7. This sentence, as I have since learned from Dr. A. W. Phillips, is unduly complacent, for it is very doubtful whether an economist can ever *show* that an economic system containing negative feedback will be stable. For negative feedback may produce either a tendency toward equilibrium, or increasing oscillations, according to the numerical values of the parameters of the system. But numerical values are just what economic measurements, which are usually ordinal rather than cardinal, seldom yield. The belief that a system which contains negative feedback, but whose variables cannot be described quantitatively, is stable may be based on faith or experience, but it cannot be shown mathematically. See A. W. Phillips, "Stabilisation Policy and the Time-Forms of Lagged Responses," *Economic Journal*, 1957, 67.
8. A good deal of unmerited opposition to methodological individualism seems to spring from the recognition of the undoubted fact that individuals often run into social obstacles. Thus the conclusion at which Mandelbaum arrives is "that there are societal facts which exercise external constraints over individuals" (op. cit., p. 317). This conclusion is perfectly harmonious with the methodological individualist's insistence that plans often miscarry (and that even when they do succeed, they almost invariably have other important and unanticipated effects). The methodological individualist only insists that the social environment by which any particular individual is confronted and frustrated and sometimes manipulated and occasionally destroyed is, if we ignore its physical ingredients, made up of other *people*, their habits, inertia, loyalties, rivalries, and so on. What the methodological individualist denies is that an individual is ever frustrated, manipulated or destroyed, or borne along by irreducible sociological or historical *laws*.
9. I owe this analogy to Professor Popper.
10. This should rebut Gellner's conclusion that methodological individualism would transform social scientists into "biographers *en grande série*" (op. cit., p. 176).

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Chapter 29

Methodological Individualism Reconsidered

Steven Lukes

1

In what follows I discuss and (hopefully) render harmless a doctrine which has a very long ancestry, has constantly reappeared in the history of sociology, and still appears to haunt the scene. It was, we might say, conceived by Hobbes, who held that "it is necessary that we know the things that are to be compounded before we can know the whole compound" for "everything is best understood by its constitutive causes," the causes of the social compound residing in "men as if but even now sprung out of the earth, and suddenly, like mushrooms, come to full maturity without all kinds of engagement to each other."[1] It was begotten by the thinkers of the Enlightenment, among whom, with a few important exceptions (such as Vico and Montesquieu) an individualist mode of explanation became preeminent, though with wide divergences as to what was included in the characterization of the explanatory elements. It was confronted by a wide range of thinkers in the early nineteenth century, who brought to the understanding of social life a new perspective, in which collective phenomena were accorded priority in explanation. As de Bonald wrote, it is "society that constitutes man, that is, it forms him by social education."[2] or, in Comte's words, a society was "no more decomposable into individuals than a geometric surface is into lines, or a line into points."[3] For others, however, such as Mill and the Utilitarians, "the Laws of the phenomena of society are, and can be, nothing but the actions and passions of human beings," namely "the laws of individual human nature."[4] This debate has recurred in many different guises—in the dispute between the "historical" school in economics and the "abstract" theory of classical economics, in endless debates among philosophers of history and between sociologists and psychologists,[5] and, above all, in the celebrated controversy between Durkheim and Gabriel Tarde.[6] Among others, Simmer[7] and Cooley[8] tried to resolve the issue, as did Gurvitch[9] and Ginsberg,[10] but in constantly reappears, for example, in reactions to the extravagantly macroscopic theorizing of Parsons and his followers[11] and in extraordinarily muddled debate provoked by the wide-ranging methodological polemics of Hayek and Popper.[12]

What I shall try to do here is, first, to distinguish what I take to be the central tenet of methodological individualism from a number of different theses from which it has not normally been distinguished; and second, to show why, even in the most vacuous sense, methodological individualism is implausible.

