Is it meaningful to juxtapose "individual" and "society"?

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Abstract

The opposition of individual and society lies at the foundation of theoretical thinking about the conditions for being human. Apparently views on social interaction fall prey to two opposing stances, that of *sociological individualism* and that of *sociological universalism* (these terms found a pronounced articulation in the thought of the German sociologist from the first half of the 20th century, Othmar Spann – compare his work from 1930). The dilemma entailed in this opposition is closely related to the distinction between *differentiation* and *integration*. When this distinction is added to the problem, the initial problem is translated into a related one, namely that of the relation between *action* and *order*. In order to get a hold on these issues, preliminary questions, such as those related to the nature of reality and those accounting for the status of (scientific) knowledge, are treated. The distinction between *rationalism* and *irrationalism* appears to hinge upon the account one gives for the relationship between *universality* and *individuality*. Taken that into account this in turn, serves to elucidate the complex nature of *nominalism*, both in its opposition to *realism* and with regard to the foundational role it plays in respect of *methodological individualism* in social theory. After the conceptions of three classical sociological thinkers are examined (Tönnies, Spencer and Durkheim), we proceed with the argument that *organicism* may be advocated both in an *individualistic* and a *universalistic* fashion. A brief orientation is then given regarding the nature of analogical concepts, which is followed up by a treatment of the connection between universalism and biotical analogies, with reference to Parsons and Münch. In conclusion a summary of the line of argumentation followed in this article is given with a view to the follow-up article which will attempt to commence with an approach possibly capable of transcending the impasse of *individualism* and *universalism* in sociological theory.

Introduction

One of the unique conditions of being human is given in the capacity of humankind to reflect upon its own exceptional position in the world. Human *rationality* and *morality* play a dominant role in long-standing legacies, which characterize humans as rational-ethical beings. Alongside this perceptive we find another, closely related, view. According to it humans are "social animals," or, as Aristotle affirms it, the human being is a "political animal." The presence of many similar assessments – think in addition about claims concerning the nature of being human such as: "homo symbolicus," "homo economicus," "homo ludens," "homo faber," – calls forth the question whether or not it is possible to capture the complexities of being human in the mould of any one of these (partial) perspectives?

Undoubtedly, nonetheless, it is through *language* that humans indeed are capable of articulating and communicating their reflection on *being human*, thus revealing that next to *reflection* another condition of being human ought to be acknowledged: the use of *language*. Both these conditions are necessary for the functioning of a society. But there is more to reality, for the *social dimension* of human beings transcends these two conditions by incorporating them within the domain of human societal interaction. Does this mean that we may now be satisfied that human beings are *social* beings? Whereas *individualism* encloses being human within the (separated) existence of an individual –albeit sometimes conceived of as involved in interactions with other individuals – *universalism* takes the supposed "social nature" of human beings to mean that some or other social collectivity, or even 'society' itself, can encompass and absorb one's life fully.

Thinking about the nature of society and reflecting on the multiplicity of intellectual traditions within the discipline of sociology (and practically even within all the other related humanities) therefore (implicitly or explicitly) entails a *specific perspective* on the diverse ways in which human beings continue to interact in the course of the constitution of their highly differentiated daily societal endeavours. Even the fashion in which theoretical stances proceed in their treatment of concrete issues reflects their basic position regarding the nature of social interaction, in spite of the claims of postmodernity that it is no longer warranted to speak about the 'nature' of anything.

The situation becomes more complex by the fact that implicit anthropological concepts concerning human nature also play an important role in our understanding of the "individual" and "society."

For example, if we adhere to a naturalist, determinist, existentialist or rationalist view of being human, contrasting consequences follow with regard to our comprehension of societal interaction. One merely has to contemplate the contribution of *physicalistic*, *psychologistic* or *conflict* and *consensus* orientations within sociology, in order to appreciate this consideration.

At a more general (and fundamental) level one may look at certain unavoidable *ontological* and *epistemological* questions underlying the sociological enterprise. Alexander aptly says: "The problem is that most of these contemporary debates ignore the most general non-empirical level of all. I will call this the level of presuppositions. ... By presuppositions, I refer to the most general assumptions that every sociologist makes – what he 'presupposes' – when he encounters reality" (Alexander, 1987:10). Johnson *et al* relate this to the following questions:

(i)   "what is the nature of social reality?" and:

(ii) "how can we best obtain knowledge of it?"

