

Methodological Individualism as Holism of the Parts

Nathalie Bulle

I previously explained that Durkheim was, in his own time, a methodological individualist, a fact you were already aware of. Raymond Boudon has offered some insightful analyses on this subject. Now, what I aim to demonstrate is just as simple and clear, but may be more surprising. My argument is that the main theoretician of holism, Jan Smuts—a South African statesman, scientist, and philosopher who coined the term in his 1926 book, *Holism and Evolution*—would have found himself in complete agreement with the methodological individualists. Conversely, I will argue that the latter are, in fact, holists in the very sense articulated by the main thinker of holism, Smuts himself.

The objective here is not to engage in paradoxical wordplay, but to illuminate the epistemological and ontological foundations of MI in light of the very concept of holism. In order to do this, we need to differentiate between two main forms of holism. The first is causal holism, which is diametrically opposed to MI. In causal holism, wholes act upon their parts in such a way that the parts respond to logics defined at the level of the wholes. The second form of holism is not one of wholes, but of parts, where the parts possess properties and activities inherent to their participation in the whole they form but with no action of the whole as such on them. Smuts illustrates this by stating that the whole is in the parts, and the parts are in the whole. But, the important point to note here is the fact that even if the parts are related to each other, they are the sole active entities. The same applies to individuals in MI: they are interrelated by nature, as social actors, but with no specific action of social wholes on them. We might also remember here Ludwig von Mises' assertion that there is no logical precedence between the social whole and the individual parts. Smuts agrees with this point, maintaining that the whole is not something above the parts and additional to them, but rather, that it characterizes their unity. Therefore, he writes, the whole 'does not act as a separate cause, distinct from its parts (...) holism is of the parts and acts through the parts (...) the causality of the whole (is) exhausted by the causal operation of its parts [so that there is nothing] over and above the influence of the parts which must be attributed to the whole as such.'

The difference is huge. The active entities are the parts which depend on the whole, that is, on each other, and this is an intrinsic characteristic of these entities. But the whole represents only their union as interrelated entities. In the literature, authors frequently counter reductionism by

asserting that the whole is more than the sum of its parts. This statement might make sense if we were to consider the parts as independent entities, but this would lead to a speculative separation of parts from wholes. However, once we acknowledge the intrinsic interdependence of the parts, this statement loses its relevance. Indeed, the whole as such does not act beyond the parts. Yet, given the intrinsic interdependency of the parts, there is no feasible reduction that would permit theorization of the parts with properties independent of the whole.

Let us add that even if the whole adds nothing to the parts, this does not contradict the possibility of a central control, as is the case in organisms. Such control results from a differentiation of the functions of the parts. Therefore, we have two distinct forms of holism: one that I call causal, according to which the whole is considered to act beyond the actions and interactions of the parts, so that the whole actually drives these activities—seen, for example, in the notion of the spirit of the people in certain 19th century historicist approaches, or the notion of function in various forms of functionalism in social sciences; the other one is the holism of parts, according to which the properties of the parts that are crucial for analysis depend intrinsically on their participation in the whole, but they are not determined by the whole as if it were a separate force acting upon them.

In brief, we should not oppose holism and individualism, but instead, three main orientations of methodological approaches: causal holism, holism of parts, and micro-reductionism. Micro-reductionism is an approach that opposes the two forms of holism by viewing the properties of the parts as independent of their participation in the whole. Historically, causal holism was often the only form contrasted with micro-reductionism. This led to a misunderstanding that conflates all forms of holism, which in turn results in a tendency to mischaracterize methodological individualism as reductionism. Alban Bouvier will speak on this topic tomorrow.

My intention here is to demonstrate that, contrary to common understanding, MI is rooted in a form of holism—precisely the kind that eludes reductionism, both the reduction of parts to wholes as is the case in causal holism but also the reduction of wholes to parts, that is, micro-reductionism. In other words, a fundamental aspect of MI is that the parts it considers, the social actors, possess characteristics intrinsic to the social wholes, and we will see the role played by the rationality principle in this respect.