Let us begin with a set of truisms. Society consists of people. Groups consist of people. Institutions consist of people plus rules and roles. Rules are followed (or alternatively not followed) by people and roles are filled by people. Also there are traditions, customs, ideologies, kinship systems, languages: these are ways people act, think, and talk. At the risk of pomposity, these truisms may be said to constitute a

theory (let us call it "Truistic Social Atomism") made up of banal propositions about the world that are analytically true, i.e., in virtue of the meaning of words.

Some thinkers have held it to be equally truistic (indeed, sometimes, to amount to the same thing) to say that facts about society and social phenomena are to be explained solely in terms of facts about individuals. This is the doctrine of methodological individualism. For example, Hayek writes:"There is no other way toward an understanding of social phenomena but through our understanding of individual actions directed toward other people and guided by their expected behavior."[13] Similarly, according to Popper,

> ... all social phenomena, and especially the functioning of all social institutions, should always be understood as resulting from the decisions, actions, attitudes, etc. of human individuals, and ... we should never be satisfied by an explanation in terms of so-called collectives.[14]

Finally we may quote Watkins's account of "the principle of methodological individualism":

> According to this principle, the ultimate constituents of the social world are individual people who act more or less appropriately in the light of their dispositions and understanding of their situation. Every complex social situation or event is the result of a particular configuration of individuals, their dispositions, situations, beliefs, and physical resources and environment.

It is worth noticing, incidentally, that the first sentence here is simply a (refined) statement of Truistic Social Atomism. Watkins continues:

> There may be unfinished or half-way explanation of large-scale social phenomena (say, inflation) in terms of other large-scale phenomena (say full employment); but we shall not have arrived at rock-bottom explanations of such large scale phenomena until we have deduced an account of them from statements about the dispositions, beliefs, resources and inter-relations of individuals. (The individuals may remain anonymous and only typical dispositions, etc., may be attributed to them.) And just as mechanism is contrasted with the organicist idea of physical fields, so methodological individualism is contrasted with sociological holism or organicism. On this latter view, social systems constitute "wholes" at least in the sense that some of their large-scale behaviour is governed by macro-laws which are essentially sociological in the sense that they are sui generis and not to be explained as mere regularities or tendencies resulting from the behaviour of interacting individuals. On the contrary, the behaviour of individuals should (according to sociological holism) be explained at least partly in terms of such laws (perhaps in conjunction with an account, first of individuals' roles within institutions, and secondly of the functions of institutions with the whole social system). If methodological individualism means that human beings are supposed to be the only moving agents in history, and if sociological holism means that some superhuman agents or factors are supposed to be at work in history, then these two alternatives are exhaustive.[15]

Methodological individualism, therefore, is a prescription for explanation, asserting that no purported explanations of social (or individual) phenomena are to count as explanations, or (in Watkins's version) as rock-bottom explanations, unless they are couched wholly in terms of facts about individuals.

It is now necessary to distinguish this from a number of others, from which it us usually not distinguished. It has been taken to be the same as any or all or the following:

1. Truistic Social Atomism. We have seen that Watkins, for example, seems to equate this with methodological individualism proper.

2. A theory of meaning to the effect that every statement about social phenomena is either a statement about individual human beings or else it is unintelligible and therefore not a statement at all. This theory entails that all predicates which range over social phenomena are definable in terms of predicates which range only over individual phenomena and that all statements about social phenomena are translatable without loss of meaning into statements that are wholly about individuals. As Jarvie has put it, "'Army' is merely a plural of soldier and *all* statements about the Army can be reduced to statements about the particular soldiers comprising the Army."[16]

It is worth noticing that this theory is only plausible on a crude verificationist theory of meaning (to the effect that the meaning of p is what confirms the truth of p). Otherwise, although statements about armies are true only in virtue of the fact that other statements about individuals are true, the former are not equivalent in meaning to the latter, nor a fortiori are they "about" the subject of the latter.

