

Branko Mitrović

Intellectual History, Inconceivability and Methodological Holism

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[ABSTRACT] The debate between individualism and holism in the philosophy of history pertains to the nature of the entities relied on in historical explanations. The question is whether explanations of historical items (e.g. events, actions, artifacts) require the assumption that the collective historical entities (e.g. civilizations, cultures etc.) used in these explanations are (sometimes) conceived of as irreducible to the actions, thoughts and beliefs of individual human beings. In this paper I analyze two methodological problems that holist explanations face in the writing of intellectual history. The first problem derives from the fact that holistic explanations in intellectual history have to rely on the claim that certain beliefs were *inconceivable* to some individuals because they were members of specific collectives, whereas it is unclear how historical research can justify such claims. The second problem pertains to the difficulties the holist position faces when it has to account for the novel properties of artifacts studied by intellectual history.

[ABSTRACT ENDS]

Preliminary considerations

By “intellectual history” I understand the study of *artifacts* created by human intellects through history (e.g. artworks, scientific theories, philosophical systems). The subdisciplines of intellectual history are, for instance, art history, the history of science, or the history of philosophy. Philosophers of history often neglect these fields of historical research and tend to assume that historians study and explain *events*, not *artifacts*; influential works on the philosophy of history in the analytic tradition--for instance, Hempel’s paper “Explanation and Laws” or Danto’s *Analytic Philosophy of History*--deal exclusively with history understood as the history of *events*.

The history of artifacts can indeed be treated as a history of events. One may explain the properties of artifacts by referring to the events and causes of the events that brought the artifacts (and their properties) into existence. Additionally, events that were in some way caused by the existence of the artifacts and their properties (e.g. their “cultural impact”) are also a legitimate topic of intellectual history.

In what follows, I assume that explaining X means stating the causes of X. If an artifact has the properties P_1, P_2, \dots, P_n , it is possible, for every property P_i , to state an event E_i which brought it into existence and to argue that E_i explains the existence of P_i . Typically, this event E_i will refer to an action of the author of the artifact. If P_i is explained by the author’s conscious actions, the assumption is that the author believed that the artifact needed to have the property P_i . For instance, it will often be the case that the author’s belief that P_i should be included in the artifact was caused by his or her reasoning about other properties of the artifact. (“Reasoning” in this case can be construed to apply also to those fields of intellectual creativity where logical coherence need not be the motivating force: formal-aesthetic judgments are also a form of reasoning, and it would be proper to say that a painter’s choice of colors may be motivated by the belief that a certain yellow will provide balance to a certain blue in another part of a painting.)

The kind of historical explanation I want to analyze in this paper argues that, although the introduction of specific properties of an artifact may have been motivated by the author’s reasoning, this reasoning was itself determined by the author’s “context”--i.e. membership in collectives such as a tradition, culture, ethnicity, gender, etc. In this case, no description of the author’s reasoning process is sufficient to account for the artifact’s properties if it does not describe how the collective to which the author belonged *determined* the author’s belief that the properties under consideration should be included in the artifact. Intellectual history, from this point of view, can only describe “collective creativity”; creative actions of the authors of artifacts are just manifestations of the author’s membership in collective entities. The idea is that there are no reasons that are not socially predetermined; even logical reasoning and visual perception (let alone a painter’s choice of colors) are always already predetermined by the collective the author belonged to. In other words, the membership in a given collective determines the reasoning of the author in such a way that it can be taken to *explain* the properties of the artifact produced by the author--and as mentioned, to explain X is to state the cause of X.

The problem I want to address in this paper pertains to explanations of the *beliefs* that led authors to consciously include certain properties in the artifacts they produced. If C is the author, A the artifact, and P a property of the artifact, I am interested in exploring the methodological validity of a historical explanation which that has the form:

- (1) (The artifact A has the property P) because
 {[(C created A with the property P) because (C believed that A should have the property P)] and [(C believed that A should have property P) because (C was a member of the collective S)]}

In what follows I shall use the phrase “C created₍₁₎ A with the property P” in those cases when C created A with the property P because C believed that A should have the property P. So (1) becomes:

- (1a) (The artifact A has the property P) because
 [(C created₍₁₎ A with P) because (C was a member of S)].

Since it can be assumed that an artifact created with a certain property has that property, the really important section to discuss is:

- (1b) (C created₍₁₎ A with P) because (C was a member of S)

Thesis (1) defines the scope of the paper. It should not be controversial that, besides the beliefs and conscious decisions of the author, the existence of properties of artifacts is often determined by social circumstances: books need to be printed and buildings need to be built. Social circumstances that cause artifacts to have specific properties can be seen as reducible or irreducible to the beliefs and actions of the human individuals who participated in them (i.e. analyzed from holistic or individualist positions). However, in this paper I am interested in exploring how and whether the individual author’s belief that the artifact should have a certain property, in the situation when that belief was the author’s conscious motive that caused him or her to produce the artifact with such a property, can be explained by that author’s membership in a collective. This is a *holist* argument. I leave aside cases in which the presence of a certain property of the artifact was caused and needs to be explained by the beliefs and decisions of individuals and groups other than the author. Nor am I interested in the situations when an author may have believed that the artifact should be produced with a certain property, but for various reasons abandoned the idea and then still, inadvertently (or for reasons other than his or her belief that the artifact should have such a property) produced the artifact with that specific property. Explanations that do not conform to (1) fall outside of the scope of this paper.

This paper is concerned with the *methodological* assumptions of holist explanations and their implications. There exists an extensive body of debates about the way membership in a collective can or cannot affect, influence, or determine an individual’s beliefs or intellectual life. Intellectual artifacts have to be imbedded in a

social setting at least insofar as it must be possible to interpret them as attempts to communicate to or affect other human beings. (This is why, for instance, the ranting of a madman cannot be taken as an artifact of intellectual history.) Different authors may describe the collective in which the artifact was intended to make an impact as a set of individuals or as a holistic entity. In what follows I shall extensively rely on some aspects of such debates between holism and individualism. However, the question this paper deals with is not whether and to what degree an individual author's membership in a collective *causes* the production of an intellectual artifact with certain properties, but rather that of *the methodological implications and necessary assumptions involved in explaining* an artifact's properties by its author's membership in the said collective. The distinction is significant: a historian could, in principle, subscribe to the holist view about the relationship between an individual's intellectual life and membership in a collective but nevertheless believe that, for methodological reasons, proper holist explanations in intellectual history cannot be provided.

