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METHODOLOGICAL INDIVIDUALISM AND CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL SCIENCES

Alban Bouvier :

"Methodological Individualism and Contemporary Analytic Philosophy"

[Brief introduction to : « Methodological Individualism facing recent criticisms from Analytical Philosophy. *Artificial reconstructions and genuine controversies*] in Bulle & Di Iorio, 2023, *Palgrave Handbook of Methodological Individualism*, Palgrave MacMillan, London]. »

In the *Handbook* co-edited by Nathalie and Francesco, I am aiming at a very restricted set of very recent texts to which I reproach a certain use of analytical style, an an-historical use, the origin of which I trace, in philosophy, to a series of articles written in the 1950s by John Watkins, a disciple of Karl Popper. I contend that the alleged clarifications introduced by Watkins have unfortunately steered a whole part of the current MI debate in the philosophy of the social sciences in the wrong direction due to the notorious indifference of Watkins and his successors, with rare exceptions, to actual debates in the social sciences, resulting in a succession of misunderstandings that lead to a lot of misproblems to the detriment of the advancement of the social sciences. Nevertheless, the analytical requirements of these authors lead MI proponents to clarify their own position, as I attempt to show in my contribution.

In the *Handbook* I discuss in the details in particular a paper published in 2019 by Julie Zahle and Harold Kincaid and entitled : « Why be a methodological individualist? » and relative papers. I will not today enter into the details of this discussion, which would be too lengthy for the time available. Just to take an example, in this contribution, I examine the definition of holism given par Julie Zahle in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: “Methodological holists [...] defend the view that explanations that invoke social phenomena (e.g., institutions, social structures or cultures) should be offered within the social sciences: their use is indispensable. Explanations of this sort are variously referred to as holist, collectivist, social (-level), or macro (-level) explanations”, while “methodological individualism is the thesis that good social scientific explanations should refer *solely* to facts about individuals and their interactions”, a definition borrowed from List and Spiekermann (2013). So, for these authors, introducing institutions in the *explanans* of a social phenomenon is already assuming a holist stance.

In my talk, today, I shall rather try to situate my contribution, which deals with very particular current controversies in philosophy, within a broader intellectual space. My presentation today will therefore be less a summary of my contribution to the volume than an introduction to it. There will be two sections in my talk, one focused on what analytical philosophy is, the second, more briefly, on what MI is, with cross-references to the other domain in both sections.

First section, focussed on analytical philosophy. To simplify things considerably, one can say that the expression "analytical philosophy" can characterize both a style and a tradition, which paradigmatically uses this style. This tradition has, like any tradition, its founding fathers, to whom philosophers who subscribe to this movement refer on a very regular basis.

Without going into all the many technical details of what is really meant by "analysis" in analytical philosophy, one can say very simply that the analytical style is characterized by a threefold ideal of linguistic clarity, conceptual clarity and logical clarity. Fulfilling this ideal involves characterizing a given theoretical position, for example methodological individualism or holism, by a thesis and possibly sub-theses that are carefully distinguished from each other, as Kincaid and Zahle did in their papers, with careful attention to the terms used and the content of the concepts to which these terms refer; then listing the arguments that support the theses in question and assessing their logical validity; and, if necessary, seeking to refute carefully the arguments that contest or could contest these theses, and the arguments that support opposing theses. However, adopting this style in no way implies a commitment to the analytic movement as such. It is this kind of analytic turn that Watkins especially gave to the MI debate, from onwards, whereas his mentor, Karl Popper, did *not* write in this style *at all*; there are several sentences in *The Poverty of Historicism*, in particular, that are notoriously obscure and ambiguous, for example on the nature or the existence of institutions. Watkins did not situate himself any more than Popper in the analytic tradition, the content of which I shall now specify, but Popper sometimes happened to comment on the analytic tradition while certain authors of this tradition reciprocally referred explicitly or implicitly to Popper's own works and sometimes also, although very rarely, to the works of Carl Menger and Max Weber, the founders of a tradition in the social sciences typically claiming to use an individualistic methodology.

The analytic tradition is generally considered to be rooted in the British philosophers Bertrand Russell, who was trained in mathematics (especially interested in logic), and George Moore, who was trained in the humanities (and especially interested in the everyday language), even though Russell recognized a precursor in the German philosopher and mathematician Frege. Wittgenstein, who was trained in Austria and a little later joined Russell and Moore at Cambridge, is also often credited with having initiated a specific trend in analytical philosophy. Incidentally, Wittgenstein's style is quite distinctive and cannot be characterized as analytic in the sense I have defined. For Wittgenstein, philosophical analysis essentially consists in revealing that a large number of philosophical problems entirely stem from a misuse of language: philosophical analysis is therefore primarily a question of dissolving philosophical pseudo-problems through an analysis of philosophical language, and not especially an issue of identifying theses and arguments. I shall consider this tripartition to be illuminating in identifying three sub-traditions in analytic philosophy that have been concerned with methodological individualism.

