliefs played a larger role than practice

⁴ This critique is most apparent in *Suicide*, where he says in organic solidarity, an increase in anomie leads to egoistic suicides (1951).

Durkheim sees a return to practice as the only solution for a society comprised of a multiplicity of individuals. He insists that society has to create new practices to generate new beliefs, because symbols left over from mechanical solidarity cannot combat radical individualism. For example, his work in pedagogical sociology reflects an attempt to systematically create a common practice of education for French children, as a basis of generating unifying symbols and morals (Lukes 1973: 109-119). Later on, Durkheim also provides the French Revolution as an example when symbols had to be overturned in practice to generate new beliefs (1995: 213, 215). Durkheim distinctly periodizes historical changes with changes in practice. That is, he clearly privileges practice over beliefs. This is also where the practice-over-belief hierarchy becomes the clearest and most problematic, because a historical periodization based on practice creates a conceptual cul-de-sac because he insinuates that only practices evolve, not symbols. But symbols do evolve. This is where Bellah calibrates Durkheim's model by providing symbolic realism's two most important modifications to Durkheim.

Bellah's first construct posits that as the social order evolves, symbols evolve also: "neither religious man nor the structure of man's ultimate religious situation evolves, then, but rather religion as symbol systems" (Bellah 1964: 24, Madsen et. al. 2001: 5).⁵ If a symbol no longer works for society, it does not simply follow a linear path of disappearance, like in Durkheim's model; a symbol can either lose its power or it can become more powerful. Durkheim does not provide an account for how symbols can become sacrilized. This leads to Bellah's second construct, which is that symbols can take on a life of their own (1970b). Whereas Durkheim believed symbols were only second hand reflections of practice, Bellah insists that symbols as second hand

⁵ He explains his use of the word "evolution" as "social evolution." The path is flexible and does not have a pre-determined or even planned outcome (Bellah et. al 2006: 19).

reflections not only *reify* the practice, they can also *transcend* practice and become sacralized through this process.

Bellah's symbolic realism posits practice and symbols in a state of flux (Bellah et. al 2006: 6). In this sense, symbols and practice are mutably reciprocal – as one changes, so can the other. His understanding of religions as constituting “symbolic forms and acts that relate [humans] to the ultimate conditions of [their] existence” means that he sees practice and beliefs as interdependent, and does not privilege one over the other (1964: 24).

Bellah thus solves Durkheim's hierarchy by treating symbols as capable of exerting force, while still faithfully acknowledging that symbols are rooted in practice. This treatment gives symbols the power to exert their own moral force; Durkheim says it is *only* in practice that moral force can be exerted (1995: 213, 223-224, 424). Durkheim always returned to practice as the locus of ritual. Rituals are ceremonies of “moral remaking” that create and/or redefine the sacred versus the profane (1995: 429). This is consistent with Durkheim's work in pedagogical sociology, where he saw education as the locus of practice to impress a rational morality on French students (Lukes 1973: 115).⁶ Clearly, moral force for Durkheim can only be exerted in practice, where for Bellah, it can *also* be exerted in symbols. Herein lies the key to understanding how Bellah solves Durkheim's problem of characterizing historical periodization with practice. By identifying the root of his conceptual cul-de-sac, that only practice can exert moral force, Bellah masterfully renders symbols as capable of exerting moral force on society

⁶ Lukes points out that Durkheim's account of morality went through several changes throughout his writing, but these lectures on pedagogy provides the most clear elements of how he defined morality. He defined it by three elements: discipline, attachment to social groups, and autonomy (1973: 115-119).

(1968).⁷ Bellah recognizes that when there is a strong collective practice supporting a symbol, the symbol can cross a critical threshold and take on a life of its own and affect future enacted practice. Bellah effectively dissolves the hierarchy of practice over idea by recognizing that symbols exert real social force, and account for historical variation and a historical periodization rooted in the mutably reciprocal relationships of practice and symbols.⁸

By implicating a symbolic evolution that goes hand-in-hand with action evolution, Bellah's symbolic realism provides an account for religiosity in modernity. His concept of civic religion in America explains that religiosity never disappears; rather it is the symbols and practice that change (1967: 233). Religion (for example beliefs of Protestantism) has not disappeared, rather it has mutated into a form of civic religion *sui generis*. This is an example of how symbols can exert their own social force.