3. A theory of ontology to the effect that in the social world only individuals are real. This usually carries the correlative doctrine that social phenomena are constructions of the mind and "do not exist in reality." Thus Hayek writes,

> The social sciences ... do not deal with "given" wholes but their task is to constitute these wholes by constructing models from the familiar elements—models which reproduce the structure of relationships between some of the many phenomena which we always simultaneously observe in real life. This is no less true of the popular concepts of social wholes which are represented by the terms current in ordinary language; they too refer to mental models.[17]

Similarly, Popper holds that "social entities such as institutions or associations" are "abstract models constructed to interpret certain selected abstract relations between individuals."[18]

If this theory means that in the social world only individuals are observable, it is evidently false. Some social phenomena simply can be observed (as both trees and forests can): and indeed, many features of social phenomena are observable (e.g., the procedure of court) while many features of individuals are not (e.g., intentions). Both individual and social phenomena have observable and nonobservable features. If it means that individual phenomena are easy to understand, while social phenomena are not (which is Hayek's view), this is highly implausible: compare the procedure of the court with the motives of the criminal. If the theory means that individuals exist independently of, e.g., groups and institutions, this is also false, since just as facts about social phenomena are contingent upon facts about individuals, the reverse is also true. Thus, as we have seen, we can only speak of soldiers because we can speak of armies: only if certain statements are true of armies are others true of soldiers. If the theory means that all social phenomena are fictional and all individual phenomena are factual, that would entail that all assertions about social phenomena are false or else neither true nor false, which is absurd. Finally, the theory may mean that only facts about individuals are explanatory, which alone would make this theory equivalent to methodological individualism.

4. A negative theory to the effect that sociological laws are impossible, or that lawlike statements about social phenomena are always false. Hayek and Popper sometimes seem to believe this, but Watkins clearly repudiates it, asserting merely that such statements form part of "halfway" as opposed to "rock-bottom" explanations.

This theory, like all dogmas of the form "x is impossible" is open to refutation by a single counter-instance. Since such counter-instances are readily available[19] there is nothing left to say on this score.

A doctrine that may be called "social individualism" which (ambiguously) asserts that society has as its end the good of individuals. When unpacked, this may be taken to mean any or all of the following: (a) social institutions are to be understood as founded and maintained by individuals to fulfill their ends (as in, e.g., social contract theory); (b) social institutions in fact satisfy individual ends; (c) social institutions ought to satisfy individual ends. (a) is not widely held today, though it is not extinct; (b) is certainly held by Hayek with respect to the market, as though it followed from methodological individualism; and (c) which, interpreting "social institutions" and "individual ends" as a noninterventionist state and express preferences, becomes political liberalism, is clearly held by Popper to be uniquely consonant with methodological individualism.

However, neither (b) nor (c) is logically or conceptually related to methodological individualism, while (a) is a version of it.

2

What I hope so far to have shown is what the central tenet of methodological individualism is and what it is not. It remains to assess its plausibility.

It asserts (to repeat) that all attempts to explain social and individual phenomena are to be rejected (or, for Watkins, rejected as rock-bottom explanations) unless they refer exclusively to facts about individuals. There are thus two matters to investigate: (1) what is meant by "facts about individuals," and (2) what is meant by "explanation"?

1. What is a fact about an individual? Or, more clearly, what predicates may be applied to individuals? Consider the following examples:

i. genetic make-up; brain-states,
ii. aggression; gratification; stimulus-response,
iii. cooperation; power; esteem,
iv. cashing cheques; saluting; voting.

What this exceedingly rudimentary list shows is at least this: that there is a continuum of what I shall henceforth call individual predicates from what one might call the most nonsocial to the most social. Propositions incorporating only predicates of type (i) are about human beings qua material objects and make no reference to and presuppose nothing about consciousness or any feature of any social group or institution. Propositions incorporating only individual predicates of type (ii) presuppose consciousness but still make no reference to and presuppose nothing about any feature of any social group or institution. Propositions incorporating only predicates of type (iii) do have a minimal social reference; they presuppose a social context in which certain actions, social relations, and/or mental states are picked out and given a particular significance (which makes social relations of certain sorts count as "cooperative," which makes certain social positions count as positions of "power" and a certain set of

attitudes count as "esteem"). They still do not presuppose or entail any particular propositions about any particular form of group of institution. Finally, propositions incorporating only individual predicates of type (iv) are maximally social, in that they presuppose and sometimes directly entail propositions about particular types of group and institution. ("Voting Labor" is at an even further point on the continuum.)

