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# From Fragmentation to Ontologically Reflexive Pluralism

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**Abstract:** Considerable attention has recently been directed towards the analysis of pluralism in social science, not least in economics. Plurality is often taken as a mark of pluralism. But it is not the same thing, and often indicates little more than a disconnected fragmentation of contributions to a topic. We believe, in fact, that such fragmentation is rife in modern social theorising, and identify numerous causes. We subsequently examine the possibility of using an ontologically reflexive form of pluralism to achieve a greater degree of theoretical integration between various strands of thought than has hitherto been the case. We conclude by stressing the need to be aware of ontological presuppositions in social theorising. Our motivation is a concern with advancing a 'the pluralist project' in which, where feasible, an integration of ideas takes centre stage.

**Keywords:** plurality, ontologically reflexive pluralism, scattered pluralism, fragmentation, integration

## Introduction

Most, if not all of us, in engaging in scholarly endeavour, carry reasons, questions, presuppositions, disciplinary traditions, etc. that combine to bear on our research. This, and the fact that there are multiple aspects to most social phenomena, explains amongst other things why theories on issues such as money, care, institutions, gender, markets, and so on, abound. In fact, few would disagree that the state of play across the social sciences consists in a vast *plurality* of scholarly contributions. In addition, it equally seems that, for contributions to abound in

this way, a degree of *pluralism* prevails; that is, there seems to be an *openness* to the development of varying approaches, opinion, methods, and so on.

Yet, for the understanding of a domain of study to progress few would argue against the need for a degree of *integration* between the many different contributions, whether in economics or elsewhere. Integration is often, however, timid and limited. Instead, scholarship whether in terms of focus, theory, or methodology tends to be highly fragmented (Derksen, "Against" 139, Dow, "Variety" 448). Sheila Dow reminds us that nearly two decades ago the economics discipline was already faced with issues of fragmentation:

"In 1991, the Economic Journal marked the occasion of the first issue of its second century by inviting leading economists to reflect on what the future held for the discipline. Among the prescient themes which emerged were the following, each of which was explored by several contributors:

- the opening of economics to input from, as well as input to, other disciplines, notably sociology and psychology (see also Allen, 2000);
- increasing specialisation within economics (and thus of conferences, journals, etc.) leading to *fragmentation* of the community of economists;" (Dow, "Variety" 448, our emphasis).

The plurality of methods and approaches in the social sciences challenges a simple summary. Meanwhile, the attitudes of social scientists on the subject of diversity oscillate between those favouring a proliferation of theoretical and empirical approaches (see Bohman 459-461), and those who actively seek the synthesis and integration of values, meanings, explanations, and so on (see Aerts et al. 5-6). Perhaps it is not too difficult to see that plurality for its own sake is not especially conducive to achieving progress in understanding. More to the point, in the last two decades or so, scholarly contributions have continued to proliferate. It seems legitimate then, when not urgent, to question the situation before us: Why the fragmentation? Or perhaps: why the lack of integration?

The aim of this paper is to explore the extent to which the pursuit of a pluralist approach to the study of a domain, subject, discipline, and so on, might achieve the level and type of integration that at the same time can produce theoretical and methodological advances in scholarship. Though the focus of this paper is on economics, the arguments surrounding issues of fragmentation, integration and pluralism are it seems equally relevant to disciplines across the sciences.

Specifically, the objective of the paper is to see if and how we can move from a state of a relatively high degree of fragmentation, that is, one involving a *scattered* plurality of contributions, as a particular *kind* of pluralism, to perhaps another brand of pluralism, involving greater integration. Maybe we should add, though this may seem rather obvious, that the authors see the move towards the integration of contributions, where feasible, as an essential part of achieving progress in the academy, and so constitutes a major motivation behind this paper.

The paper commences with a conceptualisation of fragmentation, pluralism, and integration. Having considered these issues, the authors seek answers as to why fragmentation exists (and persists) in the academy; or indeed, why there is relatively little in the way integration. The authors initially identify several obstacles that appear to explain the relatively high degree of fragmentation. The authors move on to focus on one obstacle in particular, for it is perhaps the greatest impediment of all to achieving (a progressive form of) integration. Specifically, at stake is a noted absence in ontological explicitness. The final section of the paper provides a discussion of the benefits that can accrue from the adoption of an ontologically reflexive form of pluralism as an antidote to scattered pluralism.

## **Fragmentation, pluralism, and integration**

### *Fragmentation*

The authors are concerned, in particular, with a state of affairs that involves a relative abundance of (sometimes conflicting) contributions, coupled with very often an absence of *conversation*, one which incidentally is not restricted to the economics discipline. Not surprisingly, the degree of integration between ideas and principles is often found to be wanting. The result more generally is to impede progress in knowledge and understanding in the subject, domain, and/or discipline concerned.