The first of these sub-traditions is typically represented by the Vienna Circle, whose *Manifesto*, dating from 1929 and signed in particular by Rudolf Carnap and Otto Neurath, very favorably and explicitly mentioned Carl Menger, among many other authors supposed to share the same scientific view of the world. As for Carl Hempel, a physicist like Carnap, and a member of the Berlin Circle, he implicitly clearly referred positively to Popper in *Philosophy of Natural Science*, published in 1966, when speaking of Methodological Individualism. Just as Russell, following in Frege's footsteps, set out to *reduce* mathematics to logic, the philosophers of physics from Berlin, such as Hempel, or from Vienna, such as Carnap and Neurath, would have liked to *reduce* all the sciences, including psychology and the social sciences, to physics, with the aim of unifying all the sciences while providing them with a sound foundation. Nagel developed this idea at length in 1960, with particular reference to the social sciences. Within this framework, MI is seen as a first step in this reductionist program, which is *not at all* presented in a negative light - quite the contrary - despite the pejorative character the term has since taken on.

One of the issues, considered the easiest in this perspective, and identified as early as the Vienna Circle Manifesto, is to first reduce expressions such as « the spirit of a people » (*Volksgeist*), explicitly mentioned, to the spirit of particular individuals. However, although these philosophers did not address this further issue, one has to recognize that there may be specific properties at the strictly social level, i.e. that the properties of collective entities better circumscribed than that of a people, such as the properties of a state or of an army or of a company, or of a church, are probably not all the same as those of the individuals who are members of these totalities. This is the problem of emergence, which has, since then, given rise to a huge literature, later renewed by the philosophy of mind and the introduction of more refined concepts such as that of supervenience. In fact, another, more difficult problem is precisely that of how to "reduce" the subjective dimension of social phenomena, and in particular the mention of intentions in a statement, an issue that is central in Menger's and Weber's work. Both Nagel and Hempel were thinking of behaviorism as a type of psychology which could carry out this reduction, as Nathalie Bulle clearly showed in a recent article. However, this issue is now being addressed in a different way, with the return of a certain kind of mentalism, after the cognitive revolution in psychology. These questions are obviously very sensitive, not only for psychologists but also for social scientists, and have recently given rise to a vast literature, which Francesco di Iorio addressed in one of his own recent articles on reductionism. But in this recent literature, the idea of reductionism has become very pejorative, and sociologists who claim to be the supporters of MI aim above all to show that MI is *not* a kind of reductionism.

The second of the analytic sub-traditions in philosophy appeared a little later than the first one, with Peter Winch, whose *The Idea of a Social Science* dates from 1958. Winch's work does not use the analytic style as I have defined it, but is explicitly Wittgensteinian in inspiration. In particular, Wittgenstein developed the idea that there is no knowledge, even intimate knowledge, of what goes on in people's minds, including one's own mind that is not discursive (apart from properly neurophysiological processes), i.e., that does not in some way use language; and since language is a means of social communication, the mind is necessarily also social. Anything that might escape this is, by definition, "ineffable" and therefore impossible to truly apprehend. Winch claimed, more generally, that Popper's MI fails to recognize the fact that an individual is intrinsically social and that an individual's properties, for example, being a soldier, cannot be identified independently of a given group, in this case an army: there is no soldier if there is no army. In a way, the Winchian point of view is symmetrical with the Vienna Circle point of view, for the question that Winch raises is no longer that of the possible reduction of the social to the individual, but rather that of the reduction of the individual itself to the social, in this case to a social institution: all individual properties are social properties and not the reverse as Popper is supposed to have contended. Even if Winch did not say so explicitly, this would justify a radically methodological holism, but in the precise sense of a reduction of the properties of individuals to the properties of collective entities. In France, Vincent Descombes is a strong supporter of this style of approach, often shared by Durkheimian sociologists, and he backed it up with strong references to Marcel Mauss. However, to return to Winch's example, one can think of combattants who are not or not yet members of any army and therefore describe the individual properties of these combattants without making reference to the properties of an army established as an institution.

Finally, there is a third, much more recent sub-tradition, which dates only from the 1980s, and is more in line with the distant legacy of George Moore, in the sense that it pays special attention not to what the social sciences or philosophy say about the social, but to what common sense says about it in its everyday language. As a result, unlike the two previous

traditions, this sub-tradition is interested not in the language of the social scientists or of philosophers, but in the language of ordinary people, and especially in the various uses of "we" and "us" as opposed to "I" and "me" or "You", and in what these uses may express in terms of collective intentionality. This might concern the lives of a loving couple or of a soccer team, but it could also concern the members of a military commando group or the employees of a company. Raimo Tuomela, Margaret Gilbert, Michael Bratman, just to name a few, are representatives of this sub-tradition, with a certain impact in economics for example in Robert Sugden's work. This is an original and refined way of rethinking notions such as "team spirit", "family spirit" or "group spirit" on methodologically individualistic bases and therefore without assuming the independent existence of collective entities overhanging individuals or the dependence of individuals' properties on groups' properties. These analyses are sometimes brought together by these authors with authors close to Max Weber, such as Georg Simmel, for example by Margaret Gilbert, who seeks to reformulate what seems to her acceptable and even profound in Durkheim. The analytical style is very much in evidence here, as the authors seek to break down what is meant by statements such as : "I commit to support this viewpoint [or to act that way]", as distinct from, for example: "I commit only if you commit", also distinct from « I commit only if you commit and you commit only if I commit », still distinct from « it is *common knowledge* that I commit and that you commit » and from "we commit with each other together", and so on.