Individualism – Holism

Whereas the main outlines of the debate between holism and individualism are likely to be known to many readers, it may still be useful to provide a description of both views. The debate has many forms, such as: do some human collectives constitute entities that are not reducible to the sums of their individuals? Can sentences about such entities always be translated into sentences about individuals that make up such entities? Can the behavior of such entities be regarded as the sum of actions of the individuals that constitute it? The distinction between the holist and individualist positions is not in the individualist's denial of the existence of collectives. It is obvious that many individuals do make up a group. What the individualist denies is that collectives are more than sums of individuals--e.g. that collective entities can have properties independently of the properties of the individuals that constitute them.¹

¹ It is important to warn against the common misunderstanding of the individualist position, which ascribes to individualism the denial of social entities. The proper understanding is, however, that the individualist position assumes complete reducibility of such entities on the sets of individuals. In his "Holism versus Individualism in History and Sociology" Ernest Gellner (in Patrick Gardiner (ed.), *Theories of History*, Glencoe: The Free Press, 1959, 489-503, 491) described the individualist position as marked by the belief in reductionism which

does not wish to allow that the Whole could ever be a cause, and [insists] that explanations which make [it] appear that it is can be translated into other. ... The holistic counter-argument works in reverse; if something (a) is a causal factor and (b) cannot be reduced, then in some sense it "really and independently exists".

Similarly, J. W. N. Watkins, in his "Historical Explanation in the Social Sciences" (Patrick Gardiner (ed.), *Theories of History*, Glencoe: The Free Press, 1959, 503-515, 505) provided a similar description of the individualist view that

In what follows I intend to bracket ontological, metaphysical, and other aspects of the debate between holism and individualism. I shall concentrate purely on methodological issues. A formalized differentiation between methodological individualism and methodological holism in historical research was provided by Arthur Danto; in his *Analytic Philosophy of History* he presented the position of methodological individualism in three theses²:

- I_a). Social individuals are causally dependent upon the behavior of individual human beings and not the other way around;
- I_b). Explanations of the behavior of social individuals are always to be rejected as ultimate unless these explanations are framed exclusively in terms of the behavior of individual human beings;
- I_c). Explanation of individual human behavior must never be in terms of the behavior of social individuals.

Danto then suggested that the methodological holist position can be defined by the same list, by replacing every occurrence of “individual human beings” with “social individuals” and vice-versa. In this paper, I prefer to use the term “collective” instead of Danto’s “social individual” (because the latter is easily confused with “individual individual”). In what follows, I shall concentrate on the claim that some individuals have and others don’t have certain properties because they belong to certain collectives and, in order to avoid possible confusion with the term “collective”, I shall assume that this term cannot be used to refer to the set of *all* human beings.

Throughout his book, Danto predominantly assumed that historians describe and explain actions and behavior, but for the purposes of this paper, it will be useful to talk about “properties” instead. If an individual or a collective has performed an action or behaves in a certain way, we can say that they have the property of

we shall not have arrived at rock-bottom explanations of such large-scale phenomena until we have reduced an account of them to statements about the dispositions, resources and inter-relations of individuals.

On the holist view, however,

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.

² Arthur Danto, *Narration and Knowledge*, New York: Columbia University Press, 266. Danto’s description of methodological individualism actually has five theses, but the first two (that sentences about social individuals are logically independent of sentences about individual human beings, and that social individuals are ontologically distinct from individual human beings) were introduced merely to remove ontological and metaphysical areas of confrontation between individualism and holism—they reduce the scope of the debate to methodological issues. One should mention that the second of Danto’s theses (that social individuals are ontologically distinct from individual human beings) is in an uneasy relationship with the third theses (listed as (Ia) below, that social individuals are causally dependent upon the behaviour of individual human beings and not the other way about).

behaving, or acting, or of having behaved or acted, in a certain way. The beliefs of individuals or those shared by collectives are similarly easily described as the properties of these individuals or collectives. But if we talk merely about “behavior”, this does not cover the properties of individuals or collectives that may not be acted out in a given moment; in a historical explanation we may refer to the fact that all members of a group of French speakers have the ability to speak French even when they are not manifesting it in their behavior (for instance, because they are listening to a lecture in English).

Finally, the reference to causality in I_a can be misleading. It depends on the understanding of causality adopted and, especially when we deal with intellectual history, on the question of whether we assume that reasons count as causes. In what follows, the intention is anyway to discuss the way properties of individuals and collectives are used to *explain* each other, so it is advisable to reformulate I_1 in accordance with this intention.

We thus get a formulation of the individualist program in intellectual history:

- I₁). Properties of collectives are explainable by the properties of individual human beings and not the other way around;
- I₂). Explanations of the properties of collectives are always to be rejected as ultimate unless these explanations are framed exclusively in terms of the behavior of individual human beings;
- I₃). Explanation of the properties of an individual must never be in terms of the properties of collectives.

In Danto’s formulation, I_a suffers from the lack of explicit quantification. This can hardly cause confusion in the case of the individualist program, because the individualist cannot allow that social entities may have properties independently of the individuals that constitute them. The implicit quantification in I_1 and I_2 , therefore, has to be “all”. But when we have to convert I_{a-c} (or I_{1-3}) into a holist program by replacing “social entities” (“collectives”) with “individuals”, it becomes unclear whether the first thesis should say that *all* or only *some* properties of individuals are explainable by individuals’ memberships in collectives. The difference in quantification results in different holist programs.³ However, this need not concern us here, since we are not discussing the universal validity of the holist program, but its validity for specific historical explanations: we are concerned with the ability of the holist program to explain the specific properties of the authors of

³ Whereas H_2 says (see below) that all explanations have to be phrased, ultimately, in terms of the properties of collectives, this may merely mean that individuals may have properties that are not explainable. Since individualism, as defined in I_1 , I_2 and I_3 , is an outright rejection of the idea that collectives can have any properties that cannot be explained by the properties of individuals, it is reasonable to differentiate between strong and moderate holism. A *moderate holist* may claim that *some* properties of individuals are ultimately explainable only in terms of collectives (and others are unexplainable), whereas *strong holism* would claim that all properties of individuals are explainable by the properties of the collectives to which these individuals belong. One may further imagine a moderate holist who would reject H_2 and believe that some properties of individuals are explainable by their membership in collectives and others by other individual properties these individuals possess.

intellectual artifacts (that they have created₍₁₎ artifacts with specific properties). Those cases in which some versions of the holist program do not claim to be able to provide an explanation such as (1) are not relevant for our discussion here. One can thus avoid the unnecessary discussion about quantification by introducing appropriately the word “relevant” in the formulation of the holist program--where “the relevant property of an individual” is to be understood as relevant in the context of this article: “the property of the author C to have created₍₁₎ the artifact A with the property P.” If, for instance, a painter has the property of having created₍₁₎ a painting with a certain balance of white and blue colors, then this property has to be explained by the properties of the collective(s) to which he or she belongs. We thus get:

- H₁). Relevant properties of individuals are explainable by the properties of collectives and not the other way around;
- H₂). Explanations of the properties of individuals are always to be rejected as ultimate unless these explanations are framed exclusively in terms of the properties of collectives;
- H₃). Explanations of the properties of a collective must never be in terms of the properties of individuals.

