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## **A response to Harold Kincaid's and Julia Zahle's article 'Why be a methodological individualist'**

Hi Harold Kincaid, Hi Julia Zahle

I think it would be very useful if you stated your position regarding ontological individualism in the beginning of the article, in order to ensure that you are properly understood. For instance, do you assume that social entities (banks, courts, schools) and events (soccer matches, wars) are individuals, their properties, what they do and how they do it, or do you assume that they are something more, or something that has nothing to do with individuals at all?

Here are two points about ontological individualism that need to be made before I can describe what confuses me about your article. First, it is commonly thought that one can endorse ontological individualism without endorsing methodological individualism—for instance, one can believe that although social entities and events are individuals and what they do, some of these entities and events cannot be reduced to or explained by individuals and their interactions. Also, if one does not endorse ontological individualism, it is pointless to ask about methodological individualism: if social entities or events are not individuals and what they do, then it makes no sense to discuss whether one may reduce them to or explain by individuals and what they do—one has already assumed that this cannot be done. So it is fair to assume that a methodological individualist, i.e. your opponent, has to be an ontological individualist.

Second, from the point of view of ontological individualism, if I talk about a social entity or an event, I am talking about individuals and what they do. Words that refer to social entities or events in that case name sets of individuals and their interactions—there is nothing over and above that. Often, I have to use such words because I cannot name all the individuals involved, or because listing them all would be impractical and take too much time. In all spheres of life it is common to use words that way in order to refer to the sets of items and what they do. When I want to explain how I reached some place, I can say that I came by car. My car is a set of its parts; when I drive it, the interaction of these parts with each other produces the interaction of tires with the road, the car moves and I get from one place to another. I normally use the word “car” to refer to all these parts taken together, partly because I do not know the names of all of them, and partly because listing them all would take too much time. However, when I use the term “car” this does not make me an ontological or a methodological holist about cars. I do not assume that cars are more than the sum of their parts. I also do not assume that I could not explain how a car works by referring to and only to its parts and their interactions.

I say this because of the problems that arise if I try to read your paper from the point of view of an ontological individualist. As mentioned, your opponent has to subscribe to this position. Consider the holist argument that you mention at the beginning of the paper:

describing an individual as a CEO ... presupposes the existence of corporations, corporate structure, etc. and in that sense is not individualistic

But, certainly, for an individualist, these corporations, corporate structures etc. are nothing but individuals and their interactions. Consequently, from the perspective of your opponent, the description is perfectly individualistic. You are right that the reasoning you cite is indeed often stated in holist literature as an argument against individualism: for instance, it is impossible to understand educational system without reference to teachers, it is impossible to understand teachers without reference to schools, and schools are social entities. They are indeed social entities, but for an individualist this will merely mean that they are individuals and what individuals do. As a refutation of individualism, this argument is a classical logical fallacy: one assumes that individualism is false (that schools are not individuals and their interactions) and then uses that assumption in order to refute individualism.

Consequently, I find it hard to understand what do you mean by “holist explanation”. Here is your definition:

A purely holist explanation is one in which both the explanans and the explanandum refer to social phenomena, that is, social organizations, social processes, the statistical properties of groups, etc.

But how is this different from an individualist explanation, if, according to ontological individualism, the terms “social phenomena”, “social organizations”, “social processes”, “groups” refer exclusively to individuals, their properties, what they do and how? The same point as with the use of the term “car”: the fact that I talk about social organizations or processes etc. does not make me a holist if I conceive of them individualistically. Vice-versa, as mentioned, if one does not endorse ontological individualism, then it is pointless to discuss methodological individualism (understood as claims about reduction or explanation) because one already assumes that social entities or events are not (and consequently not reducible to or explainable by) individuals and what they do.

The problem keeps coming back through the arguments in the article. For instance, consider the claim that individualists “cannot explain the general influence of ruling elites on governmental decisions”—but for an individualist, these elites are individuals, the influence is what they do, and it is not clear that an explanation needs to (or can) refer to something else. It does not help to say merely that they have “dense internal structure”, or that corporations and NGOs have formal organization: one has to show that they cannot be understood as individuals and what these individuals do: if they can, and if ontological individualism is valid, then there is nothing more to them and one is talking about individuals and what they do when talking about elites, corporations or NGO. Similarly, in the example that you state:

the empirical evidence suggests that housing segregation in the US is largely the result of discriminatory government policies and active violence on the part of white neighborhood organizations

your individualist opponent is going to understand these white neighborhood organizations as the sets of individuals and what they do, and assume that government policies are generated through interactions between government employees—and fail to see what is holist in your example. The example is a perfectly reasonable statement from the individualist position. Similarly, when you say about microfoundationalist explanations:

Tax policy that has macroeconomic effects [that] can be elaborated by adding in corporate behavior as an intervening factor—such explanations add intervening variables but not in individualist terms.

you are actually assuming that corporate behaviour does not result from (or cannot be explained by) what individuals do—but this is precisely denied by the individualist argumentation that you are trying to replace using this argument. So, for an individualist, this is not an example of the expansion of a holist explanation on intervening details at a nonindividualist level.

Finally, the Normativity Section cites a number of authors who relate (or confuse?) individualism and political libertarianism. I believe that this connection should be either argued properly or left aside—otherwise it looks as if you were making insinuations you cannot prove. In any case, I think the association is highly problematic. First, when you say

holist explanations show how individuals adopted certain norms, values, and the like without having any choice on this matter

this seems to suggest that individuals can be influenced by society independently of their interactions with other individuals. But this is biologically impossible: individuals have to use senses in order to communicate and to be influenced. Senses cannot be affected by abstract entities, but only by individual objects. All communication consequently has to have the form of interactions with other individuals. And this is something only an individualist explanation can describe. At the same time, a methodological individualist can endorse hard determinism about free will and believe that individuals have no choice—this is not an issue.

Second, social programmes can only be formulated from the individualist perspective—one has to assume the groups they target are sets of individuals (schoolchildren, minorities, elderly). It is hard to imagine how one could formulate social programmes that do not target the sets of individuals. (Whom would they seek to help? How could one provide education or medical care to a group without providing it to exclusively to the sets of individuals?) One certainly cannot provide free medical treatments to a population *in abstracto*, without treating individual patients.

Third, I am worried that methodological holism can be used as a corporate whitewashing strategy. I believe this is something that its proponents really need to address in our contemporary environment. Imagine a corporation engaged in a criminal activity in order to achieve profit: for instance, the company produces cars that illegally pollute the environment or it engages in illegal arms trade. From the holist point of view, it can be argued that a corporation is a holistic entity and that it (permit me to use your words) “has dense internal structure” or that it has “formal organization” and so on; a holist

analysis of the corporation could claim that the CEO “adopted certain norms, values, and the like without having any choice on this matter” and is therefore innocent for the crimes committed by the corporation and should not face criminal prosecution. Arguments against methodological individualism often sound (to me) as exculpatory constructs intended to defend corporate elites. A company, from this point of view, is a holistic entity and its decisions, actions or responsibilities cannot be analyzed into the decisions, actions or responsibilities of individuals. Consequently, the company may be fined billions, thousands of workers may lose jobs, but the CEO is innocent and receives her regular multi-million bonus next Christmas. Now you may say that this does not follow and that holist explanations need not apply to all social entities, or in all situations. But it is then it is really important to specify when, how and why methodological individualism applies and when it does not. The point is not only that corporations break the law: there are governments that commit crimes against peace, armies that commit war crimes, schools in which children get abused, and so on. The list is long and methodological individualists probably do not want to provide theories that exculpate culprits.