Others have assessed the state of the economics discipline and its diversity. David Colander et al. consider that the profession (of economics) is best characterised as a complex adaptive system, in which old and new ideas compete with one another (Colander et al. 4). The boundaries and descriptions of different groups of economists are seen to be constantly challenged and modified. In the same vein, Sheila Dow ("Variety" 448) perceives a state of ongoing change in economics, with

a plurality and variety of perspectives. Beyond a common belief that only heterodox economics comprises a diversity of approaches (defined variously at the methodological or theoretical level), there is an increasing recent literature that refers to a state of plurality and fragmentation within both mainstream and heterodox economics (e.g. Davis 1-20, Dow, "Plurality" 2).

So, an obvious question concerns the precise nature of the lack of integration, or indeed (conversely) to the nature of fragmentation itself. The authors take the *fragmentation* of scholarship to be both a *process* and a *product*, or outcome. Fragmentation, of course, can take on any number of forms. There are two forms in particular, which appear especially relevant to the present analysis, where *both* forms can be encountered both within and across any particular discipline.

Fragmentation due to non-assembly:

The fragmentation of scholarship in the form of (and resulting from) multiple specialisations, or compartmentalisation.

Fragmentation due to non-resolution:

The fragmentation of scholarship in the form of (and resulting from) divergent, conflicting *views*, approaches, methods, and so on.

Now, our concern with the relative fragmentation of scholarship in the social sciences is motivated in this paper by a *primary* concern with the closely related issue of pluralism. Of particular interest is the relation between academic *progress* and *pluralism*. Although at first sight the two do appear to go hand in hand, in truth, the situation is slightly more complicated. So, what is the relation between academic progress and pluralism? And first, what do the authors understand by pluralism?

### *Pluralism*

There is a popular view that economists cannot escape disagreements with each other. The existence of different traditions in thought, or schools of thought, is an indication of such a condition. Indeed, schools of thought have been observed, on the face of it paradoxically, to illustrate both differences and pluralism at the same time (Negru 28). The fact that there are many organising principles around the same subject is consistent with a *pluralist orientation*, and with the existence of a *plurality of views* pertaining to the same phenomenon. All this clearly makes

the conversation within and across disciplines, and the choice of methods, ideas, etc., an extremely difficult task.

There have been several contributions to the debate on pluralism in economics to add to the mushrooming of literature on this topic (e.g. Caldwell 244, Samuels 302). It becomes clear that there is a need to examine the nature of pluralism more closely, before we find ourselves in a position to understand its significance for (the progress of) economics.

Typically, pluralism (or a pluralist orientation) is conducive to the co-existence of a plurality of theories, methods, methodologies, approaches, models, explanations, assumptions, and so on. As such, pluralism embodies the absence of an *a priori* rejection of (methodological, theoretical, etc.) ideas, other than one's own, including any originating from other branches of knowledge. Pluralism supposes a general tolerance of diverse points of views and conceptions of economic reality. Traditionally, pluralism is an approach that seems often to rest on a more or less purposeful avoidance of meta-methodological or epistemological principles, when it comes to the organisation of knowledge. Portrayed in this fashion, pluralism seems if anything to amplify the problem of discriminating in the face of scholarly diversity found in the array of methods, theories, methods, and so on.

Note too that pluralism can be opposed to monism when one is referring to conceptions of the nature of social reality. As a pluralist, it is possible to hold there to be a plurality of, or several, parallel realms, which may or may not be complementary or compatible. Monism, on the other hand, is a philosophy purporting there to be a oneness about social reality, truth, and so on.

There are varied responses to the state of affairs which is by some thought to be unsatisfactory. One such response comes from Bruce Caldwell. Caldwell proposes to reconstruct research programmes through a critical and open-minded treatment of alternative methodologies (Caldwell 244-252). He discusses pluralism in relation to method and truth, in a concern to ensure progress in economics. Caldwell sees pluralism, when framed in a context of dialogue between different standpoints, as conducive to progress in economics. As such, he seems concerned to deal with, and regards positively (perhaps as a starting point), the fragmentation that can be seen to stem from divergent views.

Others authors, such as Hendrik P. van Dalen consider the existence of a plurality of organising principles around one and the same phenomenon within economics

to be potentially confusing for both economists and policy makers (4-5). Certainly, van Dalen appears less optimistic than Caldwell, though his concern is really with the fragmentation that can be seen to result from the difficulties in piecing together different specialised contributions (effectively referring to fragmentation arising from non assembly). Similarly, Robert Garnett (1-10) argues for a move beyond the categorisation of schools of thought altogether, so as to facilitate more fruitful theorising.

The sorts of concerns noted above seem to advocate one or other (organising) principle in favour of pluralism. Broadly speaking, one can systematise various brands of pluralism, as located along a range or continuum of options.

