The Moral Radicalism of 
Durkheim, Nietzsche, and 
Wittgenstein: 
A Reply to Gottfried

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THANKS are owing to Paul Gottfried for his Re- 
joiner (Summer, 1981) to my essay, "The Ethics 
of Comparative Religion," 1 but in my opinion 
his comments contain a number of errors and 
misrepresentations. First, it is not true, as Pro- 
fessor Gottfried says, that the French sociologist 
Emile Durkheim "wrote and spoke as a socialist 
partisan." Most Durkheim scholars have 
recognized two elements in Durkheim's attitude 
toward socialism: on the one hand, his rejection 
of the economic analysis he regarded as basic to 
all socialist doctrines ("The maladjustment from 
which we suffer . . . bears witness not to greater 
economic poverty, but to an alarming poverty of 
moralityz . . . . Basically, I have . . . . an aver-
sion (éloignement) for socialism . . . .");3 and, on 
the other hand, his strong interest in socialism as 
a sociological phenomenon—an interest which 
caused him to sympathize with certain forms of 
socialism as one would with a sick person 
("Socialism is to the facts which produce it what 
the groans of a sick man are to the illness with 
which he is afflicted . . . . Socialism . . . . is a cry 
of grief"). 4 Lewis A. Coser points up these two 
elements of Durkheim's attitude toward 
socialism when he says: "Durkheim always re-
jected socialism, though he knew socialist theory 
well . . . ."5 Among the many scholars who 
have given roughly similar accounts of 
Durkheim's attitude toward socialism are 
Robert Bellah,6 Marcel Mauss,7 Talcott Par-
sons, 8 Robert Nisbet,9 Stephen Lukes,10 Elvin 
Hatch,11 and Anthony Giddens.12

Secondly, Professor Gottfried states that Durk- 
heim "looked forward, like Auguste Comte, 
to a sociologically-reconstructed Europe." The 
widespread misinterpretation of 
Durkheim's early thought as primarily 
Comtean is due in large measure to the influence exerted 
by the writings of such sociologists as Robert K. 
Merton13 and Talcott Parsons.14 The fact is, 
however, as Stephen Lukes notes, that 
"Durkheim always spoke of himself as a ra-
tionalist, never as a positivist."15 His views, as 
Durkheim himself warned, "must not be confus-
ed with the positivist metaphysics of Comte and 
M. Spencer."16 Similarly, Robert Nisbet has 
written that Durkheim's "positivism has little or 
nothing to do with Comte's brand . . . . For a 
long time, the positivist objective of Durkheim's 
thought led those who studied his work to 
overlook its conservative and religious con-
tent . . . . What is found in Durkheim . . . is 
the rationalization . . . . of philosophical 
conservatism."17 Among the many scholars who 
have noted the deeply conservative elements in 
Durkheim's thinking are Lewis A. Coser,18 
Morton, Grodzins,19 Stephen Lukes,20 Dominick 
LaCapra,21 P. Q. Hirst,22 and Ernest 
Wallwork.23

Thirdly, Professor Gottfried states that Nietz-
sche's essay, "The Use and Abuse of History" 
(Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben) 
"sets out to show the past's irrelevance." Neither 
Walter Kaufmann,24 Karl Jaspers,25 F. A. 
Lea,26 George Allen Morgan,27 Tracy Strong,28 
nor any other responsible Nietzsche scholar 
would agree with this judgment. What Nietz-
sche's essay sets out to do is denounce the 
spiritual bankruptcy of both the Hegelian and 
Darwinian views of history and progress, with 
their "naked admiration for success," "idolatry of 
the factual," and implicit valuation that 
"everything that passes away deserves to pass 
away." For Nietzsche, " . . . we are merely the 
resultant of previous generations . . . we cannot 
escape the fact that we spring from them."29

Fourthly, Professor Gottfried represents my 
essay as being largely concerned, on a 
philosophical level, to refute the position of neo-
Kantian Wilhelm Dilthey. He then criticizes me 
for allegedly maintaining that (in his words) 
"Dilthey and his disciples tried to construct de-
subjectivized . . . pictures . . . of the various 
cultures they studied," when in fact Dilthey 
"based his investigations on sympathetic 
understanding." I do not understand how Pro-
fessor Gottfried could say these things. Wilhelm 
Dilthey's name does not appear in the text of my 
essay, only in the footnotes, where a few short 
remarks are made unambiguously characteriz-
ing his approach as subjective. The method of 
"sympathetic understanding" adopted by 
historians of religion and anthropologists is one 
of the principal issues addressed in the essay.

Finally, Professor Gottfried strongly implies 
that the use of the thought of Durkheim, Nietzsche,
sche, and Wittgenstein to support my critique of comparative religionists is misplaced and that I would have done better to model my thesis along ideological lines, keeping in mind "that the majority of Americans working as social scientists consider themselves men and women of the Left." The former criticism seems to me wrong (as I will argue in a moment) while the latter seems to me irrelevant since it ignores the stated theme of the essay. Very briefly, I argued that the dichotomy of facts and values assumed by comparative religionists carries with it two destructive consequences: it causes them to conceive of culture and religion as subjective entities subsidiary to the more "necessary," "harder" realities of social life and it justifies their stance of ethical neutrality (as well as most types of moral relativism) by granting them an objective, neutral position from which they may view such subjective processes. Contrary to Professor Gottfried, what was relevant to my argument was not so much the particular value assumptions comparative religionists do make, but rather their failure to acknowledge the fact that they make them. Moral bias, I argued, is inevitable in the study of culture and religion; it is imposed on the researcher by the very nature of his subject matter. The only question is whether or not the researcher is to cultivate a critical consciousness of his moral assumptions—whether or not he is to acknowledge them as moral. By not doing so, the comparative religionist distorts his judgment and vision; he loses control over what he cannot in any case get rid of—his moral judgment. It is this lack of control which sustains the ideals of "primitivism, anti-Westernism, and a homogeneous humanity" which Professor Gottfried referred to; they are sustained (at least partly) by the failure to lay bare their moral content, to strip away the veil of a non-moral status with which they are draped. But such "moral puritanism," such girlish reluctance on modern man's part to reveal himself as a moral being, is largely impervious to ideological attack; only through a distinctively moral analysis can the veil be rendered transparent.

And it is just here that the thought of Durkheim, Nietzsche, and Wittgenstein can be of value to conservatives. Like the latter, these men recognized that the crisis which modern civilization has been undergoing since the Enlightenment was a fundamentally moral one. As a moral crisis, moreover, they believed that non-moral solutions marking a division between science and morals, or between that of Natur-
drawn from the works of Durkheim, Nietzsche, and Wittgenstein which should be very close to the hearts and minds of conservatives: that a true challenge to modernism is possible through a moral radicalism which questions at its deepest level the bifurcated, narrowly scientific understanding of the universe that has prevailed for the last few centuries. Granted, their critique of modernism was "from within" and therefore erroneous in many respects from a conservative point of view. Nonetheless, Durkheim, Nietzsche, and Wittgenstein, unlike most "moderns," managed at least partly to transcend their age—to shed a little light into what Wittgenstein called "the darkness of this time." Their pronouncements were, in Nietzsche's words, "untimely meditations." Conservatives can only benefit by lending a critical ear to them.

—Henry McDonald