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The Reconciliation between Rationalism and Empiricism

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THE RECONCILIATION BETWEEN RATIONALISM AND EMPIRICISM

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Immanuel Kant formulated his ethical theory based on categories of thought, which he believed were programmed by nature into the consciousness of every rational being. A major implication of this type of formulation is that moral laws hold universally for all rational beings. Emile Durkheim, wishing to retain the rationalism of Kant granted that all rational beings possess categories of thought. However, Durkheim was also an empiricist, which is usually thought to be a conflicting claim with rationalism. The categories of thought, for Durkheim, were constructed, not by nature, but by society, and, thus, could vary from society to society. Hence, Kant's universalistic ethical theory was transformed by Durkheim into an ethical theory with relativistic implications. Durkheim's ultimate goal in asserting that categories of thought were constructed by society, and not the individual, was to reconcile rationalism and empiricism. However, Durkheim's belief that society (not the nature of human reason) is the source for the categories of thought, is a clear indication that Durkheim was not willing to grant enough rationality to the individual as is necessary for his theory to be a rationalist theory. Thus, Durkheim fails in his quest to reconcile rationalism and empiricism.