One possible extreme scenario involves a pluralist stance being adopted, where equal acceptance of all stances is encouraged. This is better known as relativism: the doctrine/theory/idea that some elements, moral codes, cultures, concepts, aspects of experience are relative to, or dependent on, other elements or aspects and that as a result no judgment or assessment can be made across perspectives. In other words, cultures, concepts, moral codes, and so on, are to be understood only in terms of particular (historical, geographical, cultural) contexts, where cultural relativism is the view that only judgments are to be made from the standpoint of a particular culture. Thus, relativism holds that ideas/concepts/values/ cultures are 'authorities' in their own right, and that equal status be granted to pretty much all ideas. A relativist would take cultural/moral codes/ideas to be unassailable, where pluralism as toleration of 'self' and 'others' is seen as an 'entitlement' available to all individuals and ideas. In its extreme form, in a relativist world, individuals will be insulated and isolated, having no possibility of communicating with one another, nor in the end the capacity to understand and evaluate other cultures.

The other possible extreme is total integration. In truth, total integration can only exist when one has achieved a state of omniscience, one which, one dare speculate, is likely to be unattainable (and possible only perhaps if the world were to cease to be in a state of flux). Alternatively, one may think of dogmatic versions of integration, in which some believe only their methods and theories to be legitimate. In the latter cases, that which is different, not conforming, is often dismissed as irrelevant and/or inferior (Bigo 5). This is certainly not the kind of integration the authors have in mind. Clearly, the latter does not sit well with pluralism on any account.

The absence of certain rules and limits as to the grounds for pluralism has increasingly been the concern of economic methodologists. A mere unconnected plurality of ideas has been criticised for its limitations. Not inappropriately, it is branded by some as "scattered pluralism" (Bigo et al. 34). Martin Hollis captures the limitations of relativism well, when he warns that relativism "threatens every attempt to justify one interpretation over another. All interpretations become defensible but at the price that none is more justifiable than the rest" (241).

Elsewhere, Sheila Dow argues that without openness and a clear conception of open systems, pluralism is not possible. Moreover, pluralism needs to be structured in order to have meaning:

"Going back to the ontological foundations for methodological pluralism, the structuring of social reality (and the language which plays an important part in that reality) suggests a structuring also at the epistemological level. Structured pluralism, then, is the advocacy of a range of methodological approaches which, like the range of social structures is not infinite." (Dow, "Plurality" 287-288).

And drawing in part on Dow's call for structured pluralism, Andrew Mearman defends a further form of 'rhetorical pluralism' (1-10). David Colander, Richard P.F. Holt and J. Barkley Rosser, do not go so far. They prefer to leave ideas to compete with one another:

"Pluralism does not come easy to any in power, and calls for pluralism inevitably come from the marginalized, which is what heterodox economists have become. If you believe in the correctness of your ideas, you don't want pluralism; you want your ideas to win out because they are correct. The best one can hope for in terms of pluralism is a level playing field so that ideas can compete" (Colander et al. 5).

The paper does not, however, here propose to evaluate the merits of various strands of pluralism. Rather, below the authors advance a particular kind of pluralism that can be seen to be largely compatible with some of the above versions, in that it places itself at a level of analysis that is sufficiently abstract as to accommodate previous accounts. In doing so, one needs to bear in mind the question formulated at the beginning of this section: What is the relation between academic progress and pluralism? Put differently, what sort of pluralism can be seen to favour the advancement of knowledge?

Pluralism is a concept that is inherently prescriptive (or normative). The authors take pluralism to entail an orientation of openness, and indeed an acceptance of



otherness. More generally, pluralism is (or should involve) a *process* that is oriented towards advancing the state of knowledge. This is different from *plurality* (descriptive in nature), by which the authors mean to indicate features of a system of thought, and a state of play, in which differences and diversity (already) exist. As such, plurality is best described as a *product*, or outcome. In effect, the conception of pluralism endorsed by this paper is of a reflexive and integrative sort. This is so just because the authors see a pluralist approach as beneficial only if it at some point actively seeks to make connections between ideas (both within disciplines and where relevant across the academy), seeking 1) to overcome disagreements, and 2) to consolidate partial insights.

### *Pluralism towards integration*

How then can one expect a healthy state of pluralism, which is constructive, progressive, and conducive to academic advancement, to appear? As indicated, the authors suggest this to be one in which there is a striving towards (a degree of) integration of a particular kind. Just as with the state of fragmentation, one can distinguish two aspects to such integration, either of which consist of both process and product:

#### Integration by assembly:

The integrating of insights into the different *aspects* of the subject/field/realm being studied, so as to acquire a bigger n-dimensional, and also a deeper, picture, so gaining in completeness through assembly, akin to a jig saw puzzle (a useful analogy here is perhaps the combining of theories on organs, limbs, cells, etc., into a theory of the human body as a whole).

#### Integration by resolution:

The integrating of divergent or conflicting *views* through a process of sublation, or dialectical resolution, of existent divergences, to gain, ultimately, in truth and accuracy.

These then are the principal forms of integration the authors take to be likely required to facilitate a progressive form of pluralism, and which is advanced in this paper. The authors are not the only ones to associate progress with integration. A similar sentiment is captured by Maarten Derksen in his reflections on the integration between psychology and the social sciences:

"A lack of integration is often identified as a fundamental problem in psychology and the social sciences. It is thought that only through increased cooperation among the various disciplines and sub-disciplines, and integration of their different theoretical approaches, can psychology and the social sciences make real progress." (Derksen, "Against" 139).