In order to treat these basic issues the following pairs of opposites are dealt with:

(i)   "*material* or *ideal*?" (Johnson *et al*, 1984:13-15) and

(ii) "*nominal* or *real*?" (Johnson *et al*, 1984:15-18).

Opting for alternative straightforward answers one can arrive at the position taken by *materialism*, *idealism*, *nominalism* and *realism*.[1] Choosing crosscutting combinations may result in *empiricism* (combine *nominalism* and *materialism*: example – Parsons), *substantialism* (combine *realism* and *materialism*: examples – Husserl, Weber and Schutz), *subjectivism* (combine *nominalism* en *idealism* – example *Marxism*) and *rationalism* (combine *realism* en *idealism* – example Durkheim) (Johnson *et al*, 1984:19). These stances have their own implied criteria of validity: '*experience*', '*practice*,' '*convention*' and '*logic*' (consistency) (Johnson *et al*, 1984:185-187).

Although Johnson *et al* indeed touch upon basic issues transcending the divergence of alternative trends in sociology, their scheme is insufficient to account adequately for the many underlying issues involved in sociological theorising. Already a confrontation with the focal point of our current endeavour, directed at the relation between "individual" and "society," highlights inherent shortcomings in the classification of Johnson *et al* The four cross-cutting options just mentioned (empiricism, substantialism, subjectivism, and rationalism) are incapable of addressing the concern embodied in our question: do we have to understand social reality in terms of *individuals in interaction* or rather in terms of *societal totalities* encompassing participating individuals as *integral parts*?

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1   In general *materialism* acknowledges nothing but physical reality; *idealism*, by contrast, gives priority to what is considered to transcend the realm of matter; *nominalism* accepts no universality outside the human mind; and *substantialism* only accepts concrete things as real.

Although this dilemma between an *atomist* or a *holist* understanding of social reality concerns the *nature* of human society, it cannot be treated merely in terms of the opposition between what is supposed to be *material* or *ideal*. A thinker adhering to a materialist or idealist perspective can choose for any pole of the opposition between atomism (individualism) and holism (universalism), thus showing that more refined distinctions are required to account for the "nature of reality."

A partially 'idealist' thinker such as John Locke, as well as the idealistic intellectual giant of the 18th century, Immanuel Kant, are examples of *atomistic* (individualistic) thinkers, that is to say, they want to construct human society from its simplest elements, individuals (aided by the social *contract theory* of the Enlightenment). Thomas Hobbes is just as 'atomistic' in his thought, but in terms of the classification of Johnson *et al* one has to characterize him as a 'materialist,' since he attempts to capture all of reality under the denominator of a *moving body*. Similarly, there are idealistic thinkers who are in the grip of a *holistic* approach, such as Hegel and his followers who proceed from a *supra-individual communal spirit* which totally and fully encompasses the individuals absorbed in this societal whole.

In anticipation of what we will develop in a follow-up article aimed at the exposition of an alternative approach to these problems, it is necessary at this preliminary stage of our argument to come to a characterization of the issue involved in the opposition between *atomism* and *holism*.

If the distinction between 'material' and 'ideal' does not provide us with a sufficient articulation, then we have to ask what is really here at stake? Our provisional answer is that the fundamental problem of *unity* and *diversity* ought to be recognised. A non-reductionist ontology will be inclined to affirm the uniqueness and irreducibility of diverse aspects of reality, whereas all *monistic isms*, such as *physicalism*, *organicism*, *psychologism*, *historicism*, and so on, will deny this. Viewed from the perspective of this issue the question regarding the nature of (social) reality present in the opposition of atomism and holism therefore addresses the quest for a *basic denominator.* Inevitably the choice of such a basic denominator (explanatory device employed in the comparison and explanation of whatever there is) always entails an account of the mutual coherence and diversity within reality – amply captured in the statement that it concerns an account of the "coherence of irreducibles." The juxta-positioning of *material* and *ideal* is just one particular (rather unrefined) response to this basic question.

