

## ***Lecture Four:: Holism and Individualism***

It is sometimes said that if the social sciences are to be genuinely *social*, they must be holistic in approach: ‘treat social facts as *things*,’ said Durkheim, who also added that as soon as sociology invoked psychological considerations it was in error. It is equally often said that methodological virtue – political virtue, too – requires us to adopt ‘methodological individualism.’ The argument is often intertwined with another, about the merits of functionalism and functional explanation. I will tackle functionalism next week. The literature suggests – and I agree – that the subject is rather a bog, but I will try to step carefully....

### **Methodological Individualism (MI)**

Many writers from Mill through Weber, Popper and others to Jon Elster espouse MI. MI comes in various shapes and sizes, some of which are more obviously at odds with (some or all) sorts of holism than they are with some others. Three crucial kinds of MI are:

- i) *ontological individualism*; all that exists and all therefore that the social sciences can investigate are *persons*. That is, the world does not contain states *as well as* citizens, bureaucrats, officers etc. What the world contains is individual persons, their beliefs and desires, their willingness to occupy roles and follow rules; and that’s it. Many adherents of this view – Popper and Hayek especially – were driven by dislike of racist thought, and therefore of supernatural concepts such as ‘racial mission’ or ‘racial destiny.’ Popper’s critique in *The Poverty of Historicism* and *The Open Society and its Enemies* was avowedly what he described as his ‘war work’ against totalitarianism and dictatorship. We talk about entities that seem holistic – teams, corporations, states and peoples – but holistic entities such as these are just individual people organised in a particular way. This is not necessarily a *reductionist* view (of which the most popular says that the only reality is the one uncovered by physics), but it has something in common with it.
- ii) *moral individualism*; what matters is how things go with individual persons. This is not a methodological position, but it raises methodological questions, such as, whether we can want – say – Bolton Wanderers or Cambridge University to thrive without wanting named individuals to thrive.
- iii) *scientific – possibly conceptual – individualism*; good explanations take us from cause to effect by perspicuous steps; the perspicuous steps in social science

explanations require us to work through (individual) agents and their desire-belief constitution. Unless we can account for outcomes in terms of individuals and their reactions, we do not have explanations. This is the version defended by Elster and Popper; but it is worth watching for bear-traps: ‘desire-belief’ explanation is sometimes called explanation by ‘folk psychology,’ but Popper, for instance, attacks psychological reductionism, and thinks Mill was guilty of it.

### **Holism of Meaning**

The counter to MI is never absolutely clear because it is unobvious what version of holism is opposed to what version of individualism; but it is possible to distinguish two holisms – themselves internally differentiable. The first is holism of meaning: what individuals do depends on what *counts* as what they do, and that requires a context. For instance, a cheque isn’t a piece of paper but a piece of paper that *counts* as an instruction to a bank to transfer money to another account; similarly, the same fifteen men might be a rugby team *or* a platoon, but which they are depends on what roles they occupy, and what they are recognised as by others. An implication of the holism of meaning is that for many purposes it is *roles* and not their occupants that matter: ‘prime minister’ is a role, Tony Blair is an individual; what he does is intelligible only because he occupies a role. Roles come first, which is why these are *social* sciences, not psychological sciences; the individuals who constitute Bolton Wanderers are *team-members*, not Tom, Dick and Harry. When we want Bolton Wanderers to thrive, we want it to thrive *as a team*, and with it the team-members, whoever they happen to be.

### **Holism of Causation**

Associated with Durkheim and sometimes with Marx is holism of causation; this is the view that *the whole* dictates to the individual what s/he must do. The Hegelian ‘cunning of reason’ is one version of a claim that the process as a whole dictates what happens at each of the stages of that process. There are, as we shall see, various ways of explicating the various holisms of causation, but one great divergence is between those that run through the agent’s own understanding of his or her situation and what that entails, and those that work behind the back of the agent. Needless to say, some versions employ both sorts of device. The thought is something like this: just as a part that plays a role in making a car engine work is ‘inert’ if it is sitting in a box on the shelf, but works in appropriate ways when it forms part of a functioning engine, so a person is ‘inert’ until s/he has a role to occupy in whatever social undertaking it might

be; that implies in general that the person understands what the role demands, so that the 'belief-desire' model incorporates the agent's beliefs about what the role requires and her desire to fulfil those requirements. But, there can be many variations on that theme, such as that the agent will only do what the role requires on the basis of false beliefs, which Marx's theory of ideology implies. More interesting are attempts to argue that the interesting causal chain runs 'behind the back' of the agents involved. Hegel's account of the way world history uses great men is one such. Marx sometimes *sounds* as though he holds something like this view. The most committed exponents of it were French, and include Gustave Le Bon who worked on crowd phenomena, and Durkheim.

### **Durkheim**

Durkheim's *Suicide* is the best example of ferocious holism: the sociological explanation of suicide is said by Durkheim to be causal, and non-psychological; the obvious interpretation is hydraulic, which is to say that 'suicidogenic currents' wash away the least secure. [Imagine people with different degrees of vulnerability clustered on a rock; as the river rises, more of them are washed away.] Two questions are raised by this: *might* it be true, and is it *complete*? On my view, the answer to the first is yes and to the second no. That is, we might have good reasons to believe that we had discovered a Durkheimian causal connection; but we would always want to know which of the many possible point-to-point causal connections held in this case. For instance, we would want to know whether the people who commit anomic suicides during economic booms and slumps are the suddenly successful or the suddenly unsuccessful, so even if we were happy with a hydraulic model, we'd want the piecemeal story too. *But*, Durkheim gives us reason not to be content with the hydraulic model by distinguishing different forms of suicide: the kinds of suicide he distinguishes are distinguished by the sorts of reasons operating on the people who kill themselves. That is to say, the desire-belief explanations fill in the causal gaps.

### **Marx**

But the same thing can be said with Marx's account of the general crisis of capitalism; *pace* Popper, you can give an impeccably MI account of it all in terms of situational logic. The point that Marx has in mind is that – seeing it in a rational choice framework – we are rational fools who dig our own graves. Filling in the point-to-point causal connections is pointless, not because we cannot fill them in but because they are so obvious. There is a good deal in Marx that fits less readily into an MI

framework, of course, and some of it looks less like the workings of an Adam Smith 'hidden hand' that explains unintended outcomes – such as the general crisis of capitalism – as the side-effect of everyone trying to maximise returns to themselves in a capitalist economy than a providential account of history of a much more Hegelian kind.

### **Reconciliation - perhaps**

One might think that an emphasis on the way MI – or folk psychology – explanations provide the point-to-point causal connections that we are looking for achieves a sort of reconciliation between holists and their critics; indeed I do. But it does it at a price; the most interesting cross-arguments are lost sight of. On the other hand, it is at least arguable that the most interesting cross-arguments are in fact not philosophical but part of the social sciences themselves, and interesting only to the extent that they are empirically informed.