

Representations and the oppositional structure of consciousness in the sociology of Emile Durkheim

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Abstract

My claim is that Durkheim's sociology is driven on the philosophy of consciousness. To make my point I will start by stressing the importance of the concept of representation in his work. Then I will show that this conception relies on Durkheim's interpretation of Kant. With that aim I will depict Durkheim's position on representation as an expression of the philosophy of consciousness, following Husserl and Henry. In addition I will argue that representations are thought by Durkheim as a product of the main function of our consciousness which is to constitute syntheses. I will end by suggesting that Renouviere's distinction of inner and outer sense informed the way Durkheim conceived of individual and social representations as two different functions of our consciousness, one that we use to make our own representations of the objects of our thought, another that we use to represent to ourselves objects external to us.

Keywords: Durkheim, representations, objectivity, exteriority, consciousness, Phenomenology

1. Three major misunderstandings concerning Durkheim's sociology

Durkheim's sociology has been misunderstood from the outset as one can see in his own complaints about the way his *Rules...* were read in his time. One of these major misinterpretations involves Durkheim's concept of representations. In the Preface to the second edition of *Rules...* he complained that his critics did not realize how important representations are for understanding social life.¹ Another major

misunderstanding concerns the exteriority of social facts, that has been confused with the idea—which Durkheim explicitly rejects— of the exteriority of social phenomena as regards the individuals.² A third misinterpretation is related to the notion of objectivity, which Durkheim called his “fundamental principle,” that was not unanimously accepted in his days.³

These three misunderstandings are parts of one and the same confusion which requires one integrated approach. Specifically, the first misunderstanding is at the base of the other two since disregarding the role of representations leads to a misleading conception of the exteriority and the objectivity of social facts. A deeper comprehension of what Durkheim meant by “representation” is then needed in order to grasp what he had in mind whilst claiming that social facts are external to the individuals and that they have an objectivity of their own.

To fully understand Durkheim’s notion of representations we must take into account that they are a product of the activity of our consciousness. Maybe one of the reasons why “Durkheim is one of the best known and one of the least understood major social thinkers” (LaCapra 2001, 3) is that not many of his readers have realized of the importance of the concept of representation and the consequences it has for main issues of his sociology.

In order to deal with this subject, I will start by stressing the importance of the concept of representation in Durkheim. Then I will show that this conception relies on post Kantian ideas that he received from the French philosopher Renouvier. Then I will depict Durkheim’s position on representation as an expression of the philosophy of consciousness following Husserl. In addition I will argue that representations are thought by Durkheim as a product of the main function of our consciousness which is to constitute syntheses. I will conclude with a discussion about the meaning of Kantism for Durkheim’s sociology drawn upon Henry’s critique of dualism.

2. Representations, a key concept in Durkheim

Representation is a key concept in Durkheim. For instance, nothing less than the collective is made of

representations and consists “entirely” in representations (Stedman Jones 2003, 70).

Despite its relevance, not all scholars have noticed the centrality of representations for the sociology of Durkheim. In this regard, three different stances have been taken. Some (probably the most) have overlooked the importance of representations in Durkheim. Others, such as Lukes, upheld that “representation is a post-1895 concept.” (Stedman Jones 2003, 14) A few (and I would like to include myself in this group) consider that “representation” is a core concept for Durkheim since his early writings and is a fundamental reference in order to truly understand his oeuvre (Stedman Jones 2003, 16-18).

My claim here is not that Durkheim often mentioned the word “representation” in his early writings but that his longstanding idea that social facts are objective and external to the individuals only makes sense if related to the idea of representation⁴ conceived, in Kantian terms, as the opposition between internal and external reality. Maybe this is why the neglect of representations in Durkheim often goes along with the oblivion of the ubiquitous notion of consciousness, since “it is the functions of *conscience* which make representation possible.” (Stedman Jones 2003, 18)