When it comes to explanations in intellectual history, the holist case really hinges on showing that:

- a). There exist properties of intellectual artifacts that the holist position can explain and the individualist cannot.
- b). There are no properties of intellectual artifacts that individualism can explain and holism cannot.

Holism and individualism in intellectual history

Let P_1, P_2, \dots, P_n be the properties of an artifact A studied by intellectual history, and let C be the author of the artifact. The properties P_1, P_2, \dots, P_n came into existence through the respective actions E_1, E_2, \dots, E_n performed by C. Some of the properties P_1, P_2, \dots, P_n may be *novel* in the sense that before A there never existed an artifact with these properties (or such a combination of properties, which is itself also a property). (It may also be argued that intellectual history mainly or exclusively studies the novel properties of artifacts and how they came about.)

Arguing the holistic position in intellectual history means arguing that the specific property of a given artifact A was introduced by the author C *because* C belonged to a collective S--as was stipulated in (1b). If C's membership in S is meant to *explain* the fact that he or she created₍₁₎ an artifact with certain properties, then (1b) must actually imply that any other member of S would do the same when producing an artifact such as A. Otherwise (1b) cannot count as an explanation. But it would be wrong to think that (1b) suggests:

- (2) If (X is a member of S) then (X necessarily creates₍₁₎ an artifact such as A, with the property P).

If we say that the cause of a certain Renaissance astronomical treatise that exposes the geocentric system is that it was written by a *quattrocento* Italian, this does not mean that all *quattrocento* Italians wrote astronomical treatises in which they advocated the geocentric system. Nor would it be accurate to delimit the explanatory collective S to the group of authors of astronomical treatises who count as *quattrocento* Italians:

- (3) If [(X is a member of S) and (X creates₍₁₎ an artifact such as A)] then (X necessarily produces an artifact such as A with the property P)

Rather, the intended explanation is that those *quattrocento* Italians who thought about the nature of the Universe, thought in the terms of the geocentric system; some of these people were astronomers, others astrologers, still others were Renaissance musical theorists who also had a lively interest in the issue--and very few of these people wrote astronomical treatises. The idea is that all members of a wider group have a certain property (believe in the geocentric system); some of them create₍₁₎ artifacts in which this property is manifested and the author's membership in this wider group explains the properties of the artifact. A reduction such as (3) is also dangerously close to being circular: if we define the explanatory collective as "authors of *quattrocento* astronomical treatises" this will boil down to listing all authors of Italian astronomical treatises written in the 15th century, then establishing that they assumed the heliocentric system and then explaining that because the given author belongs to the same list, he or she had to assume that the Sun revolved around the Earth.

Specific holist historical explanations may involve different types of difficulties when it comes to the stipulation of the explanatory collective. These difficulties will depend on the specific historical circumstances. For the methodological discussion presented in this paper, however, we need a general formulation that will apply to all cases to which (1) applies. A way to achieve this is to reformulate (1b) so that in each given instance C's membership in S is said to *preclude* C's capacity to make artifacts such as A *without* the property P. This strategy makes it possible for the wider set of potential authors to function as the explanatory collective, as long as we can say that the members of that set could not produce artifacts such as A without P. For instance, because C was a *quattrocento* Italian, he could not write an astronomical treatise which would not assume the geocentric system. If the property Q is identical with not-having-the-property P (i.e. "not-P"), then we can reformulate (1b) into (4):

- (4) (C created₍₁₎ A without the property of not-having-the-property P) because (C was a member of S).

or

(4a) (C created₍₁₎ A without Q) because (C was a member of S).

The idea is that C's membership in S makes C incapable of producing an artifact with the property Q; this amounts to saying:

(5) [(C created A without Q) because
(C did not believe that A should be made with Q)]
and
[(C did not think that A should be made with Q) because
(C could not believe that A should be made with Q)]
and
[(C could not think that A should be made with Q) because
(C was a member of S)]

The switch from the factual "did not" to the modal "could not" is crucial if (5) is to count as an explanation. If C's membership in S *did not make it impossible* for C to believe that A should have Q, then it makes no sense to say that he or she believed that A should not have Q because he or she was a member of S. Saying e.g. that because C was a member of S, C did not, *but could have*, believed that A should be made with Q amounts to providing no explanation whatsoever of why C produced A without Q. The important point to be made is that modality was implicit already in (1), since the formulation included in the second part of (1):

(1c) (C believed that A should have P) because (C was a member of S).

must mean:

(1d) (C could not believe that A should have not-P) because (C was a member of S).

If membership in S does not prevent C from believing that A should have not-P, then (1) could not claim to be an explanation. And since "not-P" is identical to "Q", it follows:

(1e) (C could not believe that A should have Q) because (C was a member of S).

It follows that (5) says the same as (1). We can now further simplify (5), by omitting the section that states that C could not have the belief that A should have P--if he or she could not have a certain belief, it is safe to assume that he or she did not have it. Also, we can replace "C could not acquire the belief that A should have Q" with "it was inconceivable for C that A should have Q". The result of these two modifications of (5) yields:

(6) [(C created A without Q) because (It was inconceivable for C that A should have Q)]
and

[(It was inconceivable for C that A should have Q) because (C was a member of S)]

However, there may be some problem with the word “inconceivable” in (6). The word can be understood in two different senses:

Primary inconceivability: “C could not conceive of A with P” means that the author C could not imagine an artifact A with the property P because of his or her membership in a given collective. For a given collective, certain beliefs and concepts are shared cognitive resources that provide the framework in terms of which all members of the collective thinks; however, the property P may not be thinkable in terms of these cognitive resources, with the result that for the members of the collective P is not thinkable. In this case the author could not imagine an artifact with certain properties, and consequently could not have believed that an artifact with such properties could be made.

Secondary inconceivability: The author could imagine the artifact with the specific property, but, because of his or her membership in the given collective, he or she could not acquire the belief that it would be good or desirable for the artifact to have it—that A *should* be made with P. “C could not conceive of the artifact A with the property P” then means “C could not acquire the belief that A should have P”. (I include here also the author’s decisions about the content of his or her books based on the belief that a book should be written to have a certain content.)