However, once again the issue is further complicated as soon as we realise that the distinction between *nominalism* and *realism* is concerned with a related but different problem, namely that of the relationship between *universality* and *individuality* (*uniqueness*). Yet, in order to understand this problem one needs in addition a provisional definition of two equally well-known *isms*: *rationalism* and *irrationalism*. Since Aristotle *rationalism* accepts *universality* as the only source of valid knowledge. *Irrationalism*, by contrast, considers knowledge of what is *unique* and *individual* as the only true knowledge of reality. The classical legacy in the West regarding concept-formation holds that a concept typically understands whatever is conceptually grasped in terms of *universal features*.[1] One can therefore say that *rationalism* absolutizes *conceptual knowledge* or that it identifies *knowledge* with *conceptual* knowledge. Although it is indeed correct to say that *concepts* are 'blind' to what is unique and individual, this identification of knowledge with conceptual knowledge is incorrect. We certainly *know* the unique individuality of entities and events, and we *know* our own uniqueness. The full scope of knowledge therefore *transcends* the *limits* of concept formation. But it is exactly this *concept-transcending* side of knowledge, directed at the unique and contingent, which is (one-sidedly) appreciated by *irrationalism* – at the cost of conceptual knowledge. Kant designated this kind of knowledge by using the term "Grenzbegriff." It concerns knowledge transcending the

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1   Closely related to this heritage a concept is seen as combining a *multiplicity* of (universal) features/properties into a logical *unity*. Cf. Strauss, 1973.

limits of concept formation (sometimes, in this technical sense, also called an *idea*). Although we cannot *conceptualise* what is unique and individual, we do *know* it in a concept-transcending manner (i.e., by means of idea-knowledge).[1]

When Johnson *et al* traces the root of *rationalism* to the "desire to contemplate the harmonies and universalities of Reason" (1984:189) they indeed touch upon the crucial element of this *ism* as we have circumscribed it. Nonetheless they often confuse *universality* with *totality* (i.e., rationalism with holism). In order to substantiate their claim that Durkheim ought to be seen as a *rationalist*, they mention his *holistic* statement that society as a whole is *more than the sum of its parts* (1984:154). Similarly, it is not proper to juxtapose *nominalism* and *rationalism* as it is done by Johnson *et al* Although the *nominalist* does acknowledge universality (concepts and/or words) *within* the human mind – the decisive feature of rationalism – it also claims that whatever exists *outside* the human mind is *particular* and *contingent*. Thus at once, in this regard, it adheres to the position of *irrationalism*. It is clear, therefore, that *nominalism* has both a rationalistic and an irrationalistic side, which means, in terms of the classification of Johnson et. Al., that it encompasses both their categories of *subjectivism* and of *rationalism*.

Although the preceding analysis may seem to be loaded with analytical profundity, it lies at the basis of the greatest diversity of theoretical positions in modern sociology. An illustrative quotation from Max Weber will immediately highlight the significance of the foregoing analysis for sociological theory, because it exemplifies an *individualistic* approach in the spirit of nominalism.[2]

> Concepts such as "state," "club" ... signifies specific kinds communal human actions ..., that could be reduced to "understandable" ("verständliches") actions, and that means that it can, without an exception, be reduced to the actions of the individual human beings (Einzelmenschen) concerned (Weber, 1973:439).[3]

It is typical of *nominalism* to claim that the *state*, the *firm*, the *church*, and other *societal totalities* are mere *concepts* or *names* (*nomina*) through which our understanding, in a substituting manner, refers to that which only truly exists in reality, namely *individuals*.[4] In his discussion of the basic theses of *methodological individualism* Giddens mentions the "assertion that only individuals are real" (1986:214).[5] In connection with the views of the marxist Althusser, Giddens explicitly depicts the connection between nominalism and methodological individualism: "For Althusser believes that 'structures' exist only within theoretical domains, not in reality itself; hence this stance resembles the nominalism of methodological individualists" (1986:218). Yet, when he attributes a "curious mixture of nominalism and rationalism" in Lévi-Strauss's understanding of *structure* it is clear that he does not realise that nominalism has a *rationalistic side* (cf. Giddens, 1983:63).

1 We shall briefly return to this point when we highlight the historical roots of postmodernity in a later context.

2 Theodor Litt, in his work *Individuum und Gemeinschaft* (1919) advances a nominalistic stance which is *holistic*.

3 Giddens (1986:213) quotes a similar statement made by Weber not long before his death: "if I have become a sociologist … it is mainly in order to exorcise the spectre of collective conceptions which still lingers among us. In other words, sociology itself can only proceed from the actions of one or more separate individuals and must therefore adopt strictly individualistic methods" (quoted in an article written by W. Mommsen: Max Weber's political sociology and his philosophy of world history, *International Social Science Journal*, Vol.17, 1965, p.25 – cf. Giddens, 1986:225, note 14).