3. Durkheim’s sociology as “an extension of Kantianism”

Despite the fact that some scholars choose to focus on Durkheim’s ambivalent relation to Kant (see Vera 2002, 112; see also Murguía Lores 2002, 89, 91) or even in his criticism (see Morales Zúñiga 2009, 158, 151; Giner 2008, 12-13), it would not be difficult to attest Kant’s influence on Durkheim. For instance, one could argue that he vaguely echoes kantian language when opposing sensations and sensibility to concepts⁵ and when advocating for the human personality⁶. But that won’t be necessary since I’m not the first to notice the influence of Kantism on Durkheim. Major social theorists like Giddens have referred to “Durkheim’s sociological Kantism,” (Giddens 1979, 22) and allusions to this topic are ubiquitous in the state of the art. For instance, LaCapra considers Durkheim’s “passion for dualistic antinomies” as a neo-Kantian influence,

along with the “philosophy of finitude” and the understanding of morality as a matter of practical reason (LaCapra 2001, 6). Also Stedman Jones observes the influence of neo-Kantism on Durkheim, this time, attributed to Renouvier, who “was the first French philosopher to point to the scientific importance of Kant’s Copernican revolution.” (Stedman Jones 2003, 17) And Boudon goes further yet by arguing that Durkheim erected his sociology as “an extension of Kantianism.” (Boudon 2006, 140)

However, I won’t address here such a large subject as “Durkheim and Kantism.” I will focus on one aspect of Kantism which is essential to understand what Durkheim had in mind when speaking of consciousness. This particular aspect is the idea of representation. Also, I will focus not on Kant himself but in the way his ideas were received by Durkheim, on how Renouvier influenced him, and on how they antedated phenomenology since they involve the idea of consciousness as intentionality (in a Husserlian sense) and as the opposition of the object and the subject (in Hermy’s terms).

4. Core issues of the metaphysics of representation in Durkheim’s sociology

Durkheim thought that representations are inner determinations of the subject but he also considered the collective aspect of representations, which he pursued “through the logic of ‘external’ relations.” (Stedman Jones 2003, 17) As Stedman Jones notes, he appreciated that Kant had shown “that representation is not a private subjective (or merely ‘inner’) experience but has an objective reality that is general” (ibid.); and this ideas came to Durkheim through Renouvier, who –in a peculiar, personal way—

continued Kant’s distinction between the inner and the outer aspect as a way of accounting for all aspects of experience⁷ within the logic of representation. For Renouvier the self logically belongs to the inner aspect of representation: nature and material things or all external relations belong to the outer aspect – or external relation;⁸ all external relations – that is all relations other than the self are logically outside⁹. So Durkheim stresses external reality (*le dehors*) whilst insisting that all is representation, for society consists in the relations which surround the person and which are thus logically

external. This analysis helps to explain Durkheim's use of the outside (*le dehors*) in relation to social facts (Stedman Jones 2003, 18).

Durkheim also conceived of collective consciousness as opposite to individual consciousness inasmuch as the exterior opposes the interior.¹⁰ That's why –he argues— individual and social states of consciousness are heterogeneous (Durkheim 2005, 360). The opposition between internal and external reality and the idea that the social is objective —therefore, external— can be clearly appreciated, for instance, in the large issue of the origin and nature of categories, which increasingly interested Durkheim along the years.

5. Categories and the oppositional structure of consciousness

Durkheim held that categories are both, objective and external. He considered them as ruled by objective laws of representations constituted in the sphere of the outer (Stedman Jones 2003, 17)¹¹. By doing this, he was answering the French spiritualists, who “had developed a tradition of deriving the categories from internal reflection.” (Schmaus 2004, 100) Durkheim, instead, considered that even inner experiences that generate in part some fundamental categories (such as the category of causality) are inner experiences of outer social forces “generated in us by collective representations.” (Schmaus 2004)

Representations are a function of consciousness (Stedman Jones 2007, 99); therefore, consciousness has a “centrality” with regards to representations (Stedman Jones 2003, 16-17). Despite this centrality, the concept of consciousness is “the most neglected theoretical term in Durkheim's thought.” (Stedman Jones 2007, 98) By “centrality”, I mean that the concept of consciousness is “closely tied” in with Durkheim's fundamental concepts, “primarily amongst which is solidarity.” (Stedman Jones 2007, 95) Indeed,

it is *the similarity of consciences that gives birth to legal rules* and that constitutes traditional mechanical solidarity. Thus *conscience* is central to the whole issue of solidarity. In the traditional mechanical case, social cohesion results from a ‘conformity of all particular *consciences* to a common type, which is nothing but the psychic type of society’. [... And] the concept of *conscience* is also present in the

concept of a modern organic solidarity. [...] Organic solidarity is about differentiation, and this entails a sphere of action, within *conscience*, which is free from the *conscience commune* and which is where ‘special functions develop’. (ibid.)