In order to understand *why* the goal of integration has yet to be achieved within and across academic disciplines, and in particular how the lack of integration relates to pluralism and progress, the paper now turns to the causes of academic fragmentation (of the two sorts noted above).

## Causes of (persisting) fragmentation

In considering the issue of integration, one can identify five major reasons for, and/or obstacles to, integration. Some obstacles tend to explain the existence, or coming about, of fragmentation, whilst others can be seen to explain the persistent lack of integration.

First, there is, in attempts to gain an understanding of the economy, a need to engage in 'low' level theory, in the form of ground/field work, or empirical study. This type of research tends to be highly specific and narrow in focus, and the specialised focus often brings with it (sometimes necessary and sometimes unnecessary) terminology that is equally specialised. Here fragmentation can often be seen to exist between empirical work and more strictly theoretical work. In addition, the many different bits of ground work, the many field studies, experiments, and so on, abound in such a manner that it is difficult to keep track of them, and when one does, there is again the question of how they *fit together*. This then, is a first process and product of fragmentation. Its nature is mainly of the first sort, that is, fragmentation by non-assembly, noted above, where the tendency for gaps to be created between 'low' and 'high' level theorising, between different empirical and theoretical works, is a feature that tends to divide disciplines from within.

Second, as those who are familiar with the academy will recognise, fears and insecurities often result in a defence of (petty) vested interests, and/or in a desire for power for its own sake. Such tendencies clearly stand in the way of the advancement of knowledge, since for some the process involves a (conscious or unconscious) tendency to establish and consolidate their stronghold to the exclusion of others. A way to set about achieving this objective is clearly to set

oneself up as expert, with highly specialised and exclusive terminology, methodology, frame of reference, and so on. When someone less specialised comes along communication is rendered (purposely) difficult, knowledge is (often) unnecessarily mystified, and alternative approaches are typically dismissed.

This certainly does not sit well with pluralism. Though no one would own up to taking such a stance, it is not unusual to encounter this sort of behaviour in the academy. Behaviour of the kind renders a state of plurality in the way of contributions nothing but sterile, for exchange is neither pursued nor facilitated, but mostly discouraged. The situation serves only to cause a further (increasingly irreversible) entrenchment of views and specialisations (and further contributes to fragmentation).

So for example, there appears to be a clear schism in the economics academy between those who insist on mathematical deductive modelling (mainstream economists), and those who perceive the social realm to be such that the emphasis on these methods is not desirable, or even warranted – where, instead, qualitative analysis is thought to lead to relevant insights (as is the case with many heterodox economists). To take an example, feminist economists consider in depth time use surveys to be more fruitful as an approach to studying care than the pursuit of more quantitative techniques.

The heterodoxy, however, typically finds it is not taken seriously by the former (the 'modellers'). Certainly, the fact that non modellers cannot publish (for the 'lack' of mathematical formalism and/or econometric analysis) in certain journals is a token of the disappointing absence of exchange and integration between the two groups (Strassman 54-68, Nelson 59, Lawson, "Economics" 134, Colander 127-143, Lipsey 169-202). It is certainly a sign of persistent schisms and fragmentation in economics. This then is a second factor that can be seen to be conducive to fragmentation of both sorts, in that it impedes the assembling of the different parts, and the resolution of conflicting positions.

A third factor that appears to stand in the way of achieving greater integration, and which favours the persistence of fragmentation, is the manner in which the academy is structured in most universities around cognate disciplines, as opposed to particular topics or domains of inquiry. Whilst some of this may be a direct result of the sorts of fears and insecurities discussed above, the need for some division of academic research along disciplinary and/or other lines (e.g. applied and theoretical) seems fairly obvious.

The result, however, is that each discipline, both in terms of focus and approach, tends to develop its own specialised language, terminology, set of methods, frameworks, references, and so on. When studying a subject such as care, or money, or exchange, or institutions, where scholarship abounds in more than one discipline, fragmentation is thus clearly visible, as existing between disciplines in the way theory and also jobs are carved up. How does one piece together the relevant disciplinary insights? Can one conceive of an academy in which one studies subjects rather than disciplines? Could one study care, or exchange, as subjects in their own right, rather than economics, psychology, history, and so on?

Whatever the answers to these respective questions, the point remains that there is here a further source of fragmentation in the academy, where economics (typically) remains by and large cut off from other disciplines. When economists do manage to divorce themselves from the 'scientific' superiority that dogs their standpoints, there remain questions as how to (best) integrate the understanding of subjects arrived at in other disciplines. What is the relevance or importance of these extra disciplinary insights to our understanding of economics? How much or how little is one to take on board from other disciplines? Can one sustain the study of subjects in economics as distinct from other social sciences? Once more, until one finds a way of answering such questions, the most likely scenario resulting from the existing academic set up is one of continued fragmentation, of the sort noted above resulting from non-assembly, with efforts to integrate the insights and understanding arrived at in the different specialised approached, disciplines, and so on, remaining only marginal.