Methodological individualism has frequently been taken to confine its favored explanations to any or all of these sorts of individual predicates. We may distinguish the following four possibilities:

i. Attempts to explain in terms of type (i) predicates. A good example is H. J. Eysenck's *Psychology of Politics*.[20] According to Eysenck, "Political actions are actions of human beings; the study of the direct cause of these actions is the field of the study of psychology. All other social sciences deal with variables which affect political action indirectly."[21] (Compare this with Durkheim's famous statement that "every time that a social phenomenon is directly explained by a psychological phenomenon, we may be sure that the explanation is false.")[22] Eysenck sets out to classify attitudes along two dimensions—the Radical-Conservative and the Tough-minded-Tender-minded—on the basis of evidence elicited by carefully constructed questionnaires. Then, having classified the attitudes, his aim is to *explain* them by reference to antecedent conditions and his interest here is centered upon the modifications of the central nervous system.
ii. Attempts to explain in terms of type (ii) predicates. Examples are Hobbes's appeal to appetites and aversions, Pareto's residues and those Freudian theories in which sexual activity is seen as a type of undifferentiated activity that is (subsequently) channeled on particular social directions.
iii. Attempts to explain in terms of type (iii) predicates. Examples are those sociologists and social psychologists (from Tarde to Homans)[23] who favor explanations in terms of general and "elementary" forms of social behavior, which do invoke some minimal social reference but are unspecific as to any particular form of group or institution.
iv. Attempts to explain in terms of type (iv) predicates. Examples of these are extremely widespread, comprising all those who appeal to facts about concrete and specifically located individuals in order to explain. Here the relevant features of the social context are, so to speak, built into the individual. Open almost any empirical (though not theoretical) work of sociology, or history, and explanations of this sort leap to the eye.

Merely to state these four alternative possibilities is to suggest that their differences are more important than their similarities. What do they show about the plausibility of methodological individualism? To answer this it is necessary to turn to the meaning of "explanation."

2. To explain something is (at least) to overcome an obstacle—to make what was unintelligible intelligible. There is more than one way of doing this.

It is important to see, and it is often forgotten, that to *identify* a piece of behavior, a set of beliefs, etc., is sometimes to explain it. This may involve seeing it in a new way, picking out hidden structural features. Consider an anthropologist's interpretation of ritual or a sociological study of (say) bureaucracy. Often explanation resides precisely in a successful and sufficiently wide-ranging identification of behavior or types of behavior (often in terms of a set of beliefs). Again, to take an example from

Mandelbaum,[24] a Martian visiting earth sees one man mark a piece of paper that another has handed to him through some iron bars: on his being told that the bank teller is certifying the withdrawal slip he has had the action explained, through its being identified. If the methodological individualist is saying that no explanations are possible (or rock-bottom) except those framed exclusively in terms of individual predicates of types (i), (ii), and (iii), i.e., those not presupposing or entailing propositions about particular institutions and organizations, then he is arbitrarily ruling out (or denying finality to) most ordinarily acceptable explanations, as used in everyday life, but also by most sociologists and anthropologists for most of the time. If he is prepared to include individual predicates of type (iv), he seems to be proposing nothing more than a futile linguistic purism. Why should we be compelled to talk about the tribesman but not the tribe, the bank teller but not the bank? And let no one underestimate the difficulty or the importance of explanation by identification. Indeed, a whole methodological tradition (from Dilthey through Weber to Winch) holds this to be the characteristic mode of explanation in social science.