Since it is related to Durkheim’s main ideas, to clarify what he meant by consciousness is a *condition sine qua non* for understanding the deepest meaning of his sociology, no matter if some scholars forget or choose to ignore that Durkheim is insistently talking about it.

The first thing to notice is that, for Durkheim, representations involve “both the mode of thinking and that which is thought.” (Stedman Jones, 2003, 18 ; see also Paoletti 2002, 444)¹² This is what Husserl called intentionality: the correlation of the *cogito* and the *cogitatum*¹³. However, Durkheim didn’t get this from Husserl but from Renouvier, who upheld an idealistic, anti-realistic, reinterpretation of Kant which rejected the “thing-in-itself” and reduced it to the phenomenon¹⁴. Within his “logic of representation”, there were only two poles:

the ‘representative’ (*représentatif*) is that which represents and the ‘represented’ (*représenté*) is what is represented or is referred to [...]. Conscience covers the totality of these functions which do the referring and ‘thing’ is that which is referred to. (The association of thing and the represented for Durkheim is clear). (Stedman Jones 2003, 18. See Renouvier 1854, 24-25 ; 1901, 236-237)¹⁵

So, representations are for Durkheim not just a subjective or merely cultural kind of thoughts—as Alexander seems to imply when claiming that there is a “cultural turn” in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*¹⁶—. On the contrary, representations are twofold realities, objective as well as subjective, which are referred to one another. Put otherwise, representations are intentional.

6. Synthesis, intersubjectivity and the social

Durkheim’s notion of consciousness not only involves intentionality but also what Husserl (Husserl 1982, 39, § 17) called “the primal form belonging to consciousness”, i.e., synthesis. However, Durkheim uses this term in a peculiar way since he focuses on synthesis constituted on the outer, not on

the inner experience.¹⁷ In turn, this distinction runs parallel to the distinction of the social and the individual.

Actually, “we find Durkheim talking of the personal nature of our ‘*conscience*,’ which ‘represents’ and indeed ‘constitutes’ ‘*notre personnalité individuelle*.’” (Stedman Jones 2007, 80)¹⁸ Therefore, Durkheim acknowledges that there is “a personal aspect of consciousness that is central to any social world” and, consequently, to his “theoretical apparatus.” (Stedman Jones 2009, 693) One can find this line of argument, for instance, in *Sociologie et philosophie*, where Durkheim claims that collective consciousness emerges from a synthesis originating in the relations among individual consciousnesses. It rises as a social world produced by the reification of individual life outside itself. In this way, collective consciousness emerges from the intensification of interactions between individual consciousnesses. See, for instance, the following paragraph.

Quand les consciences individuelles, au lieu de rester séparées les unes des autres, entrent étroitement en rapports, agissent activement les unes sur les autres, il se dégage de leur synthèse une vie psychique d'un genre nouveau. Elle se distingue d'abord, de celle que mène l'individu solitaire, par sa particulière intensité. Les sentiments qui naissent et se développent au sein des groupes ont une énergie à laquelle n'atteignent pas les sentiments purement individuels. L'homme qui les éprouve a l'impression qu'il est dominé par des forces qu'il ne reconnaît pas comme siennes, qui le mènent, dont il n'est pas le maître, et tout le milieu dans lequel il est plongé lui semble sillonné par des forces du même genre. Il se sent comme transporté dans un monde différent de celui où s'écoule son existence privée. La vie n'y est pas seulement intense ; elle est qualitativement différente. Entraîné par la collectivité, l'individu se désintéresse de lui-même, s'oublie, se donne tout entier aux fins communes. Le pôle de son conduit est déplacé et reporté hors de lui. (Durkheim 2004b, 133)

As seen, Durkheim understands the synthesis from which the states of collective consciousness emerge as elaborated from the relationship between individual states of consciousness.¹⁹ In this view, a synthesis that brings together a multiplicity of individual states generates a new type of psychic life which, as such, is a feeling but a feeling distinct from the mere sum of individual feelings and which constitutes a new force arising from intersubjective effervescence. It is the

emergent character of this new order —new or different in relation to individual experience— that produces the feeling of exteriority and transcendence that awakens in us the social.