Fourth, it may be that the persistent fragmentation (of the non-assembly type) of academic endeavour is due to insufficient work being undertaken in the way of taking stock and/or systematisation. Certainly, such efforts seem a necessary condition, to achieve a kind of pluralism capable of moving beyond a scattered plurality of scholarly contributions. Systematisation can clearly pave the way towards consolidating and integrating research efforts.

Returning to the example of care, Paula England (381), identifies five different frameworks on, or approaches to, its study, mostly stemming from economic scholarly contributions, which subsequently enables a classification of scholars and theories as belonging to one or the other framework. As a heuristic device for marking the boundaries and topography of the different debates, such categorisation can only lead to a better understanding as to the existence and

nature of different perspectives. Certainly, to the extent that systematisations of the sort, both within and across disciplines, are relatively few, one has here a further cause for the persistent fragmentation of academic endeavour (of both the non-assembly and the non-resolution type).

However, systematisation, such as the one proposed by England (381), whilst clearly necessary, has its limitations [1]. For her classification, and indeed any systematisation of theories of care, to do its work some crucial questions need to be answered first. Precisely how do each of the five frameworks she puts forward fit with conceptualisations of care? Is there a shared notion of care within and/or across the frameworks, or are the various notions advanced in fact different? The authors find this is an issue that is not directly addressed in England's classification, or indeed in many others. We shall return shortly to the ways in which systematisations of the sort might be taken a step further.

The degree of sustained fragmentation just discussed is such that something more seems required. To achieve a higher degree of integration in the face of the plurality that abounds, a further initiative is called for (Bigo et al. 31-34). There is, the authors contend, a fifth obstacle, to achieving a more integrated form of pluralism, and it is to this issue that the paper now directs its attention.

## Social ontology and pluralism

Working *presuppositions* and premises as to *the nature* (i.e. ontology) of the domain/subject of study, and as to *the nature* of the social realm, in which the subject matter is located, underpin scholarship of any kind, and in any domain. It is our contention that a major obstacle to greater integration is the remarkable absence of any explicit statement and discussion of these working presuppositions in much scholarly work. The noted absence can be seen to impede achieving a form of pluralism that is conducive to academic advancement. For the absence means some of the potential benefits to be had from the proliferation of insights that abound are currently foregone.

In other words, the authors contend a lack of *ontological explicitness* to be a further reason for the *sustained* state of fragmentation. Whilst the first three noted obstacles in part explain the *origins* of (the process and product of) fragmentation in the academy, this latter impediment (and to a lesser extent also the fourth obstacle) can in large part account for the continued state of

fragmentation of both types (as will be elaborated below). Given that the authors take a greater degree of integration to be an important condition for academic advancement, that is, for the advancement of knowledge, it is to this latter impediment that the paper now turns.

By lack of ontological explicitness, the authors mean the notable absence of explicit ontological theorising. There is relatively little in the way of explicit discussion of (1) the nature of the social realm, and/or (2) the nature of specific domains themselves. An understanding of both the nature of the social realm and of specific topics is nonetheless necessarily presupposed *whenever* theorising is undertaken. And it is the absence of explicitness that is, if not a major *cause* for the fragmentation, certainly a major *obstacle* towards overcoming (that is, moving beyond) it, and so to achieving greater integration. If such is the case, then one should be able to explain how and where the *absence* of ontological explicitness sustains fragmentation. In the next section, the paper shows how *greater* ontological reflexivity can actively facilitate a higher degree of integration (of the two sorts described). It is shown to be the case in at least five different ways.

The authors noted that scholars such as England (381) have produced a systematisation of scholarly contribution around a domain of research. This can in itself be seen as an attempt towards achieving a greater degree of integration. We contend, however, that it is not sufficient to list and classify what is out there. Indeed, a greater emphasis on ontology, that is, on the nature of the subject under study, as well as on the nature of the social realm in which the subject is located, seems of the essence here. Let us now explain why.

Two forms of ontology interest us in particular: 'scientific ontology' and 'philosophical ontology' (Lawson, "Conception" 1, Pratten 13). The first of these consists in the explicit study of the nature (the essential and enduring features) of the object under study (e.g. money, care, institutions, and so on). This concerns the study of relatively concrete or substantive matters/domains/topics. It warrants questions of the sort: 'In virtue of what is something care, or gender, or money, and not something else?' Of a more abstract nature is the explicit positing of (pre) suppositions as regards the worldview adopted (an implicit component of any theory produced), so called philosophical ontology. The latter involves elaborating on our conception of the fundamental (and more enduring) nature of the social realm (e.g. a conception may involve holding the social realm to be structured, inherently relational, dynamic, open, value laden, and so on).

Having made this distinction, the authors suggest that there is a role for social ontology of both kinds in the face of the plurality of scholarly contributions that abounds. Specifically, the authors believe, and will show, that an 'ontological turn' can make a positive contribution to the achievement of a constructive form of pluralism.