Sometimes, intellectual historians use “inconceivability” in the primary sense. Typically, historical works of German-styled *Geistesgeschichte* use the concept in this way. For instance, when Erwin Panofsky, in his highly influential paper “Perspective as a Symbolic Form”, argued that perspective was not invented before the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century because the concept of space as a homogenous medium in which bodies are located was inconceivable, his claim was that medieval and ancient painters *could not* imagine depicting objects in homogenous space, not that their cultural context made them believe that they *should not* do so.⁴ However, intellectual historians also use “inconceivability” in its secondary sense. An example of secondary inconceivability of the use of the word would be if one were say that “the heliocentric system was inconceivable to Renaissance astronomers before Copernicus.” The claim in this latter case is not that the idea of heliocentrism was unthinkable—these astronomers were certainly able to formulate it at the time—but that it was unthinkable that it could be true (and consequently that an astronomical treatise advocating it should be written). The

⁴ Erwin Panofsky, “Die Perspektive als ‘symbolische Form’,” Fritz Saxl (ed.) *Vorträge der Bibliothek Warburg 1924-1925*, Leipzig and Berlin 1927. English translation by Christopher S. Wood: *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, New York: Zone Books, 1991.

claim would be that people could articulate the idea, but not acquire the belief that it was true. When Thomas Kuhn argued about Boyle's experiments that "they were not conceivable (and if conceived they would have received another interpretation or none at all) until air was recognized as an elastic fluid to which all the elaborate concepts of hydrostatics could be applied", he talked about the ability to conceive not as the mere ability to imagine but also to acquire beliefs.⁵ In this case he was talking about secondary inconceivability.

In what follows I shall restrict the use of the term "inconceivable" to its secondary sense, that which pertains to an inability to acquire beliefs. Inconceivability in the primary sense entails inconceivability in the secondary sense, but not vice-versa: people can imagine and articulate certain ideas even if they do not think they are credible. Secondary inconceivability covers all cases of primary inconceivability: if an artifact A with P is inconceivable to an author in the primary sense, it is certainly inconceivable in the secondary sense. At the same time, if the author could imagine A with P and yet could not acquire belief that A with P should be made, then we are certainly obliged to talk about secondary inconceivability. So it is really secondary inconceivability that interests us here.

Strong and weak inconceivability

Since (6) is a direct conversion from (1), this means that there is no holist argument of the type (1) that cannot be expressed in terms (or that does not implicitly rely on the concept of) inconceivability. All holist explanations that conform to (1) thus involve, implicitly or explicitly, the concept of inconceivability. Nevertheless, not all explanations based on inconceivability have to be holist. Inconceivability can be analyzed according to the individualist or holist paradigm. To show this, begin with the capacity to acquire beliefs. To acquire belief requires:

- the possession of knowledge, information or other beliefs necessary to form a specific belief.
- the necessary reasoning abilities

Start with the case in which a certain belief may be inconceivable to an individual author because other beliefs, information or, knowledge necessary to form that belief, were not available to that author. In this case, it may be that all individuals of a certain era may lack specific concepts, knowledge or information, necessary to form certain beliefs, and this can make that specific belief unavailable to an author who belongs to that era, whatever individual efforts he or she may make. In this case holists will argue that individuals acquire the beliefs, knowledge, and information that are necessary in order to form other beliefs only as members of certain collectives. Individualists will argue that the such beliefs, or the

⁵ Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996, 28.

knowledge and information necessary to form them, are only acquired through communication with other individuals, who, in their turn, may belong to particular collectives (understood as groups of individuals). There can thus be both a holist and individualist construal of inconceivability understood to result from lacking the possession of knowledge or other beliefs necessary to form a specific belief.

Next, consider the case of inconceivability that derives from lacking certain necessary reasoning abilities. There are three ways one can assume that the reasoning capacities necessary to acquire beliefs are available to individuals:

- RC₁ Reasoning capacities necessary to acquire beliefs are routinely available to human beings *qua* human beings.
- RC₂ Different reasoning capacities necessary to acquire beliefs are available to different individuals. (I include here also the understanding that the routine capacities, as described in RC₁, may be available to some individuals in a greater degree than to others.)
- RC₃ Individuals possess the reasoning capacities necessary to acquire beliefs as members of certain collectives; members of different collectives have different capacities to acquire beliefs.

The individualist analysis of the concept of inconceivability cannot accept RC₃ (because of I₃), but it can work with both RC₁ and RC₂. Consequently, there are two models of individualist understanding of inconceivability: the capacity to acquire beliefs is a property of individuals as individuals either because

InInc₁ all humans routinely possess the necessary reasoning capacities, but only some acquire certain beliefs, because of the variety in communication patterns between individuals.

or that

InInc₂ both the necessary reasoning capacities and the acquisition of the knowledge, information or beliefs necessary to form these beliefs are individuated.

The holist account of reasoning capacities must rely on RC₃. Reasoning capacities are properties of individuals, and if these were not explainable by individuals' membership in collectives, this would contradict H₁ and H₂.

It may appear possible to formulate the holist understanding of inconceivability by starting from RC₁ and arguing that individuals have their reasoning capacities routinely, *qua* humans, but that they acquire certain beliefs *qua* members of certain groups. But one should carefully analyze how this view differs from InInc₁. The real crux is in the question, whether we conceive that individuals acquire beliefs, knowledge, and information because they are members of a certain collective or because they acquire them as individuals. The latter, individualist,

position does not deny that the necessary beliefs, knowledge, and information are available to individuals through their membership in a collective, but this acquisition has to be understood individualistically, according to I₁-I₃. H₁-H₃ require the holist to assume that individuals possess certain beliefs, knowledge, or information *qua* members of certain collectives; the holist program forbids talking about properties of individuals (such as “having acquired knowledge”) that are not manifestations of the properties of collectives. For the holist, the beliefs individuals acquire must derive from their membership in collectives and are appropriate for them as members of these collectives; for the individualist, these beliefs are ultimately the result of the collaboration of the reasoning capacities and the available knowledge, information and beliefs.

The difference really manifests itself when we try to imagine situations when a member of a collective is exposed to ideas other than those available in his or her collective.⁶ The individualist will argue that in such a situation the member will acquire new beliefs, different and inaccessible to other members of his or her collective. But the holist cannot accept this idea, since it would mean that the individuals are able to acquire beliefs individually and independently of the collectives to which they belong. For the holist, the capacity to form beliefs is collective-determined. Consequently, the holist position cannot rely on the distribution of the reasoning capacities according to RC₁ since it cannot allow that the functioning of reasoning capacities could produce beliefs different from RC₃.