Commenting Durkheim’s position on this matter, Stedman Jones claims that “the irreducibility of collective representations to individual representations” is based on “the combination of ‘associated individuals’ which establishes the diverse relations from which the collective representations develop.” (Stedman Jones 2003, 16) Accordingly, the alleged “synthesis at the level of the whole” (Stedman Jones 2003, 16-17) might be thought of as nothing else than a combination *sui generis* of individual consciousnesses, i.e., as a “communion” (Stedman Jones 2007, 97) or “meeting of consciousnesses.”²⁰

7. The social as an ontological region

So far, Durkheim’s argument seems indisputable. However, we still have to deal with what might be one of his most perplexing ideas. How can a synthesis be operated outside the individuals’ consciousness? Does this mean that there is such a thing as a collective consciousness apart from it? Well, that’s how many of Durkheim’s advocates and even many of his detractors interpreted this. But it’s not what Durkheim thought, as seen when discussing some misunderstandings concerning his sociology. He rejected the idea that social phenomena are external to individuals (Durkheim 1999, xv). So, there must be a better way to interpret the objective nature of social representations and their peculiar exteriority.

Once again I’ll have to agree with Stedman Jones: Social syntheses are constituted in “one of the functions of *conscience*,” which is “to relate.” (Stedman Jones 2007, 98) And this is how Durkheim expressed this idea in *De la division du travail social*.

Il y a en nous deux consciences : l’une ne contient que des états qui sont personnels à chacun de nous et qui nous caractérisent, tandis que les états que comprend l’autre sont communs à toute la société. La première ne représente que notre personnalité individuelle et la constitue ; la seconde représente le type collectif et, par conséquent, la société sans laquelle il n’existerait pas. Quand c’est un des éléments de cette dernière qui détermine notre conduite, ce n’est pas en vue de notre intérêt personnel que nous agissons, mais nous poursuivons des fins collectives. Or, quoique distinctes, ces deux consciences sont liées l’une

à l'autre, puisqu'en somme *elles n'en font qu'une*, n'ayant pour elles deux qu'un seul et même substrat organique. Elles sont donc solidaires. (Durkheim 2004a, 74; emphasis mine)

Hence, even if there is a radical heterogeneity between personal and social consciousness and they fulfill different functions (one constitutes our social personality and the other represents the collective type), they both form a single consciousness with one single organic substrate. That is to say that the collective consciousness does not have an entity of its own and that its exteriority is such with respect to the ontological region²¹ of the individual personality and not with respect to the individual understood as an organism. Our two consciousnesses are then distinguished as two states of mind and not as two substances: they are distinct states of a single consciousness, structured into regions which have one single organic substratum.

So the social is a state of consciousness that constitutes a specific ontological region and not a self-subsisting entity that oppresses individuals as a self-sufficient collective substance capable of operating on its own. The social exists in us: it is us, not in what we have of singular and incomparable but in what we have in common, in what we resemble and that which moves in us a feeling of belonging that could not drag us like a whirlwind outside we (using Durkheim's metaphor) if it did not move us from within; that is, if it were not immanent to us.

8. Durkheim's sociology as a philosophy of consciousness (final remarks)

In my paper I have shown that the current state of the art mostly agrees that, in Durkheim's work, representativeness is the condition for everything that exists as a social fact. I have quoted different scholars who claimed that the concept of representation is one of Durkheim's main ideas and a persistent interest throughout his oeuvre.

I have also shown that there is a consensus as regards the idea that for Durkheim representations are associated to objective experience. In particular, when it comes to social representations, its mere existence indicates the existence of an objective social fact. Thus, collective representations are

inextricably related to objectivity. In addition, I have depicted how representations and consciousness are closely tied in Durkheim since social, objective representations are opposed to individual, subjective representations —a demarcation drawn upon Renouvier's interpretation of the Kantian distinction of inner and outer experience.

Finally, I suggested that Renouvier's distinction of inner sense and outer sense informed, at least in part, the way Durkheim conceived of individual and social representations. This is enlightening because it could lead to a non objectivistic understanding of Durkheim's sociology, if the distinction of individual and collective representations is not to be found in an hypostasized collective consciousness existing on its own but in two different functions of our consciousness, one that we use to make our own representations of the objects of our thought, another that we use to represent to ourselves objects external to us.