Our proposed turn appears in principle to be compatible with Dow's structured form of pluralism (see Dow, "Structured" 275-290). Indeed, it seems unlikely that scholars endorsing grounded forms of pluralism would dispute that stating more clearly what is presupposed by any theorising should facilitate the identification of the kind of fragmentation one is addressing. Nor are they likely to contest that the insights so acquired pave the way for a greater degree of integration in the academy. Let us explain in greater detail.

The specific form of pluralism the authors have in mind, and advocate, with a view to progressive theorising then, is one we shall henceforth refer to as *ontologically reflexive pluralism*. Note here that the aim is not to buy into an *a priori* ontology that is determined and superimposed by others. The purpose here is, to the contrary, to enquire into the specific ontology that is presupposed by each and every framework, theory, method, and so on. It is not unlikely that such an inquiry will throw up a host of different (philosophical) world views, or indeed divergent conceptions of the specific (scientific) topic under study, whether firms, markets, money, care, and so on. Paradoxically perhaps, it is the fact of rendering visible *differences* (in presuppositions) that emerge out of such an exercise that will often prove of the greatest relevance (as shall appear in the next section).

If there is indeed relatively little in the way of scientific and philosophical ontological reflexivity, what are the more precise implications of the advocated ontological turn for a more progressive and constructive form of pluralism? This is the question to which the paper turns next.

## **Implications of adopting an ontologically reflexive form of pluralism**

It is the authors' contention that the two forms of ontological reflexivity described above can contribute towards a form of reflexive pluralism that is conducive to academic progress in at least five different ways. But first let us remind the reader briefly of how the authors conceive of progress in a context of a plurality (and

proliferation) of scholarly outputs. Specifically, the argument is for a particular type of integration, one which aims to gain in completeness in two major ways:

Integration by assembly:

The integrating of insights into the different *aspects* of the subject/field being studied, so as to acquire a bigger n-dimensional, and also a deeper, picture, so gaining in completeness through assembly.

Integration by resolution:

The integrating of divergent *views* through a process of sublation, or dialectical resolution, of existent divergences, to gain ultimately in truth and accuracy.

Bearing these two objectives in mind, let us focus now on five major ways in which ontological reflexivity can be seen to facilitate integration with a view to an enhanced, and more complete, understanding of the world.

First, an exercise in ontological reflexivity is particular in that it establishes most explicitly *if and where* differences in world views are presupposed, held and defended. Where such differences can be seen to exist, it becomes possible to determine with some clarity to identify *where* presuppositions diverge.

Specifically, increasingly social theorists (including economists) seek to uncover event regularities with a view to making predictions. This is especially manifest in the adoption of more quantitative methodology. By contrast, there are those who, whilst studying similar phenomena, favour the use of more qualitative methodology. Clearly, each methodology presupposes something different about the nature of the world and/or object under study. So, it will be crucial for conversation and advancement of knowledge for theorists pursuing different approaches here to engage with the various presuppositions about the nature of the stuff they are seeking to understand.

In other words, by being ontologically reflexive, one can uncover why differences in methodology arise, for different world views, or presuppositions as regards the social realm, explain (or justify) the use of different methods. One can then examine whether such differences and/or the relevant methodology are warranted. Specifically, one can examine if methods are appropriate to, or consistent with, the nature of the realm in which the subject matter is located. Whilst a certain conception 'X' of the nature of the social realm can often accommodate an array of



methods, it is also clear that certain methods can *a posteriori* be seen to be inconsistent with the particular conception 'X'. So in the case of conflicting theories emerging out of divergent methodology, one real possibility is that very different presuppositions are in play.

There may in fact be differences in conceptions as to the nature of the object under study, or as to the nature of the realm in which it exists, or both. Either way, the discussion can become located in the relevant place. It is completeness by way of resolution with a view to achieving a greater degree of (methodological) consistency, and so integration, that is in this instance facilitated by the suggested ontological turn. This is a first way then in which ontological reflexivity can be seen to pave the way towards resolving tensions and differences towards greater integration.

Second, fragmentation, as has been shown, emerges, out of (the need for) specialisation within, or across, disciplines. In such cases, it is clear that an overt understanding, and stating, of our conception of the more fundamental nature of both the object under study and the realm in which it exists facilitates the piecing together of relevant contributions. When asking, taking again the example of care, what scholars mean by it, a variety of answers, in the way of conceptions of care are likely to emerge. Mignon Duffy states matters starkly:

“Despite the recent explosion of scholarship on this topic (or perhaps because of it), there remains a lack of consistent conceptual clarity about what kinds of activity constitute care work” (Duffy 67).

If so, it is useful to be able to distinguish the fact that one may be attempting to piece together, or integrate, somewhat different objects of study – and so that the respective theories are perhaps not to be pieced together at all, or at least not as perhaps hitherto thought. It may be that scholarly differences are based on different implicit conceptions of the object under study, and so are not differences in the sense of disagreement, but differences in focus. These insights should facilitate integration by assembly, as well as dispel misunderstandings that stand in the way of integration by resolution.