Second, shorter, section of my task : let me now turn more specifically to the MI as presented by those who claim it. It is commonplace to say that there are many 'versions' of MI. It is therefore useful to try to identify the origins of these major disagreements and to attempt to circumscribe them without, however, wishing to legislate on the correct use. Schumpeter's publications of 1908 and 1909 are a useful reference for this purpose: they certainly marked a break with previous uses, and all the more so in that Schumpeter distinguished political individualism, at the foundation of John Locke's political liberalism, from methodological individualism, a sensitive issue. However, while the passage of Schumpeter's 1908 book on methodological individualism, *Das Wesen und der Haupt-inhalt der theoretischen National-ökonomie* in which Schumpeter carefully distinguishes between methodological individualism and political individualism, is often cited today by the recent authors I am discussing, they generally forget the second part of chapter VI, where Schumpeter more positively characterised what, in his view, MI is.

What is the most striking in comparison to other currently widespread uses, including those I am discussing, is that Schumpeter situates the very nature of MI not at all in the rejection of reference to collective *entities*, such as institutions, in the explanation of social phenomena, as for example Julie Zahle contended, but instead in *a critical vigilance with regard to collective concepts*. Schumpeter's examples are borrowed from economic theory, and he examines concepts such as national income or social value. Hayek, who focused attention again on Schumpeter's writings in the fifties, for his part, mention one of Weber's examples, the concept of 'capitalism', as a paradigmatic example of a problematic concept : Weber used quite ironically the concept of « the spirit of capitalism » in the title of his masterpiece, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* , that which was particularly clear in the first edition of this book since Weber quoted « the Spirit of Capitalism » in inverted commas and the entire book can be read as a reduction of this allegedly autonomous overhanging collective capitalist spirit to the spirit of an ideal-typical individual, Benjamin Franklin.

What Schumpeter and Hayek, and before them Weber, and after them Raymond Boudon, are criticizing is 'conceptual realism', what Hayek, quoting Whitehead, also called 'the fallacy of misplaced concreteness'. Weber wrote, in an often quoted 1920 letter, that he

had become a sociologist because he was tired of exercises based on *collective concepts*. The principle of methodological individualism, as characterised by Schumpeter, is therefore not to reject all collective entities in the *explanans* but only pseudo-collective entities, i.e. those that cannot be clearly shown to be the outcome of interactions between individuals. We can do this, for example, with a company or a bank or a church, but not with an entity as vague as *capitalism* or, similarly, *protestantism*. We can do this with a State, with its institutional rules spelling out all the decision-making procedures, but not with a *people* or a *nation*, whose contours are too indeterminate for us to be able to trace the chain of successive decision-making procedures.

So, what has now become a *commonplace* in recent debates on MI, that is that “methodological individualism is the thesis that good social scientific explanations should refer *solely* to facts about individuals and their interactions”, without mentioning institutions, which I quoted at the beginning of this talk is unfortunately a quite biased view of this issue regarding the cumulative advancement of the social sciences.

By way of conclusion, I would like to add one point in anticipation of an obvious objection : MI understood in this way, while particularly highlighted by the Menger-Weber tradition, is not the exclusive prerogative of this tradition. Jon Elster, for example, one of the most vigorous recent defenders of this principle (he criticised, as did Boudon, the hypostasis of social structures), does *not at all* claim to belong to the tradition of Austrian economics or to Weber’s, but to Marx’s. And Marx, indeed, also rejected false abstractions, such as « the Humanity » in his criticism of both Hegel and Proudhon. Léon Walras, quite strikingly *much more often mentioned by economists today than Menger or Hayek as a typical representative of MI*, wrote nothing explicitly on the subject, as far as I know, but his successor at Lausanne, Vilfredo Pareto, explicitly criticised in *Mind and Society* what he called the illegitimate 'personification' of certain concepts. And it seems clear that, in fact, Walras' economic theory conforms to the same principle.

So, what makes the Menger-Weber tradition specific in its use of MI? It is that it adds to this principle a second principle, *methodological subjectivism*, i.e. the explicit consideration of the beliefs and intentions of the actors, what Weber called « comprehensive sociology » and what Hayek came very close to calling « comprehensive economics » in chapter III of *Scientism and the Study of Society* when he discussed the 'subjective character' of data in the social sciences.