4 Nominalism accepts universality merely within the human mind. In his *Principles of Philosophy* Descartes says that "number and all universals are only modes of thought" (Part I, LVIII). Outside the human mind nothing but pure individuality is found. What is not realised, however, is that this, in an internally antinomic way, leaves nominalism with at least *one* universal *outside* the human mind, namely the property of "being individual"!

5 He proceeds on the same page: "Thus it seems to be held by some writers that any concepts which refer to properties of collectivities or social systems (one might again instance "structural parameters") are abstract models, costructions of the theorist, in some way that the notion of the 'individual' is not."

Popper also adheres to the perspective of methodological individualism, which according to him "rightly insists that the 'behaviour' and 'actions' of collectives, such as states or social groups, must be reduced to the behaviour and to the action of human individuals" (Popper, 1966-II:91).[1]

At this stage our conjecture is that all forms of *atomism* (individualism) are ultimately attached to an employment of the meaning of the *one* and the *many*, of a *discrete multiplicity* in the quantitative sense of the term (or at least *analogical usages* of this quantitative meaning within the context of other modes of explanation). All variants of *holism* (universalism), by contrast, in the final analysis proceed from the employment of the concept of a *whole* (totality) with its *parts* – the *whole-parts relation* (or analogies of it) serves as the guiding star, dictating that the social relations among human beings must be captured by this mould. After general systems theory permeated social theory since the thirties of the 20th century, we find the distinction between *system* and *subsystems* as the equivalent of the whole-parts relation, for example in structural functionalism.[2]

The recurring theme, which arguably manifests one of *the* core issues of sociological theory, concerns the complexity of the ways in which human beings are involved (absorbed?) in societal interaction. Keeping this in mind, we continue now by investigating some contemporary and some classical approaches to this problem.

Social action (personal freedom) versus social order (collective structures)

Does the 'existence' of societal collectivities entail that there is not any room left for the personal freedom of social actors? Do we have to accept the contrast between "action" and "order" as a strict either/or? What about the numerous less fixed and less durable relationships occurring when people interact on an equal footing – be it in cooperation or in competition – with each other or opposed to each other?[3] Is our understanding of social collectivities (totalities) merely an extrapolation of "individuals in interaction" which is nothing but (an unreal) mental construct (the stance of nominalism, as we have seen)?

Prominent contemporary sociological theorists indeed look at these problems from the angle of the opposition between *action* and *order*. It turns out, however, that anyone proceeding from the concept of *action* is in danger of not being able to provide a meaningful account of the concept of *social order*. Even when behavioural patterns are related to *values* and *symbols*, and when roles and role expectations are introduced in order to account for social relationships and the nature of social interaction, it may still turn out that sociological thinking falls prey to a reduction of social forms of life to the actions of *individual human beings*.

Apparently because Bierstedt understood these shortcomings in action theories, he explicitly declares that he does not want to proceed from the concept of *action* – an approach present in the thought of both his former teachers, Talcot Parsons and Florian Znanieki:

> I would contend that no one who begins with action ... can easily arrive at a notion of the social order (Bierstedt, 1970:ix).

1   In a brief excursus on methodological individualism Giddens refers to a similar statement made by Popper on page 98 of *The Open Society and its Enemies*, Vol.II (cf. Giddens, 1983, pp.94-95 and note 84 on page 272).

2   In 1929 Cannon designated the "flowing equilibrium" which is, thermodynamically seen, present in an open system, as *homeostasis* (cf. Cannon, 1929:397). In his brief history of the term *functionalism* Alexander mentions that the term emerged from a study group conducted by the physiologist L.J. Henderson at Harvard in the 1930s. It was influenced by *biological functionalism* and by Canon's notion of *homeostasis* (Alexander, 1985:8). Von Bertalanffy also made an appeal to Canon's notion of homeostasis in the development of his *system theory* (1973:10, 14, 21, 78, 169).

3   These kinds of interaction are often *purely incidental*.

Sociological individualism versus sociological universalism

Whenever sociologists exclusively put the individual in the centre of their analysis of societal interaction, we meet core elements of what we have suggested to be designated as an atomistic or individualistic theoretical design.

Since Democritus introduced his philosophy of nature, the term *atomism* was either used in a rather *restricted* sense or in a *broader* ontological sense. In the former sense it indicated the attempt to explain the *material world* in terms of last *indivisible elements* ("atoms"). In the latter (broader ontological) sense it was employed to point at ways of understanding *reality* from its supposed last *units*. Since 1825 Saint-Simon and his followers (amongst them Auguste Comte) employed the term *individualism* in order to capture the social philosophy of the 18th century as a whole – the view in which society was broken apart into isolated *individuals*.