Third, in being more ontologically reflexive, one can uncover with some clarity the difference between tendencies, or mechanisms in play, operating as *potential* forces that bear on *outcomes*, and the outcomes themselves. Assessing England's classification of treatments of care (discussed above) in this light, one can

establish that competing theories are often seen to compete just because they emphasise one or other mechanism held to be dominant (in terms of outcomes). Indeed, social ontology brings to the fore the fact that mechanisms *combine*, and that the degree to which any mechanism comes to *dominate* depends on *context*. On such a count, theories need not be interpreted as competing at all. Scholars may, if at all, instead in many cases be seen to disagree on the assessment of contextual circumstances.

So, for example, those arguing that the commodification, or the financial rewarding of care, has the effect of 'crowding out' intrinsic motives, expose a relevant *mechanism* inherent to care giving. And equally, those arguing that one can commodify care without ridding workers of their intrinsic motives, when they are encouraged and work in a context where care is professionalised and valorised, point to a different tendency, or mechanism in play. Insights from competing frameworks and theories can so be retained, and in many cases be shown to be *complementary*. Once more, integration is facilitated by the adoption of a more ontologically conscious approach.

Fourth, in adopting a more explicitly ontological stance, one can more easily perceive the fact that specialisations is a part of what is ultimately a division of labour (Lawson, "Reorienting" especially chapter 7). The question then becomes which part of the social realm each discipline or subject matter focuses on. Often enough, schools can be seen to be working on topics or domains, where each asks questions that reflect their own orientation and interests. Thus, in economics Institutionalists can be seen to focus on institutions or sectors, and their transformation over time; Keynesians on questions of uncertainty and public spending; Feminist Economics concentrates on relations of power and inequality, and so forth. An understanding of the research as being carved out of, and pertaining to, a social whole should allow researchers to more easily relate to specialisations other than their own, both within and across disciplines (much like, as suggested, one would expect a doctor to at some point be able to understand the body as whole, piecing together theories of the different limbs, organs, diseases, and so on).

Presupposed, of course, in order to piece together and integrate (more) specialised insights, is that the scholarly insights and contributions so gathered are indeed based on shared presuppositions about the nature of both the object under study, and the social realm in which it is located. One should bear in mind at all stages

though that, as noted, ontological conceptions are not in any sense *a priori*. They, as all knowledge, are always to some extent transient, fallible, situated, and partial. And whilst the authors argue that (social) ontology can aid to diminish the degree of fragmentation, and facilitate a form of reflexive pluralism, ontological conceptions are themselves of course to be dialectically arrived at. As such, ontological findings require a similar process of integration that is to emerge out of a plurality of views and specialisations or foci by those who engage in ontological theorising (or are ontologically reflexive).

Starting from the insight then that scholars are all working on aspects of the same complex interrelated social whole, and further that one can posit and discuss one's conceptions of (all and/or aspects of) this whole, scholars in and across disciplines can see themselves as engaging in a division of labour, in what becomes an explicitly shared project. We have here then a fourth implication of the noted *absence* of ontological reflexivity. The absence can in this instance be seen as the want of an approach that facilitates the piecing together of insights, recognised as belonging to the study of the same complex interrelated social whole.

A fifth implication of more explicit ontological theorising bears on *epistemic* integration, or lack thereof. In this context, the integration that could be facilitated by an ontological turn is in fact both integration by resolution, and by assembly.

Take, for example, the fact that feminist economists tend to share similar world views, at least at a fundamental or deeper level; that is, one can observe there to be amongst them widespread agreement on the nature of the social realm, and perhaps even on the nature of many of the objects under study. Broadly speaking, members of this group agree that the world is inherently relational, that human beings are interdependent creatures, that they have needs, such as care, and so on [2]. This being said, members of the same group can often enough be seen to disagree, when it comes to more concrete issues. Let us see why this might be so.

As noted previously, any one's understanding of the nature of the social realm is amongst all else situated. An implication of this is that personal experience, due to individual path ways, in spite of shared positions (say as mothers, fathers, wives, husbands, professionals, and so on), will lead persons to view things in ways that are unique too. Whilst it may be easy enough to agree that all of us need, say, to be cared for, despite different life experiences, on more concrete issues, agreement

may be more difficult to achieve on, for example, diets, sleeping routines, exercise, care arrangements, retirement age, and so on.

It may on the one hand, through ontological reflexive investigation, transpire that oppositions are less fundamental than previously thought. Oppositions may reveal themselves to be of a purely empirical nature. Indeed, it may turn out that one merely has to double check 'facts'/data. On the other hand, on something as seemingly trivial as data interpretation, there may in fact exist a need to sit down and discuss more fundamental ontological presuppositions. Whilst two feminists may not need go so far, a misogynous individual and a feminist may find the exercise to be a condition for further conversation. Either or both may need to revise deeply held world views and/or convince the other of her or his own views, in so far as these always inevitably bear on, that is (when consistent) inform, lower level theory, choices of methodology, data interpretation, and so on.

