

Classification Essay Example

Durkheim and Mauss array themselves at the outset of the work against “Logicians” and “Psychologists,” both of which, they argue, treat the process of classifying things, events, and facts about the world as at worst innate and at best individually constituted; that is, they assume that there is one essentially uniform way of ordering the world that is common to all people. In contrast, Durkheim and Mauss mobilize the anthropologist’s ubiquitous argumentative weapon: the historical and crosscultural variability of nearly any human phenomenon. Indeed, they contend, that which is commonly understood as classification is of rather recent origin, having its true birth in the thought of Aristotle. This historical origin of logical classification presupposes an extended prehistory, during which humanity (or at least one part of it) gradually removed itself from its original “state of indistinction.”

Durkheim and Mauss document this indistinction, or “mental confusion,” which, they argue, is in places and at times so extreme that “the individual himself loses his personality.” Human consciousness, in its primitive state, is a continuous and unregulated flow of representations bleeding into one another. The phenomenon of totemism—the belief in a relation of consubstantiality between members of a social group and a category of things (for example, bears, eagles, and lightning)—is a vestigial product of this sort of thought. The primitive inability to distinguish aspects of the world is taken as evidence that in the beginning, at least, humanity lacked the capacity to classify and that, consequently, such a capacity must be acquired from somewhere.

If it is not the human mind which provides this model, as a priori philosophers such as Immanuel Kant would have it, then perhaps the groupings and relations of things are inherent in the things themselves; perhaps, as David Hume and the empiricists claimed, it is nature itself which indicates how things should be perceived. Durkheim and Mauss reject this option as well, arguing that the inherent resemblances of things are not sufficient to determine the complex schemata by which they are apprehended. Having rejected both of these solutions, Durkheim and Mauss resolve the situation by, as Steven Lukes, Durkheim’s biographer, has put it, “restating the old epistemological questions in sociological terms.”