Another way of explaining is to deduce the specific and particular from the general and universal. If I have a body of coherent, economical, well-confirmed, and unfalsified general laws from which, given the specifications of boundary and initial conditions, I predict (or retrodict) x and x occurs, then, in one very respectable sense, I have certainly explained x.[25] This is the form of explanation which methodological individualists characteristically seem to advocate, though they vary as to whether the individual predicates which are uniquely to constitute the general laws and specifications of particular circumstances are to be of types (i), (ii), (iii), or (iv).

If they are to be of type (i), either of two equally unacceptable consequences follows. Eysenck writes, "It is fully realized that most of the problems discussed must ultimately be seen in their historical, economic, sociological, and perhaps even anthropological context, but little is to be gained at the present time by complicating the picture too much."[26] But the picture is already so complicated at the very beginning (and the attitudes Eysenck is studying are only identifiable in social terms); the problem is how to simplify it. This could logically be achieved either by developing a theory which will explain the "historical, economic, sociological ... anthropological context" exclusively in terms of (e.g.) the central nervous system or by demonstrating that this "context" is simply a backdrop against which quasi-mechanical psychological forces are the sole causal influences at work. Since, apart from quaint efforts that are of interest only to the intellectual historian, no one has given the slightest clue as to how either alternative might plausibly be achieved, there seems to be little point in taking it seriously, except as a problem in philosophy. Neurophysiology may be the queen of the social sciences, but her claim remains entirely speculative.

If the individual predicates are to be of type (ii), there is again no positive reason to find the methodological individualist's claim plausible. Parallel arguments to those for type (i) predicates apply: no one has yet provided any plausible reason for supposing that, e.g., (logically) presocial drives uniquely determine the social context or that this context is causally irrelevant to their operation. As Freud himself saw, and many neo-Freudians have insisted, the process of social channeling is a crucial part of the explanation of behavior, involving reference to features of both small groups and the wider social structure.

If the individual predicates are to be of type (iii), there is still no positive reason to find the methodological individualist's claim plausible. There may indeed be valid and

useful explanations of this type, but the claim we are considering asserts that all proper, or rock-bottom, explanations must be. Why rule out as possible candidates for inclusion in an explicans (statement of general laws + statement of boundary and initial conditions) statements that are about, or that presuppose or entail other statements that are about, social phenomena? One reason for doing so might be a belief that, in Hume's words, "mankind are ... much the same in all times in all places."[27] As Homans puts it, the characteristics of "elementary social behaviour, far more than those of institutionalised behaviour, are shared by all mankind":

> Institutions, whether they are things like the physician's role or things like the bureaucracy, have a long history behind them of development within a particular society; and in institutions, societies differ greatly. But within institutions, in the face-to-face relations between individuals ... characteristics of behaviour appear in which mankind gives away its lost unity.[28]

This may be so, but then there are still the differences between institutions and societies to explain.

Finally, if the claim is that the individual predicates must be of type (iv), then it appears harmless, but also pointless. Explanations, both in the sense we are considering now and in the sense of identifications, may be wholly couched in such predicates but what uniquely special status do they possess? For, as we have already seen, propositions incorporating them presuppose and/or entail other propositions about social phenomena. Thus the latter have not really been eliminated; they have merely been swept under the carpet.

It is worth adding that since Popper and Watkins allow "situations" and "interrelations between individuals" to enter into explanations, it is difficult to see why they insist on calling their doctrine "methodological individualism." In fact the burden of their concerns and their arguments is to oppose certain sorts of explanations in terms of social phenomena. They are against "holism" and "historicism," but opposition to these doctrines does not entail acceptance of methodological individualism. For, in the first place, "situations" and "interrelations between individuals" can be described in terms which do not refer to individuals without holist or historicist implications. And second, it may be impossible to describe them in terms which do refer to individuals,[29] and yet they may be indispensable to an explanation, either as part of an identifying explanation in the statement of a general law, or of initial and boundary conditions.