Along the years, Durkheim dwelt in different ways with the issues and misunderstandings discussed here. This is one of the reasons why, as I said, his notion of representation is the most neglected theoretical term in his work. Nonetheless it is interesting to note how, regardless any other differences, the various stances on the subject remain faithful to this one idea: that representations have to do with the oppositional structure of consciousness. In this view, Durkheim's conception of representation must be considered a philosophy of consciousness in the terms outlined by Henry in his critique of ontological monism.²²

According to Henry, for the philosophy of consciousness all that exists has as its condition that we may represent it. Consequently, to be known and to be a phenomenon means to become represented. Also, to be known means to be an object: to be an object is to be represented and to be represented is to be known as an object. Consequently, representativeness is the essence common to knowledge and objectivity (Henry 1985, 125). Furthermore, for being an ontology of our experience of objects, Henry considers the metaphysics of representation as a philosophy of consciousness since it conceives of experience as the subject's relation to the object. (Henry 1985, 7)

In conclusion, I intended to demonstrate that the main features of the metaphysics of representation outlined by Henry—namely, objectivity, exteriority and the oppositional structure of consciousness—can be found in Durkheim’s work.²³ In this perspective, Durkheim shall be seen as a post Kantian who antedated Phenomenology for good and for worse; i.e., as an early sketch of what Husserl called “the Principle of All Principles” (that is, intentionality) and, at the same time, as an instance of the “ontological monism” criticized by Henry.

NOTES

¹ « Alors que nous avons dit expressément et répété de toutes les manières que la vie sociale était tout entière faite de représentations, on nous accusa d’éliminer l’élément mental de la sociologie » (Durkheim 1999, xi).

² « Une autre proposition n’a été passée moins vivement discutée que la précédent : c’est celle qui présente les phénomènes sociaux comme extérieurs aux individus » (Durkheim 1999, xv).

³ « D’ailleurs, ces contestations sont très souvent venues de ce que l’on se refusait à admettre, ou de ce que l’on n’admettait pas sans réserves, notre principe fondamental : la réalité objective des faits sociaux. C’est donc finalement sur ce principe que tout repose, et tout y ramène » (Durkheim 1999, XXIII).

⁴ Is not the word but the meaning what can be found in Durkheim’s early works.

⁵ Indeed, while referring to *les civilisations primitives*, he claims: « il faut en chercher les causes déterminantes dans des sensations et des mouvements de la sensibilité, non dans des concepts » (Durkheim 2004a, 275).

⁶ « Voilà pourquoi, suivant la formule kantienne, nous devons respecter la personnalité humaine partout où elle se rencontre, c’est-à-dire chez nous comme chez nos semblables » (Durkheim 2004a, 395).

⁷ Indeed, Kant argues that “for an experience in general to be possible, the reality of outer sense is necessarily bound up with that of inner sense, i.e., I am just as certainly conscious that there are things outside me to which my sensibility relates, as I am conscious that I myself exist determined in time.” (Kant 1998, 122)

⁸ « Nous appellerons *subjective* toute qualité constitutive d’un sujet *quelconque*, ou qui appartient à sa nature définie ; et *objective*, tout représentation, en tant que donnée à une conscience comme son objet, externe ou interne qu’on le suppose. [...] toute sensation externe est objective, en tant que représentative ; subjective, en tant que propriété du sujet doué de sensibilité » (Renouvier 1901, 7).

⁹ In this, Renouvier is actually following Kant closely, when he states that: “By means of outer sense (a property of our mind) we represent to ourselves objects as outside us, and all as in space. [...] Inner sense, by means of which

the mind intuits itself, or its inner state, gives, to be sure, no intuition of the soul itself, as an object, yet it is still a determinate form, under which the intuition of its inner state is alone possible, so that everything that belongs to the inner determinations is represented in relations of time. Time can no more be intuited externally than space can be intuited as something in us.” (Kant 1998, 157, 174)

¹⁰ In this view, exteriority is immediately given while interiority is harder to reach: « Nous partons du dehors parce qu’il est seul immédiatement donné, mais c’est pour atteindre le dedans » (Durkheim 2005, 356 n1).