Almost all that remains of Smuts' contribution to the humanities and social sciences is the term 'holism.' The specific meaning he assigned to it, referring to the activities of the parts, has been largely forgotten, for reasons I won't have time to discuss, but which are related to the dominant empiricist epistemology with which it is incompatible. MI has suffered a similar fate.

On this subject, very briefly, the activity of parts in the concept of holism of the parts fundamentally contradicts explanations derived from classical forms of empiricism where explanation relies on external links between observable elements, so that entities do not possess inherent qualities such as predispositions to behave in a particular manner. Note that the opposition to the legacy of Humean empiricism is the foundation of the active epistemologies of contemporary philosophy of science, which are grounded in notions such as causal powers or capacities. Causal powers refer to the activities of entities, or causal tendencies, which tend to persist across time and situational contexts by interacting with other factors, thereby having a form of existence for the observer. Such existence thus opposes the mere search for correlations between separate observable elements in classical forms of empiricism.

In France, we have an epistemologist who advanced these ideas a long time ago, namely Emile Meyerson, as evidenced in his work 'Identity and Reality'. When things are supposed to keep their identity and when their various arrangements tend to explain the observable changes, then we feel we have a deeper explanation, one elucidating what we now call 'generative mechanisms'. The idea is to explain how observable changes happen due to such various arrangements of entities that persist over time. In essence, this is how our mind achieve the form of understanding that is most satisfying to it. This does not mean that we should believe we have access to an ontological reality, which, as we know, is intrinsically inaccessible to us. The link between active epistemologies and the idea of generative mechanisms is clear in Rom Harré's philosophy of science. Harré underscores the limitations of this scientific realism, that goes beyond the limits of the observable. We must keep in mind that scientific causality only tends to simulate efficient causality, because we cannot know how entities ultimately interact with each other.

Nonetheless, the fact that empiricism cannot understand active forms of epistemology tended to prevent it from understanding MI as holism of parts. My first objective now is to underscore the connection between MI and holism of the parts. Then, I will argue that the fact that individuals in MI have characteristics intrinsic to the wholes they constitute is established by the rationality principle and understanding sociology— *la sociologie comprehensive*.

My first step is to argue that breaking down a complex whole into active parts or basic units in theoretical science tends to satisfy a scientific aim which has nothing to do with reductionism. Indeed, such decomposition doesn't mean that the parts are endowed with characteristics independent of the wholes. Such decomposition has often been explicitly applied in psychology for instance, and it served in particular in this field to differentiate units whose causal capacities are intrinsic to their belonging to the whole they constitute.

In my pursuit of explicit forms of theoretical decomposition into basic units, I came for instance across the work of a more or less forgotten psychologist, Boris Sidis. Sidis defines the 'percept' as the fundamental unit of the perception process, specifically to challenge views inspired by classical empiricism, which conflates sensations and ideas. According to Sidis, the percept cannot be reduced to a mere combination of sensations; rather, it implies a form of perceptual awareness, Sidis compares it to a cell, which represents an organic whole whose constituent elements are 'integrated into a single living organization'. The percepts, compared to living cells, thus represent irreducible units of the perception process which possess intrinsic characteristics that are dependent of their overall activities.

There are many other examples of the same type in psychology, but I'll come back to sociology and economics.

Take Carl Menger who laid down the initial methodological foundations of MI. Menger criticizes empirical realism which regards phenomenal reality as autonomous rather than the result of an internal order in nature. What is interesting is that we revisit with him the idea of theoretical decomposition of a complex whole into units. Menger explains that theoretical analysis transcends phenomenal reality by isolating subsystems and engaging 'the simplest and strictly typically conceived constitutive factors of phenomena'.

In this regard, Menger states that "The charge of atomism (...) is a misunderstanding (...) Every theory (...) strives first and foremost to make us understand the complicated phenomena of the research field peculiar to it as the result of the coworking of the factors responsible for its origin. This genetic element is inseparable from the idea of theoretical sciences". He even explains that "[the whole] cannot be imagined in its normal appearance and function without some essential part or other. Nor, conversely, can such a part be imagined in its normal nature and function when separated from the (unit) [the whole]. Therefore, these basic units are not presumed to be independent of the whole, meaning they do not entail any reduction.