Notes

1. *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes*, ed. Sir William Molesworth. London, 1839, i. 67; ii. xiv; ii. 109.
2. L. de Bonald, *Théorie du pouvoir*, Paris, 1854, i. 103.
3. A. Comte, *Système de politique positive*, Paris, 1851, ii. 181.
4. J. S. Mill, *A System of Logic*, 9th ed., London, 1875, ii. 469. "Men are not," Mill continues, "when brought together, converted into another kind of substance. with different properties."
5. See D. Essertier, *Psychologie et Sociologie*, Paris, 1927.
6. Cf. E. Durkheim, *Les Règles de la méthode sociologique*, Paris, 1895: 2nd ed., 1901, and G. Tarde, *Les Lois sociales*, Paris, 1898.
7. See *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans and ed. with introd. by K. H. Wolff, Glencoe, Ill., 1950, esp. Ch. i, ii, and iv (e.g., Let us grant for the moment that only individuals 'really' exist. Even then, only a false conception of science could infer from this 'fact' that any knowledge which somehow aims at synthesizing these individuals deals with merely speculative abstractions and unrealities," pp. 4–5.

8. See C. H. Cooley, *Human Nature and the Social Order*, New York, 1902. For Cooley, society and the individual are merely "the collective and distributive aspects of the same thing" (pp. 1–2).
9. See G. Gurvitch, "Les Faux Problèmes de la sociologie au XIX[e] siècle," in *La Vocation actuelle de la sociologie*, Paris, 1950, esp. pp. 25–37.
10. See M. Ginsberg, "The Individual and Society," in *On the Diversity of Morals*, London, 1956.
11. See G. C. Homans, "Bringing Men Back In," *American Sociological Review*, xxix (1964) and D. H. Wrong,"The Oversocialised Conception of Man in Modern Sociology," *American Sociological Review*, xxvi (1961).
12. See the following discussions: F. A. Hayek, *The Counter-Revolution of Science*, Glencoe, Ill., 1952, Chs. 4, 6, and 8; K. R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, London, 1945, Ch. 14, and *The Poverty of Historicism*, London, 1957, Chs. 7, 23, 24, and 31; J. W. N. Watkins, "Ideal Types and Historical Explanation," *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, iii (1952) (reprinted in H. Feigl and M. Brodbeck, *Readings in the Philosophy of Science*, New York, 1953), "Methodological Individualism." (note), ibid., "Historical Explanation in the Social Sciences," ibid., viii (1957); M. Mandelbaum, "Societal Laws," ibid. (1957). L. J. Goldstein, "The Two Theses of Methodological Individualism" (note), ibid., ix (1958); Watkins, "The Two Theses of Methodological Individualism" (note), ibid., x (1959); Goldstein, "Mr Watkins on the Two Theses" (note), ibid., Watkins "Third Reply to Mr Goldstein". (note), ibid.; R. J. Scott, 'Methodological and Epistemological Individualism' (note), ibid. xi (1961); Mandelbaum, "Societal Facts," *British Journal of Sociology*, vi (1955); E. Gellner, Explanations in History," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, xxx (1956) (these last two articles together with Watkins's 1957 article above are reprinted in P. Gardiner (ed.), *Theories of History*, Glencoe, Ill., and London, 1959, together with a reply to Watkins by Gellner. Gellner's paper is here retitled "Holism and Individualism in History and Sociology"), M. Brodbeck, "Philosophy of Social Science," *Philosophy of Science*, xxi (1954); Watkins, "Methodological Individualism: A Reply" (note), ibid., xxii (1955); Brodbeck, "Methodological Individualisms: Definition and Reduction" ibid., xxv (1958); Goldstein, "The Inadequacy of the Principle of Methodological Individualism," *Journal of Philosophy*, liii (1956); Watkins, "The Alleged Inadequacy of Methodological Individualism" (note), ibid., lv (1958); C. Taylor, "The Poverty of Historicism," *Universities and Left Review* (Summer 1958), followed by replies from I. Jarvie and Watkins, ibid. (Spring 1959); J. Agassi, "Methodological Individualism," *British Journal of Sociology*, xi (1960); E. Nagel, *The Structure of Science*, London, 1961, pp. 535–46; A. C. Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of History*, Cambridge, 1965, Ch. xii; and W. H. Dray, "Holism and Individualism in History and Social Science," in P. Edwards (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, New York 1967.
13. *Individualism and Economic Order*, London, 1949, p. 6.
14. *The Open Society*, 4th ed. ii. 98.
15. "Historical Explanation in the Social Sciences" in Gardiner (ed.), *Theories of History*, p. 505. Cf. "large-scale *social* phenomena must be accounted for by the situations, dispositions and beliefs of *individuals*. This I call methodological individualism." Watkins, "Methodological Individualism: A Reply," *Philosophy of Science*, xxii (1955), 58 (see n. 12 above).
16. *Universities and Left Review* (Spring 1959), 57.
17. *The Counter-Revolution of Science*, p. 56.
18. *The Poverty of Historicism*, p.140.
19. Popper himself provides some: see *The Poverty of Historicism*, pp. 62–3.
20. London, 1960.
21. *Psychology of Politics*. p. 10.
22. *Les Règles de la méthode sociologique*, p.103.
23. See *Social Behaviour*, London, 1961.
24. *British Journal of Sociology* (1955).
25. E.g., Hempel calls this "deductive-nomological explanation." For a recent defense of this type of explanation in social science, see R. Rudner, *Philosophy of Social Science*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1965. I have not discussed "probabilistic explanation," in which the general laws are not universal and the explicans only makes the explicandum highly probable, in the text; such explanations pose no special problems for my argument.
26. *Psychology of Politics*, p. 5.
27. D. Hume, *Essays Moral and Political*, ed. T. H. Green and T. H. Grose, London, 1875, ii. 68.
28. *Social Behaviour*, p. 6.
29. E.g., in the cases of rules and terminologies of kinship or of language generally.