In such instances, the insights facilitated by ontological reflexivity are precisely this: the locating of conflicting views/suppositions in terms of epistemic specificity and origin. A possible consequence of such a line of questioning, of course, is that, one may uncover there to be inconsistencies in one's own theorising, say between aspects of more general conceptions of the social realm, and the more substantive theorising of it, down to the methods adopted. The result, in any case, is that one can begin to dialectically resolve tensions, in the way of conflicting views and inconsistencies between people and/or within one's own research. We have here then yet a further way in which ontological reflexivity can be seen to facilitate integration by resolution.

There are no doubt other implications that follow from adopting an ontological turn. The point in all this is that a greater degree of integration, one by and large hitherto not achieved, can be facilitated by way of a greater degree of ontological explicitness and reflexivity. The continuing state of affairs – consisting of a highly fragmented, ever growing, and ever more 'accessible', body of contributions – suggests that there is in fact a pressing need for such a turn. The authors' fear is that opportunities for academic progress may be lost in favour of an increasingly widely scattered plurality of contributions. The authors advocate that the plurality of contributions be harnessed. As suggested, the move can best be seen as involving a dual process of integration. Ontological reflexivity, in this instance, serves to facilitate constructive engagement by way of resolving differences, on the one hand, and by way of piecing together specialisations in and across disciplines, on the other.

## Concluding remarks

We have been concerned in this paper with the present state of play as regards academic proliferation, one which consists of a growing, but rather scattered, plurality of scholarly contributions in the academy at large, and in economics, in particular. The authors are especially keen that the phenomenon be addressed, with a view to moving beyond the present state of fragmentation. The fragmentation, it has been suggested, is essentially of two sorts: one that results from the breadth and multiple facets of the objects under study (as of the realm in which these are situated), and a second form of fragmentation that stems from differing/conflicting opinions.

The sort of integration the authors feel that needs to be encouraged is one that is capable of addressing both these forms of fragmentation. In particular, the paper has shown that integration might be facilitated by way of a greater degree of ontological reflexivity. For example, where divergence is thought to exist, scholars may in fact turn out to be studying rather different things. Scholars may each take a notion such as care, markets, institutions, exchange, or money to mean something different, or focus on different aspects of it. In such instances, instead of disagreeing, they can better be seen to contribute to a division of labour that is complementary. Insights of this sort, that follow from ontological reflexivity, can be seen to pave the way towards a greater degree of integration between the different areas focused on by various scholars. Alternatively, it may be that deeply opposed views are implicitly defended, in theories, methods, data interpretation, and so on. In these circumstances, ontological reflexivity helps us to identify how deep, or where, tensions lie, so as to begin a process of resolution. The insights arrived at here are designed to facilitate an integration by assembly (of the second sort).

In sum, we suggest there are benefits to being more explicit about more fundamental conceptions of the nature of the social realm, and objects/domains under study, such as are presupposed and implicitly defended, whenever scholarly work is undertaken (or any form of abstraction for that matter). This holds for economics, but also across the disciplines in the academy. For when turning to the meta-framework (implicitly or explicitly) defended, it becomes possible to *locate* theoretical works within it.

The ontological turn, it has been shown, is helpful in several ways, not least in seeking to achieve a degree of integration amongst a vast plurality of contributions with a view to the advancement of knowledge. An important consideration in all this is the premise that scholars are all working on aspects of the same, highly complex, and interrelated social whole, something that remains true whether or not one agrees on its nature. Bearing this in mind, the kind of pluralism the authors advance is one that has here been systematised as *ontologically reflexive pluralism*. Amongst efforts to work for a more constructive, cohesive, structured, rhetorical, progressive pluralism, there is then a further, or perhaps even a prior, call for an ontological turn in our approach to pluralism. The turn, as noted, though different in emphasis, should be seen as lending important support to pluralist programmes advanced by other scholars avowedly pluralist in orientation.

## Endnotes

[1] England summarises her classification in terms of frameworks as follows: "The 'devaluation' perspective argues that care work is badly rewarded because care is associated with women, and often women of colour. The 'public good' framework points out that care work provides benefits far beyond those awarded to the direct recipient and suggests that the low pay of care work is a special case of the failure of markets to reward public goods. The 'prisoner of love' framework argues that the intrinsic care motives of care workers allow employers to more easily get away with paying care workers less. Instead of seeing the emotional satisfactions of giving care as its own reward, the 'commodification of emotion' framework focuses on emotional harm to workers when they have to sell services that use an intimate part of themselves. To conclude, the 'love and money' framework defended by both England and Nelson argues against dichotomous views in which markets are seen as antithetical to true care." (England 381).

[2] The social realm is further recognised for its openness and unpredictability by Post Keynesians, for its stability by institutional economists, for its class structures by Marxist economists, and so on.

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