An example, cited for different purposes by Danto a number of times, may be useful to describe the difference between holist and individualist understanding of inconceivability. Historians sometimes write that Petrarch opened the Renaissance when he climbed Mt. Ventoux. Petrarch’s brother was with him and witnessed the ascent. Had someone asked him at the time whether he was aware that Petrarch was opening the Renaissance, Petrarch’s brother would not have understood the question. Does this mean that the Renaissance was *inconceivable* to Petrarch’s brother? Would he have been able to conceive of the Renaissance if the term had been explained to him as a series of future events that would include numerous discoveries of ancient manuscripts, discovery of a machine to multiply books, immense progress in the visual arts that would all lead to a profound change in European culture within the next two centuries? If we accept that Petrarch’s brother could have understood this description and consequently conceived of such events, then the concept was inconceivable to him only in the sense that he lacked the necessary knowledge; once that knowledge was made available, he was perfectly able to conceive of the Renaissance. This, however, cannot be the holist view of things, because it assumes that individuals can acquire knowledge independently of

⁶ Exploring the implications of a historiography that uses the concept of inconceivability necessarily relies on thought experiments in which one imagines the reactions of historical figures to concepts unavailable in their times. Such a procedure may be criticized as futile because the evidence needed to support it—for instance, time machines which would enable us to do this—is not available. However, such thought experiments are already implicit in the historiographical model examined. The moment we explain the fact, e.g., that Aquinas did not conceive of the Renaissance by saying that the Renaissance was inconceivable to him, we are inviting questions about the meaning of the word “inconceivable” in this context, and the possible answers to this question cannot be defined without corresponding mental experiments.

the collectives to which they belong. The holist understanding of inconceivability in this sense would assume that no amount of new information would help Petrarch's brother step out intellectually from the collective to which he belonged.

One should thus differentiate between holist and individualist inconceivability. In what follows I shall call them respectively the *strong* and *weak* inconceivability. Strong inconceivability (inconceivability_s) is the assumption that individuals' capacities to acquire beliefs are fully determined by the collectives they belong to—for instance, that individuals *by their constitution* could not have the beliefs inconceivable in their time. Weak inconceivability (inconceivability_w) is the claim that certain concepts, knowledge, and information are not known to individuals who belong to certain collectives, although they could be learnt. Inconceivability_s is the claim that sentences “For C it was inconceivable that...” are extensional contexts and that their truth does not depend on the formulation used to explain the concept: the concept remains inconceivable, however elucidated. Inconceivability_w is the claim that such sentences about inconceivability are intensional contexts and that their understanding depends on the formulation in which they are presented. Weak inconceivability is the thesis that certain concepts and ideas were not available to the members of certain groups, which delimited the pool of beliefs they could have had—though these individuals would have been able to acquire such beliefs had the necessary elucidation of these concepts and ideas been made available to them. Strong inconceivability is the claim that members of certain collectives are constitutionally incapable of acquiring certain concepts, ideas and beliefs (the way some animal species, for instance, cannot see colors).

If a historical explanation is phrased in terms of weak inconceivability, the very membership in a collective is not enough to explain how an individual author came to produce an artifact with or without a specific property. To make such an explanation it is necessary to describe how that individual author, maybe through interaction with other individuals, came to believe that the artifact should have the specified property. Nevertheless, it is possible to claim from the individualist position that, because an individual C belonged to a certain collective, he or she could form a certain belief B. This will happen if:

- (a) The knowledge and information necessary to form the belief B could not have been acquired through C's individual efforts independently of the interaction with other individuals.
- (b) No other individual belonging to the same collective as C possessed the knowledge or information C needed in order to acquire belief B and consequently no interaction with other individuals could have enabled C to acquire the belief B.

The unavailability of the information or knowledge necessary to form a certain belief (and the resulting inconceivability_w) can be proved and documented in many different ways: most of Plato's works, for instance, were not available to Italian readers before their *quattrocento* translations.

It is, however, much harder to prove or document inconceivability_s. When it comes to reasoning capacities, we don't have an easy access to the minds of people

who died centuries ago the way we sometimes do to Renaissance library catalogues. Inconceivability_s has been compared above to the observation that some animals do not have the capacity to see colors. This incapacity can be proved in two ways: by systematic study of the behavior of the members of that species or by the study of their visual apparatus--for instance, by establishing that their sight organs do not have the necessary cells. But when it comes to the capacity of humans who died centuries ago to acquire beliefs, we do not have any access to their mental apparatus and inconceivability_s can only be inferred on the basis of observations about the members of the same group. The only way to argue that a certain belief was inconceivable_s for the individuals who belonged to a specific collective is to make a generalization about their reasoning capacities by a procedure very similar to induction in other fields of research. Other methods of proving the claim of strong inconceivability are simply not available.

Formulating holist explanations in intellectual history

In the cases where inconceivability_w can be established, it is impossible to dismiss the holist claim that we are actually dealing with inconceivability_s. For instance, the individualist may argue that Archimedes was not able to conceive_w of nuclear physics because the available technology prevented ancient Greeks from making the necessary experiments; since the necessary concepts were not known to any of his individual contemporaries, he could not have acquired them. But a holist can make the same explanation by relying on inconceivability_s, by saying that what was lacking was not only the availability of certain concepts, but the capacity to form the requisite beliefs as well.

Since in all cases in which inconceivability_w can be established a parallel explanation based on inconceivability_s can be provided as well, the outcome of the debate between individualism and holism in intellectual history really hinges on the existence of cases that cannot be explained by relying on inconceivability_w but that can be explained by inconceivability_s. Historical facts that can be explained equally well by inconceivability_s and inconceivability_w do not strengthen the holist's case because in such situations it is not clear why we need holist explanations. (It is enough to say that no single contemporary of Archimedes had the information and knowledge necessary to conceive of nuclear physics. We do not need to claim, and it is unclear how we could prove, that it would have been impossible for any of them to conceive of nuclear physics had the necessary information and knowledge been made available.) For the holist program to be convincing, it must be able to provide explanations that are beyond the reach of individualist methodology. A good example could be, for instance, Archimedes's (in)ability to conceive of Galilean physics: the necessary mathematical and physical knowledge was available, but nevertheless, unlike Galileo, Archimedes seems never to have come to the idea of systematic quantification of physical phenomena the way Galileo did. It is impossible to say that such quantification was inconceivable_w in Archimedes's time, since the necessary conceptual framework was available to his contemporaries as

much as to Galileo's. In this case it may seem feasible for holists to press their case by arguing, for instance, that the idea of quantification of physical phenomena was inconceivable_S to ancient Greeks in general.