Chapter 30
Methodological Individualism and Social Explanation

Richard W. Miller

For over twenty years, Karl Popper, J. W. N. Watkins, and others have argued for methodological individualism, the doctrine that social phenomena must be explainable in terms of the psychologies and situations of the participants in those phenomena. This statement of methodological individualism is vague, because the claims put forward in the name of that doctrine have seemed to many readers to be extremely diverse. Is there, however, a version of methodological individualism, figuring prominently in writings of the individualists themselves, which is both plausible (in that a reasonable person might, on reflection, accept it as true) and nontrivial (in that there are sociological claims of significant popularity which would not be put forward if their proponents were fully conscious of the truth of methodological individualism)? The majority of writers on methodological individualism claim that no such version exists. According to these critics, methodological individualism either consists of doctrines which no reasonable person could accept once he fully understands their implications, or consists of doctrines which fail to exclude any current sociological theses, including the Marxist explanations which are the individualists' modern bête noire.[1] The continued attractiveness of methodological individualism is typically ascribed to a muddled and unconscious shifting between the implausible and the trivial versions of the doctrine.

These critics of methodological individualism are, I shall argue, mistaken. There is a version of methodological individualism that is both plausible and nontrivial. At the same time, this version of methodological individualism, plausible though it is, is not, in fact, a valid methodological principle. When I argue for the nontriviality and the nonvalidity of the relevant version of methodological individualism, Marxist sociology will be my main case of a source of nonindividualist explanations. I shall argue that the individualist principle in question ought not to be accepted in the relatively a priori spirit in which it is offered. If my criticisms are fair, any nontrivial version of methodological individualism must exclude appeals to nonrational processes which certainly do control behavior in small-group interactions and may well do so in historically significant large-scale social phenomena.

If my argument is right, the two decades of attack on methodological individualism have largely been a misfortune for the social sciences. The critics of methodological individualism have concentrated their fire on extremely implausible versions of methodological individualism, which in practice constrain no one working in the social sciences. Meanwhile, an individualist doctrine that exercises a real restraining influence has remained unscathed.

The main text I shall rely on as a source of individualist doctrines is Watkins's concise and relatively clear exposition of methodological individualism, "Historical Explanation in the Social Sciences" [13]. In this essay, Watkins says, "There may be