One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish: Justifying Durkheim’s Argument For Deviance Through Kramer’s *Listening To Prozac*

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Human beings like to think that they are unique. Despite this tendency, society tends to favor people who color inside the lines. Emile Durkheim’s work illuminates how little room there is for deviance in our society. However, because Durkheim could not have envisioned a scenario without human variety, he fails to truly capture the importance of including deviance in our standards of normality. But in 1994, psychologist Peter Kramer saw first-hand the danger of using medicine to eliminate variant personalities. In his book, *Listening to Prozac*, Kramer helps us to look more critically at our constructed spectrum of “normality.” He argues that deviance must be included in that spectrum. By using Kramer to reexamine Durkheim’s arguments, we can more purposefully differentiate between types of deviance, and understand that human variety is essential to society and to the maintenance of human nature in the individual.

For definitions of “normality” and “deviance,” we can turn to Durkheim. Durkheim understands society as being bound together by common ethics, which he calls the collective
conscience\textsuperscript{1}. This collective conscience fixes societal norms, which are demonstrated by laws. For Durkheim, whether or not something is deemed “too deviant,” and thus criminal, is simply a matter of how much that thing deviates from the norm\textsuperscript{2}. But for Durkheim, deviance is normal, even in terms of criminality. He writes, “Since there cannot be a society in which individuals do not diverge to some extent from the collective type, it is also inevitable that among these deviations some assume a criminal character”\textsuperscript{3}. Human nature is too varied to allow for a uniform collective conscience. While this variation allows for crime, it also allows for the individuality we appreciate amongst human beings. “One does not go without the other,” writes Durkheim\textsuperscript{4}. Deviance is deviance, and deviance is good.

Durkheim’s argument about the normality of criminals is interesting, but I believe it leaves something out. While Durkheim makes a compelling case for the normality of deviance, his argument is very closely tied to his case for the normality of crime. We can imagine readers of Durkheim concluding that deviance is dangerous. Further, Durkheim leaves us wondering why human variety is so important. But in 1994, a medical prescription by a psychiatrist provided us with a previously unimaginable window into a world without deviance.

When Peter Kramer prescribed Prozac for a depressed patient, Tess, he hoped to “restore” her to mental health\textsuperscript{5}. But instead, Tess was transformed. She was livelier, dating more, and strangers were addressing her positively for the first time in her life. But most odd was what happened when Tess stopped taking Prozac. Though she was not depressed, Tess lost the newfound vitality she’d felt on Prozac. This made her feel “not herself,” she said\textsuperscript{6}. But the “self” Tess referenced was the Prozac-affected Tess. Kramer comments: “In mood and level of energy, [Tess] was ‘normal,’ but her place on the normal spectrum had changed…Tess had come to understand herself—the person she had been for so many years—to be mildly ill”\textsuperscript{7}. It was this phenomenon, and Kramer’s subsequent analysis, that led to Kramer’s 1994 book \textit{Listening to Prozac}.

For Kramer, Tess’ transformation ignited a profound discomfort. “Medication [as we know it] does not transform, it heals. When faced with a medication that does transform, even in this friendly way, I became aware of my own irrational discomfort, my sense that for a drug to have such a pronounced effect is inherently unnatural, unsafe, uncanny”\textsuperscript{8}. The power of Prozac was that it changed the self-image of people who did not necessarily see themselves as ill prior to taking the drug. Kramer saw Prozac open a door to “cosmetic psychopharmacology,” the use of medicine as a sort of cosmetic surgery for the personality\textsuperscript{9}. Prozac could alter the self, and because of its few side effects, it could do so even for “healthy” people. “Confronted with a patient who had never met criteria for any illness, what would I be free to do?” wonders Kramer\textsuperscript{10}.

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\textsuperscript{2} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{3} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{4} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{6} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{7} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{8} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{9} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.
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Kramer’s question encapsulates a possibility that Durkheim could not have envisioned: the opportunity to conform to the collective conscience by literally medicating the deviance out of oneself. Prozac opened up this opportunity, and with it arose questions about whether this would be a problem. “Since you only live once, why not do it as a blonde?” Kramer asks. “Why not as a peppy blonde?”11 “We are entering an era in which medication can be used to enhance the functioning of the normal mind,” he writes12. But once we enhance the functioning of the normal mind, normal begins to change.

Peter Kramer explores the possibility that Prozac could truly change our understanding of normality, or in Durkheim’s terms, our “collective conscience.” Kramer argues that personality styles go in and out of fashion; today, assertiveness is valued over timidity13. Still, shyness, before Prozac, would fall within the spectrum of normal accepted by society; though deviant, shyness is neither illness nor crime. But if Prozac can make us braver, then our understanding of shyness changes. “The medication seems to justify the standard that is in place by labeling those who deviate from a cultural norm as ill and then ‘curing’ them”14. In other words, the potential to be less deviant implies that deviance is a problem.

This has major implications for Durkheim. Durkheim believed that the collective conscience would always allow for some variation. But if something like Prozac can act as a “neurochemical nose job,” actually wiping out deviance, this shifts15. The collective conscience can limit the definition of “normal”, until all deviance becomes either criminality or mental illness.

Kramer writes, “Contemporary models of mental disorder—models Prozac has helped to legitimize—blur the line between illness and health. Minor depressive states...are normal variants, but they can also be seen as [illness]”16. For Kramer, Prozac opens the door to the “cosmetic” use of Prozac to conform to societal norms, like assertiveness in the workplace, for example. And the more people take Prozac, the more pressure there is on others to take Prozac. Kramer imagines, “There is always a Prozac-taking [person] waiting to do your job, so, if you want to compete, you had better take Prozac too”17. As people are pressured into conformity, human variety lessens, and the spectrum of “normal” narrows.

In Listening to Prozac, Peter Kramer helps us understand human deviance in a way Durkheim alone cannot. Kramer shows us how the opportunity to cosmically alter personality opens the door to absolute conformity. Furthermore, Kramer illustrates that absolute conformity actually changes normality, so that deviance (once included in the spectrum of normality) is eliminated from our definition of normal. Worse, Kramer fears that this process could happen almost on its own. “It is easy to imagine that our role will be passive,” he writes18.

By supplementing Durkheim with Kramer, we gain a more complete picture of the importance of human variety. Kramer shows the essentiality of including some deviance in our standards of normal. He shows us that we need to be wary of forces that try to eliminate deviance—and not just forces like Prozac. When looking at Durkheim, we can understand the law as a means of cosmetic psychopharmacology, in that the law has the potential to shape people in

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11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
conformity to collective norms. Just as we need to be careful of calling “shyness” illness, we must be aware that criminals are not “ill,” but deviant. Like shyness, criminality is on the spectrum of normality. Furthermore, Kramer shows us that eliminating deviance is a slippery slope: anything can be criminal if we call it criminal. In order to protect individuality, we need to be attentive to which norms we are promoting.

This is not to say that because criminality is deviant, we should not punish criminals. Certainly, a misrepresentation of Kramer might lead to such an argument. But Kramer does not say that we should allow for harmful deviance; instead, he asks us to more critically examine what it means to be unwell. Kramer helps reveal the cost of punishing deviance. So although we are right to punish perpetrators of true harms, we must still leave room for variance in the spectrum of normality the law delineates. We must integrate some deviant behaviors into our definition of normality. If we don’t, we come too close to a world in which we all “listen to Prozac,” a world unreflective of who we really are.