Let us therefore consider those cases in which we have to explain the presence or absence of a property P in an artifact A made by author C such that:

- (a) P is also present or absent in the works of other authors that can be argued to belong to the same collective S (epoch, culture, civilization, etc.) as C.
- (b) There is no reason to argue that the-absence-of-P (in the case of the presence of P) or the-presence-of-P (in the case of the absence of P) was inconceivable_W to C.

An example of such a case might be the absence of Galileo-style quantification of physical phenomena in Hellenistic authors. The individualist will explain the absence of P by C's individual decisions which may have been influenced by other individuals belonging to S. For instance, the fact that an artist's work conforms to the stylistic practices of its time will be explained by the influence of the author's contemporaries, the education the artist received, and so on. For the individualist none of this need imply that it was inconceivable_S for C to make an artifact without P. The holist, however, cannot rely on such an individualist explanation, and will have to claim that an artifact A without P was inconceivable_S for C because of C's membership in S. The holist's explanation will be that:

- (7) (An artifact such as A without P was inconceivable_S to C) because (C was a member of S).

Which implies:

- (8) (There could not exist X) such that
[(X was a member of S) and (X believed that A should not have P)]

The explanatory collective S thus cannot be enumerable. As we have seen above, if we merely said:

- (9) (C believed that A should have P) because (C was a member of S)

This could not count as an explanation nor be true as long as it were true that:

- (10) (There could exist X) such that
[(X was a member of S) and (X believed that A should not have P)]

The real problem is, however, how to prove (8). All one can do is state examples which support the claim that it is true: that artifacts such as A, produced by C₁, C₂, ... C_n, who all belong to S, possess P. In the case of weak inconceivability we can establish, on the basis of the fact that certain information or knowledge was not

available to certain individuals, that they could not acquire those beliefs that depend on that knowledge, information or reasoning capacities. But the discussion here pertains to strong inconceivability when weak inconceivability cannot be proved--in other words, when the knowledge or information necessary to form the belief *was* available. As mentioned earlier, the holist's claim about inconceivability_s has been a claim about reasoning capacities available to individuals as members of certain collectives--i.e. RC₃. In order to justify the claim of strong inconceivability, the holist will have to rely on a generalization about reasoning capacities of individuals belonging to a certain collective, made on what is deemed to be a sufficient number of instances.

However, it is a mistake to assume that because C_1, C_2, \dots, C_n produced artifacts such as A with P , that they could not conceive of an artifact such as A without P --and further, that *because* C_m belonged to the same explanatory collective, therefore his or her works such as A also had to have P (i.e. that he or she could not conceive of a work such as A without P). Historical investigation can only provide a generalization on the basis of a finite number of instances C_1, C_2, \dots, C_n , and however great the number of available instances, this does not prove that there *could* not exist C_{n+1} who conceived of an artifact without P . The holist claim has to be that no new discovery can change our knowledge about the ideas inconceivable for the members of the given collective because there *could never have* existed an individual who belonged to S and who could have conceived of an artifact with P . But imagine, for instance, the claim that before Copernicus the heliocentric system was inconceivable_s. Even if one could establish, by surveying all the material available, that no European astronomer known to us conceived of the heliocentric system in the century before Copernicus, this does not mean that the heliocentric system was inconceivable_s. It is impossible to prove that there *could not* have existed a young astronomer in the late 1300s who *would have* carried out the same observations as Copernicus and reached the same conclusions, *had he not* prematurely died of plague; inconceivability_s is precisely the claim that this could not have happened.

One may try to defend the holist position here by saying that this is a standard problem of any inductive claim and that the validity of such an inductive claim cannot be dismissed without dismissing the appropriateness of similar claims in other fields, including generalizations based on experiments and observation in sciences. The only really legitimate questions can be such as whether the sample has been large enough, what statistical procedures were used and so on.

Defending historical use of induction this way, however, will not work. Generalization by induction is valid only when there exist no competing explanatory claims that cannot be disproved using induction. In every case when inconceivability_w cannot be proved, the individualist can counter the holist's claims about inconceivability_s by saying that:

- (11) The author C may have decided to include the property P in the artifact A independently of his or her membership in the collective S .

This counterargument can be defended by the claim that authors can decide to adopt or reject certain beliefs (as long as such beliefs were not inconceivable_w)--

because they have free will to do so or because their decision to adopt a certain belief was determined in a way independent of their membership in S. Obviously, once free will is combined with the assumption that all necessary information and knowledge was available, little space is left for the kind of historical determinism that is necessary to sustain the claims of strong inconceivability. But the individualist's argument here need not even rely on the assumption of free will. A *trecento* painter could have had at his disposal all the information and knowledge Brunelleschi had when discovering perspective, and yet, that same painter, could have failed to make the discovery simply because by his mental constitution (RC₂) he did not have the necessary mathematical abilities. Arguing that this painter could not conceive of perspective by listing other *trecento* painters who equally failed to make the same discovery means providing the wrong explanation. It is equivalent to explaining the fact that a certain cat lives in London by listing numerous examples of cats that live in London and then inferring that it is *impossible* for a cat *not to* live in London. The old-fashioned name for this type of error is *fallacia fictae universalitatis*.

Induction in other fields of research works because the nature of their object of study precludes alternative explanations of this kind. Induction in physics or astronomy would be equally meaningless if physical objects or celestial bodies could be assumed to have free will to behave as they want or if their behavior were determined by causalities that fall outside from what the inductive method can prove or disprove.

Consequently, in those cases when weak inconceivability cannot be proved, the individualist can still provide alternative explanations based on various versions of non-collective determination or free will. For the holist inductive explanations to be convincing, it would be necessary to prove that, whatever social impact may have been in the formulation of the beliefs of the individuals, this input could not have been counteracted by other causal mechanisms contributing to the formulation of beliefs.

The problem of holist methodology in intellectual history is thus that it requires the modal concept of strong inconceivability for its explanations, whereas no amount of evidence can warrant the move from "is not known to have been conceived" to "could not have been conceived"--except trivially, if we talk about weak inconceivability. A typical methodological manifestation of this problem is thus that of basing the explanation on an incomplete survey and overlooking counter-examples, resulting in a variety of endless debates about explanatory collectives such as culture, class, ethnicity, and so on. Because they cannot be defended on methodological grounds, such explanations end up reflecting the ideological bias of the individual historian.