Although the theoretical thrust of symbolic realism asserts that symbols can change and affect action, it is important to note that not all symbols follow this path. Depending on how entrenched a symbol is in the power system, it can be difficult to overturn: once a symbol reaches mythical status, it can become more real over time (Bellah et. al. 2006: 9). This is how symbols become sacralized—a dynamic that Durkheim did not explore. Bellah attributes Durkheim's lack of fully understanding symbols and his mechanistic view of historical periodization based on practice to his symbolic reductionist approach (1970: 90). He recognizes Durkheim's attempt to "reach beneath the symbol to grasp

⁷ Shepard's article provides a good outline that traces Symbolic realism's theoretical elements throughout Bellah's extensive writing until the mid-1970's.

⁸ Bellah acknowledges that a common critique of Durkheim is that his model does not account for historical variation, to the extent that others have called him an ahistorical theorist. However, Bellah points out that historical research was a large part of Durkheim's sociology—particularly in family, individuation and religion—and he has made an invaluable methodological contribution to the field in that "comparison and structural taxonomy" can account for the "variables for an adequate theory of social change" (Bellah 1959).

the reality it represents” as “contain[ing] deep inner contradictions precisely with respect to this point” (Durkheim 1995:2, Bellah 1970b: 92).⁹ A reductionist approach assumes that once you understand the truth, you understand the truth and root of all symbols.¹⁰ Durkheim’s methodological approach confirms this, because he believed that society’s categories of understanding basically address the same needs; therefore one can study just one religion and understand all religion (Rawls 1997: 13). Durkheim’s approach reduces societies to merely their practices, therefore it is of no surprise that he also reduces historical periodization to practices.¹¹

Let us examine a modern example that traces the relationship between symbols and practice. Racial discrimination is real and symbolic at the same time. It can be located in practice and it can also be carried on as an abstract belief. For example, in Jim Crow America, Blacks were physically barred from drinking public water fountains or riding public buses. Massive protests, boycotts and marches against segregation are examples of communal practices attempting to overturn discrimination as a practice and as a culture. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 declared discrimination against Blacks (and everyone else) illegal. However, the belief of racism against Blacks still persists to this day, and therefore still affects practice, which reinforces beliefs. This is an example of a symbolic belief that has both transcended practice and affected action. The belief of racism is so strong that a person can become racist without ever having to physically

⁹ Although Bellah points out this contradiction, he compassionately situates Durkheim’s reductionist approach among many other scholars (e.g. Feuerbach, Hegel, Weber, Freud) in the context of dealing with the split between religion and science, and reacting against the rational individualism that has been popular since the Enlightenment (1970b).

¹⁰ Bellah clarifies Durkheim’s contradiction by pointing out that he said “religion is a reality sui generis,” and if a study of society and religion has to include the totality of subject and object. Therefore, symbols and practice as they correspond to religious symbolization and experience, “are inherent in the structure of human existence, all reductionism must be abandoned” (1970b: 93).

interact with a Black person. Symbols can be passed down through practice to enforce a practice.

Symbols are mutable, but they are dependent on practice. This is what also provides historical variation, because one can trace how racism as a symbolic and an enacted practice has mutated. One can argue that although there is a decrease in the practice of racism since the era of American slavery, the enduring belief of racism explains why racism is still a problem symbolically and practically. A purely Durkheimian explanation cannot account for why racism still persists. To eliminate racism, Durkheim would call for a communal action to agitate for a new morality that would generate new symbols.¹² His career as a social scientist exemplifies this simplistic, mechanistic solution for creating new beliefs, whereby new moral forces can be easily generated with enough action.¹³ But social change is not exclusively reducible to actions. Bellah acknowledges this by seeing symbols as capable of exerting moral force. This is why after 43 years of the Civil Rights Act, other important pieces of legislation, countless protests, and attention from the media, racism still persists: racism is not only a practice, it lives on as an abstract concept in institutional memory.¹⁴ A Durkheimian response does not suffice for a world where some symbols gain enough institutionalized power to transcend action.

¹² Rawls points out that in his detailed outline of Australian totemism that Durkheim posits that generating moral force is an ongoing process for all societies because this is how reason is produced (2004: 171).

¹³ Rawls provides a great explanation that clarifies Durkheim's position that the confrontation with moral forces generates "rational idea, not the belief system." It is only in practice where individuals come together to experience this social force, and that is why Rawls insists that Durkheim privileges practice because it is the only place and time empirical observation is possible. This is the root of his socially based epistemological answer to individualism (2004: 15).

¹⁴ Even before American slavery, there has been historical racism against Africans.