¹¹ In the following I will heavily rely on Stedman Jones’ interpretation of Durkheim and the influence of Renouvier’s neo Kantism on his concept of exteriority.

¹² « Chaque représentation a, pour Durkheim, un caractère intentionnel – c’est-à-dire qu’elle est représentation ‘de quelque chose’ » (Paoletti 2002, 438).

¹³ According to Husserl, the word “intentionality” refers to “this universal fundamental property of consciousness: to be consciousness *of* something; as a *cogito*, to bear within itself its *cogitatum*.” (Husserl 1982, 33) Inasmuch Durkheim is dealing with the correlation of the subjective and the objective – for instance, with the distinction of individual and collective representations (Durkheim 2004b)— it can be said that he takes intentionality for granted.

¹⁴ See Renouvier 1901, 53-54. In this regard, Paoletti notes: « Renouvier finissait par défendre vraiment la position anti-réaliste selon laquelle il n’y aurait aucune réalité indépendante de nos représentations. [...] Avec la distinction entre la réceptivité des formes de l’intuition sensible (espace et temps) et la spontanéité des catégories de l’esprit, la différence entre ce qui est connaissable – l’objet d’expérience, le phénomène selon Kant – et ce qui n’est pas connaissable, mais seulement pensable comme étant existant – le ‘noumène’ – est également annulée » (Paoletti 2002, 441 ; cf. Kant 1998, 160, 162, 177).

¹⁵ For Renouvier things are representations, representations are things, and both are ultimately phenomena: « Les choses en tant que représentations, conformément à ce que je viens d’exposer, je les nomme des faits ou des phénomènes. Ainsi j’arrive à définir la chose par la représentation après avoir défini la représentation par la chose; et ce cercle est inévitable; et les deux mots représentation et chose, d’abord distingués, viennent se confondre en un troisième: phénomène » (Renouvier 1901, 7).

¹⁶ Boudon’s critique (2006, 138-139) is addressed to Alexander (2005 136-159). See also Affergan (2008, 147), who argues that there is not a “conversion” between *Rules...* and *The elementary forms...* but “a continuity with its curves, inflections and crevices, not being possible to speak of a rupture.”

¹⁷ For instance, in *Rules...* he refers to collective syntheses constituted “outside of us” (Durkheim 1999, XX, n1).

¹⁸ In this view, “each person’s *conscience* is to some extent freed [... from] the social milieu.” (Stedman Jones 2007, 96)

¹⁹ Commenting on this, Watier (2008, 110) stresses that it is by penetrating, merging, mingling with each other, that *consciences* create a new entity, a collective consciousness. See also Vera (2002, 107).

²⁰ Weiss 2012, 90. Again, this kind of ideas seems to come from the Renouvier, who “argued that for representation to be possible there must be more than

one person who represents: representation is general and objective and as such is the condition of truth relations.” (Stedman Jones 2003, 17).

²¹ I borrow the concept of “ontological region” from Husserl’s *Ideas I*, §§ 2, 9 & 16. A region is delimited by the “highest eidetic universalities.” (Husserl 1983, 8; Husserl’s emphasis) It is the highest genus to which the objects of a particular kind belong. (Husserl 1983, 18) In other words: “A region is nothing other than the *total highest generic unity belonging to a concretum*, i.e., the essentially unitary nexus of the summa genera pertaining to the infimae species within the concretum. The eidetic extension of the region comprises the ideal totality of concretely unified complexes of infimae species belonging to these genera; the individual extension comprises the ideal totality of possible individua having such concrete essences. [...] Each regional essence determines ‘synthetical’ eidetic truths, that is to say, truths that are grounded in it as this generic essence, but that are not mere particularizations of truths included in formal ontology.” (Husserl 1983, 31; Husserl’s emphasis)

²² Indeed, for Henry the concept of representation is related to ontological monism—the philosophical perspective that takes representation as the only way of being or appearing, thus falling into oblivion of Life (Henry 1985, 125-157).

²³ One can even conjecture that Henry might accept this since he implicitly assumes that there is a collective consciousness when he says: « C’est précisément lorsque le concept chrétien de la Vérité cessera de déterminer la conscience collective de la société comme il le faisait au Moyen Age que son divorce d’avec l’idée grecque d’une connaissance et d’une science véritable se manifesterà dans toute sa force » (Henry 1996, 36).

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