Novel properties

Since it is dependent on the modal concept of strong inconceivability, holist methodology cannot provide any explanation in intellectual history which is not in any case available to individualist methodology via weak inconceivability. At the

same time, the individualist methodology is not tied to weak inconceivability, and those individualist explanations that do not rely on the concept of inconceivability are beyond the reach of holist methodology. Imagine, for the sake of the argument, that in some Florentine attic an art historian finds the complete documentation about the discovery of the geometrical construction of perspective, as Brunelleschi himself assembled before his death. This would include Brunelleschi's diaries with his early observations about the representation of space in the *trecento* Tuscan paintings, attempts to formulate and resolve the problem of the distance point, his famous (and now lost) experimental paintings, even, possibly, a manuscript of a previously unknown Italian *trecento* translation of Euclid, annotated by Brunelleschi himself; dairy entries could even describe how he obtained the books he needed from his friends. The documentation would allow us to trace, day by the day, how the discovery of perspective evolved. Such a documentation would constitute a full individualist explanation of the discovery of perspective; it would not only show how, when and from whom Brunelleschi acquired the specific knowledge necessary for the discovery of perspective but also that he possessed the necessary reasoning capacities--for instance, to read a mathematical text such as Euclid's *Elements*. Certainly, all this had to happen in a certain social context (e.g. Brunelleschi had to obtain books through his friends); the individualist thesis, however, is not that social contexts do not exist, but that the impact of social entities can always be explained as the sum of the actions of individuals that constitute these social entities. (See I_1 and I_2 above.) The strength of the individualist model is precisely in its ability to specify and individuate the way social influences contributed to the creation of artifacts with novel properties.

The definition of holism stated at the beginning (sections H_2 and H_3) does not allow that holistic explanations could refer to individuals or account of individual circumstances of this kind; every historical explanation must be stated in terms of collectives. We must be able to say that C was a member of a collective of authors (or potential authors) who produced (or would have produced) an artifact with identical properties (including the absence of those properties which were inconceivable). If an artifact A made by C has P, then, according to the holist, this fact (including C's decision to make an artifact with P) has to be explained by C's membership in a certain collective. But even if we could establish the beliefs an individual possessed because he or she was a member of a certain collective, this could be done only when it came to the beliefs, thoughts and ideas that were shared by other members of that same collective. Explanations of this kind cannot be applied to those ideas, thoughts and beliefs which were formulated for the first time by specific individuals, simply because no generalization can be made from a set of non-existent instances. It is also going to be of little help to refer, e.g. in the case of novel scientific theories, to the existence of irresolvable problems in an existing and widely accepted paradigm--because many members of the scientific community would be aware of such difficulties, but their solution (and the introduction of a novel paradigm) would still have to be individualized to one person (or a group of individuals). Before Brunelleschi, many *trecento* painters had worked on resolving the problem of the distance point. But this does not explain his geometrical solution

of the problem (other solutions could have been formulated as well) nor does it explain how he actually made the discovery, or why others before him failed.

Holist historians and philosophers of history have occasionally attempted to resolve this problem by saying that in the case of novel properties the causes are *subsequent* to their effects. In that case, the explanation of Brunelleschi's discovery should not be sought in the Florentine architect's creativity nor in the specific influences he was exposed to, but rather in the subsequent adoption of perspective by later painters. The explanation is circular--i.e. it explains specific beliefs of authors by their membership in the collectives the membership in which is defined by having these beliefs. Historically, such explanations were defended e.g. by assuming that individual authors are mere manifestations of a spiritual substance that acts through them; implicitly, they contain not only the assumption of the purposeful nature of historical events but also--as an antidote to the counterarguments about the circularity of such explanations--the claim that the historian is able to discover and describe this purposefulness. Obviously, it is utterly unclear from where a historian can derive such cognitive powers.

I also believe that this argument points out to the full extent of the difficulties of the holist position. Even if we grant the existence of spiritual substances to holist philosophers of history and the necessary cognitive powers to holist historians, the problem still remains that this kind of explanation can only account for those novel properties which were subsequently adopted and repeated in the works of other authors. Unless they are perfect copies of other authors' works, artifacts studied by intellectual history typically include a great number of properties which are not repeated in other works--and this is true even of works of art which belong to the same style, school or tradition. In the case of philosophical ideas or scientific theories, the part which is repeated (or a repetition of) the work of other authors can be explained by the membership in the collectives of other authors whose works contain the same ideas and theories ("paradigm, "tradition"). But as soon as it comes to an original formulation or application of an idea or theory in a way that is not known from the past and not repeated subsequently, the holist position becomes unable to stipulate the explanatory collective which caused C to produce A with the novel property P.

How widespread is holism in intellectual history

The intention of this paper was to survey the weaknesses of holist methodology as an approach to intellectual history. It is, however, important to ask how relevant is the problem presented: first, whether intellectual historians have reasons to be concerned with the presence of such a methodology in their discipline and secondly, whether the paper may be defining individualism in such a rich and holism in such a narrow way that the latter becomes an easy target.

The first question can be answered only by stating some prominent examples. Elsewhere I have argued that holist (collectivist) methodological positions are spread to a different degree in various fields of intellectual history--that they are quite common in architectural and art history, but much less so in the

history of philosophy.⁷ This is likely to be in correlation with the fact that holist methodology was strongly present in the scholarship of Weimar and Wilhelmine Germany and that the influence of German-trained scholars on American and British art history departments after 1933 has been much stronger than it was ever the case with philosophy departments.⁸ I believe this influence is still strongly felt today.

The most thoroughgoing and systematic formulation of the holist position in art history I know of really belongs to the Weimar era and was formulated in 1929 by Hans Sedlmayr in his Introduction to a collection of essays by Alois Riegl.⁹ Sedlmayr there described a methodological position which he approved of and which, in his account, had become dominant in German scholarship since 1918. The position was marked by the *rejection* of the belief that groups are mere sums of individuals, that individuals are primary realities and that collectives are mere names for sets of individuals. Rather, collectives are understood as primary entities, whereas individuals are mere manifestations of their groups and the collective Spirit that acts through them. It is therefore necessary to reject “the belief in the unity and immutability of human nature and human reason” as well as the idea that “nature remains the same and is only ‘represented’ in different modes”. (In Sedlmayr’s view Nature itself is determined by its social context.)

Sedlmayr was not merely writing a program—he actually claimed that he was describing a dominant practice. A similar observation about totalizing tendencies in contemporary German scholarship was made by Karl Mannheim some years before.¹⁰ Other authors writing about the historiography of the period have described similar tendencies as well.¹¹ The widespread later acceptance of specific positions theses and explanatory principles formulated by Weimar scholarship on the basis of the holist approach shows, however, that English-speaking art and architectural history have not been prepared to reject holistic arguments easily. An example of such a *thesis* would be Panofsky’s much-cited view that homogenous space was inconceivable before the Renaissance.¹² The argument was first formulated in a paper that came out in 1927 and it obviously belongs to the methodological model described by Sedlmayr. (The thesis was some remarkably counter-intuitive implications, such as the view that before the *quattrocento* architects and builders could not conceive of the fact that a wall has the same length

⁷ See the “Prologue” to Branko Mitrovic, *Serene Greed of the Eye. Leon Battista Alberti and the Philosophical Foundations of Renaissance Architectural Theory*, Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2005, esp. 18-25. See also the last paragraph of Mario Carpo’s Preface to the same book for an opinion about the presence of such methodology in Albertian studies.