Bellah empathetically understands Durkheim's intentions within the context of his time period, and optimizes his model into a dynamic analytical framework. By locating symbols as mutable, yet interdependent on practice, Bellah creates a convincing and useful theoretical framework to examine comparative historical variations and developments. We can see that Bellah roots his discourse on symbols in the cybernetic model, which treats symbols as transcending action, but not equivalent with action: "Great summary symbols...are neither objective nor subjective, neither cosmological nor psychological. Rather, they are relational symbols that are intended to overcome precisely such dichotomies of ordinary conceptualization and bring together the coherence of the whole experience" (1970a: 9, 202). He sees the importance of overcoming the very dichotomies that Rawls critiques yet perpetuates.¹⁵

Bellah masterfully bridges sociology of knowledge and sociological epistemology by treating symbols as capable of exerting real moral forces, and by treating symbols as always rooted in practice. He does not make the mistake (that Rawls claims of all post-Durkheimian scholars) of treating "the interpretation as the original thing," because he treats the interpreter's reality of beliefs in the larger context of other interpreters (Rawls 2004: 25). As one of earliest developers of contemporary American cultural sociology¹⁶, he realizes that interpretations do not take place in a vacuum, actions cannot be reduced to a single explanation, and that structures as constituted of symbols do not suffice as an

¹⁵ This formally developed into his theory of Symbolic realism in his 1969 article on "Christianity and Symbolic realism." He has now further developed his theory to explain how symbols operate on three different levels, mimetic, mythic and theoretic (Bellah et. al 2006: 7-11). In a forthcoming book, he will elaborate on how religious and symbolic representations fluctuate between these three levels.

¹⁶ Along with Clifford Geertz (Alexander 2001: 2)

explanation of the actor's decisions (Alexander and Sherwood 2001: 2).¹⁷ He is careful to avoid a structurally deterministic, functionally simplistic or symbolically reductionist approach. He simply does this by not privileging practice over idea. Where Durkheim privileges, Bellah balances; and where Durkheim divides, Bellah bridges.

Symbolic realism should be acknowledged in any treatment that critiques misinterpretations of Durkheim. If anything, towards the end of Durkheim's writing, he implies the need for a symbolic realistic approach in his call for a "cult of humanity" that would curb excessive patriotism and promote a humane cosmopolitanism (Lukes 1973: 350). This new international civic religion would bring together the entire world to sacralize humanity.¹⁸ Perhaps if Durkheim expounded on how his "religion of humanity" would have brought together a multiplicity of nations, cultures, religions, races and ethnicities, we would have a better understanding of how to "organize economic life and introduce greater justice" to combat "the utilitarian ethic [of individualism] that is appeared to [be] incompatible with social necessities" (1973: 48, 56).

Fortunately, Bellah has picked up Durkheim's baton that "a world civil religion" is possible, but it requires "vital international symbolism" (pg 245 Bellah). This is the heart of symbolic realism's contribution to Durkheim's call for a common global solidarity based on humanity. In order to do this, you need a powerful symbol to arise from collective action, one that can respond to the multiplicity of heterogeneous moralities, cultures and nations. This is where symbolic realism can be most useful –it acknowledges that a symbol can arise from practice to speak on a universal level and

¹⁷ Alexander and Sherwood's article detail how Bellah and Geertz's middle-period of writing bridged "formal and informal Parsonianism" and thereby "bridging mid- and late-twentieth-century sociology" (2001: 3).

¹⁸ The exposition "Intellectual and Intellectualism," published in 1898, signal a shift in Durkheim's unit of analysis from intra-societal to inter-societal. However, his writing focused only intra-societal analysis and 'primitive' or mechanical societies.

transcend down to the individual, and still make room for a multiplicity of differences. However, Durkheim is not a conservative scholar, urging for a return to a traditional or mechanic solidarity. In a world of extreme individualism predicated on a division of labor, “to prevent [people] from differentiating themselves more and more from each other, to equalize their personalities, to lead them back to the old conformism of former times...infinitely exceeds all human capability” (1973: 52). He does not call for “restraining and combating” individualism; rather, it is about “completing, extending and organizing” individualism (1973: 56). In a world of mutable symbols and practice, Bellah responds with a flexible schema that allows for “the emergence of a dynamic multidimensional self capable, within limits, of continual self-transformation and capable, again within limits, of remaking the world, including the very symbolic forms with which [s]/he deals with, even the forms that state the unalterable conditions of [her]/his own existence” (Bellah 1964: 47). In Bellah’s world, an individual not only realizes her/himself through practice, but also through continual self-dialogue that examines belief systems that justify practice.

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