Max Weber essentially conveys the same idea when he states that understanding sociology regards "the individuals and their actions as the basic units, or its 'atoms'." These basic units, the individuals and their action, are the active entities of analysis. Because of that, they cannot be broken down further without losing their property central to the approach - the capacity of understanding, which involves, at least partly, conscious processes. Such understanding processes are only made possible by individual characteristics that are intrinsically linked to their social being.

It's worth noting here that, while Weber recognized the importance of Menger's work in differentiating between scientific knowledge and observable reality, he also criticized Menger's

conclusions for not distinguishing sufficiently between these theoretical constructs and what might be referred to as essential reality.

These reflections lead me to the role played by the rationality principle and understanding sociology in this intrinsic link of individuals to social wholes. Paradoxically, rationality is often considered the reductive factor in MI, primarily because it stands in opposition to causal holism. What is frequently misunderstood is that, in opposing causal holism, it actually supports a holism of parts that resists all forms of reductionism.

Firstly, the principle of rationality, which represents the general capacity of individuals in MI, and as such, a capacity that is maintained beyond time and space, must be understood in the broadest possible sense. This principle is independent of any norm of rationality and refers to the capacity of social actors to understand, and in this respect, to attribute meaning to their actions. In fact, the more the analysis tends to rely on such a trans-situational role liberated from 'ceteris paribus' conditions, the more it aligns with the forms of contemporary active epistemologies I evoked previously. Rationality represents the causal power of individuals in MI which allows to consider them as persistent entities whose arrangements alone change, so that based on them, explanation deepens.

On these bases, the rationality principle broadly conceived implies an understanding approach, the idea that the observer, being equipped with the same capacity as the actor, is likely to understand the actor once the relevant elements of the actor's situation are identified. Therefore, there exists a close link between this principle, the understanding approach, and the individualistic method.

Moreover, as evoked previously, the rationality principle refers to a capacity of social actors that is intrinsic to their social being. This is the case because the rational capacities of individuals are realized through the internalization of structures of meaning. These structures are those referred to by Karl Popper with his World 3. This world, as we know, includes all the productions of the human mind that represent contents of thought, that is, cultural constructs, thus, they can form part of an individual's subjective situation. These structures of meaning are developed through social learning, and underly the ability to understand things by attributing meaning to them, so that human beings do not develop such ability outside social life. As Smuts himself states: ““The individual becomes conscious of himself only in society and from knowing others like himself”’.

Conversely, imagine that we dismiss the human rational capacity for understanding, we thus have to refer to unconscious, organic processes which, unlike rational ones, may function independently of social wholes. It is significant that it is when the rational capacity seems to be

dismissed that explanation involves organic mechanisms such as illness, nervousness or madness.

Now, let us imagine that we dismiss rationality and only refer to organic processes. Then, we observe in the literature that this opens the possibility of direct influence of social wholes on individual actions. Reductionism seems excluded, but only micro-reductionism. In this scenario, we would be dealing with a form of causal holism, in which social wholes exert a causal action separated from that of the parts. Given that the 'wholes' in question refer to theoretical constructs, we tend to attribute to these constructs a power of action of their own. Ieva Zake will develop this subject tomorrow. Rom Harré calls this 'the fallacy of collectivism.' He argues that considering social structures as causal factors contradicts the principle that causal power 'is the activity of powerful particulars at work.' This seems another way of indicating that there is nothing over and above the influence of the parts which must be attributed to the whole as such, and open to the conclusion that the only sustainable holism in social sciences is of the parts and is what MI represents.

I don't have time to elaborate a lengthy conclusion. However, I hope I have demonstrated that MI is a specific kind of holism - the holism of the parts - and that causal holism is what I would call a degenerate form of holism, tending to the reduction of parts by wholes. Thank you for attention