⁹ Hans Sedlmayr: “Einleitung” in Riegl, *Gesammelte Aufsätze*, Vienna, Benno Filser Verlag, 1929, xxxi-xxxii. Reprinted in Hans Sedlmayr, *Kunst und Wahrheit. Zur Theorie und Methode der Kunstgeschichte*, Mittenwald: Mäander, 1978, 46-47. See also English translation in Richard Woodfield (ed.), *Framing Formalism*, Amsterdam: G+B Arts, 2001.

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¹¹ Mannheim, Iggers

¹² Panofsky, “Perspektive als

regardless from which end its length is measured.¹³) Nevertheless its widespread subsequent acceptance of this idea has had huge impact on various approaches to the Renaissance discovery and use of perspective, including some very recent scholarship.¹⁴ At the same time, not only individual *theses*, but holist *explanatory principles* as well are sometimes uncritically imported from the Neo-Hegelian scholarship of the early twentieth century. Invoking substances such as *Zeitgeist* in historical explanations would raise eyebrows in a number of historical disciplines. Nevertheless, through the twentieth century, architectural historians have often explained the expansion of modernist architecture by relying on such holist entities. A good survey of *Zeitgeist*-based explanations in the scholarship about the modernist movement in architecture through the 1970s has been provided by David Watkin.¹⁵ The idea that an equivalent explanation of the rise of modernist architecture could be and should be provided on the basis of the actions and interests of individuals--such as the economic interests of developers, commercial interests of large architecture offices or promotion strategies of major architects, is a reasonably new trend in scholarship.

An example of a holist position outside art and architectural history and the traditions of Weimar scholarship is the “strong program” in the sociology of science formulated by Barry Barnes and David Bloor.¹⁶ Although the program was conceived within the field of sociology, the examples its protagonists stated often belonged to the history of science. When Bloor, for instance, analyzed Boyle’s views on the corpuscular nature of matter, his efforts were directed to showing that Boyle’s views in science directly derived from, were determined and therefore explainable by Boyle’s social position and social role.¹⁷ It may seem unclear whether, according to the strong program, all or only some scientific beliefs are to be explained by social causes; the “first tenet” of the program formulated by Barnes and Bloor stated that besides the social causes other causes may contribute to the adoption of certain beliefs. Nevertheless, insofar as “social causes” are taken to provide explanations for scientific beliefs, the strong program belongs to the holist

¹³ See Branko Mitrovic, “Leon Battista Alberti and the Homogeneity of Space”, *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 63 (2004), 424-439.

¹⁴ The original idea comes from Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, vol. 2, “Das mythische Denken” (Berlin, 1925), 107. See also Ernst Cassirer, *Individuum und Kosmos in der Philosophie der Renaissance* (Darmstadt, 1977), 11, 26, 192—93. The idea has been subsequently defended by Samuel Edgerton, *The Renaissance Rediscovery of Linear Perspective* (New York, 1975), 161; Peter Collins, *Changing Ideals in Modern Architecture 1750-1950* (London, 1965), 285 and James Elkins, *The Poetics of Perspective* (Ithaca and London 1994), 24. A more radical version of the argument is the one by Hubert Damisch who argued that Brunelleschi discovered the geometrical construction of perspective without relying on the concept of homogenous space (*The Origin of Perspective*, English translation by John Goodman, Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1995, 154) and Alberto Pérez-Gómez and Luise Pelletier, who argued that the homogeneity of space became conceivable only in the eighteenth century (*Architectural Representation and the Perspective Hinge* Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1997, 21, 26, 98). For a survey of this debate see Branko Mitrovic, “Leon Battista Alberti and the Homogeneity of Space”, *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 63 (2004), 424-439.

¹⁵ David Watkin, *Morality and Architecture*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977, 37-111.

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paradigm.¹⁸ The point of critics such as Larry Laudan and Robert Nola was that reasons and not only social causes can be the causes of beliefs¹⁹--in other words, the strategy of their criticism precisely followed thesis (11) above: it endeavored to provide an alternative explanation for the acquisition of beliefs, which would not depend on the membership in a collective.

In order to answer to the second question--whether the present article presents such a narrow formulation of the holist position in that it becomes an easy target--it is important to point out that the holist position discussed here was not formulated by the author of the article but Arthur Danto and on the basis of debates about individualism and holism between authors such as those cited in footnote 1. None of these authors addressed intellectual history specifically and all this paper has done has been to apply to that specific discipline the formulations of a problem known from other fields of historical research. It is, at the same time, hard to imagine a holist position in intellectual history that would not assume that individual authors acquire their beliefs because they are members of certain collectives. Such holism would have to accept that individual authors produce artifacts with certain properties on the basis of their belief that artifacts should have these properties and that they can acquire these beliefs independently of their membership in explanatory collectives. Such holism would be certainly open to criticism for toothlessness.

Conclusion

If inconceivability_w of a certain concept can be established for a certain collective S, then the holist can always claim that we are actually dealing with inconceivability_s. Such holist claims, even if *ficta universalitas*, could not be proved wrong. However, in the case that inconceivability_w cannot be established, holist claims, which pertain to collectives such as civilizations, cultures, ethnical groups etc. belong to the realm of those hypotheses which cannot be proved in general, but whose individual formulations can often be shown to be wrong by counter-examples. Notoriously, holist explanations in intellectual history can lead, and have led many times, to confrontations between historians advocating contradictory explanatory collectives, (cultures, civilizations, races, classes, modernity, stages in the development of Spirit and so on). Necessarily derived from a limited number of examples, such claims are regularly based on a *fallacia fictae universalitatis*: but they also document the ideological bias of individual historians and as such provide important insights in understanding their work.

The result of this examination is that a holist historian, or a philosopher of history, cannot claim that there exist properties of artifacts studied by intellectual history, which holist historiography can explain and individualist cannot. At the

¹⁸ Nola

¹⁹ Larry Laudan, "The Pseudo Science of Science", *Philosophy of Social Science*, 11 (1981), 173-198; Robert Nola, "The Strong Programme for the Sociology of Science, Reflexivity and Relativism", *Inquiry*, 33 (1990), 273-96.

same time, individualist historiography is particularly well suited to deal with novel properties of such artifacts, whereas the holist approach is in great difficulty when trying to explain them.