The theoretical acknowledgement of a *social unity and multiplicity* does seem to constitute an indispensable *basic concept* of sociology. All variants of *individualism*, however, seem to *over-emphasize* this awareness, which is – as we have suggested above – ultimately connected to the numerical nature of the *one* and the *many* (cf. Homans, 1964; Friederichs, 1970; and Opp, 1979). Such an *atomism* consistently attempts to explain all social phenomena *in terms of* the *interaction of a multiplicity of individuals*. As a consequence, consistent individualistic thinkers refuse to speak positively about *social totalities*.

In his *conflict sociology*, considered by Alexander (1987:128) to be "the prototypical model of conflict theory," John Rex believes that society is really composed out of independently acting *individuals* (cf. Rex, 1961:93 and Alexander, 1987:145). To Alexander it seems obvious "that the first thing a student of social life presupposes is the nature of action" (Alexander, 1987:10). The implicit *supposition* of this "assumption" is that it concerns *individual* action. Strangely enough Alexander juxtaposes "action" and "order" in such a way that the following question apparently does not fit in this scheme quite well: can we speak about *collective action*? Consider his statement:

> Yet to answer the central question about action is not enough. A second major issue needs to be presupposed. I will call this the "problem of order." Sociologists are sociologists because they believe there are patterns to society, that there are structures separate from the individuals who compose it (Alexander, 1987:10-11).

Directly opposed to this notion of *structures* as being *separate* from the composing individuals, Anthony Giddens would stress their *mutuality*. Layder explains it as follows:

> Giddens' work represents the view that agency and structure are mutually constituted – that they cannot be understood as separate entities in any sense (Layder, 1994:210).

This explains an initial question asked by Giddens:

> In what manner can it be said that the conduct of individual actors reproduces the structural properties of larger collectivities? (Giddens, 1986:24).

His answer to this question unfolds on two levels: a *logical* and a *substantial* one (Giddens, 1986:24). In his continued opposition of "actors" and "collectivities" his conception clearly is very close to that element of Alexander's thinking in connection with which we have asked whether it is really possible to speak about *collective action*. Neofunctionalism, nonetheless, without any hesitation, does speak about "gorups as collective actors."[1]

Surely *if* action is *individual* and *if collectivities* are constituted as supra-individual patterns or totalities, then, strictly seen, the notion of *collective action* is precluded. Giddens explicitly addresses

1   Just compare the commentary of Münch, 1985:226-229.

this issue when he poses the question: "are collectivities actors?" (1986:220). Although he concedes that descriptions of actions and accounts of interactions cannot be given "purely in terms of individual predicates," he emphatically holds that "only individuals, beings which have a corporeal existence, are agents" (1986:220). Giddens says that a statement like "the government decided to pursue policy X" is a "shorthand description of decisions taken by *individuals* (I am emphasizing – DFMS)" (1986:221).

Layder accentuates the fact that "sociological thought has understood individuals and society to be intertwined and inextricably fused" (Layder, 1994:207). Yet, he vehemently denies that social theory may be trapped in a false opposition:

> The idea that some authors or schools of social theory are entrapped in a false notion of an individual-society split is therefore quite misleading. The important question is not whether some sociologists posit a solitary individual cut off from society. ... The question is, which of the accounts most adequately expresses the fundamental connectedness of the individual and society? One of the most persistent problems that has arisen from this basic issue has been how to understand the social connectedness of individuals. In what ways are they intertwined with the social processes of which they form a part? (Layder, 1994:208).

But even in this case the subtle atomistic assumption continues to surface: individuals are individuals, though not thought of in *isolation*, since they are assumed to be *connected* (*fused*) with something *different* – namely *society*. Sociological individualism, by departing from a reductionistic understanding of being *individual*, implicitly *denies* the *ontic status* of the constitutive *social function* of *being a human individual* – a function which is only accounted for in the *second place*. Later on, when we will reflect in more depth on a different notion of the 'individual,' we shall return to this problem. In the mean time we have to move on to *holism* (*universalism*).

In opposition both to *mechanistic monism* and *vitalistic dualism* as biological theories, the term *holism* was introduced by J.C. Smuts in 1926. In this narrow sense it aimed at a dialectical synthesis which can do justice to the supposedly highest concrete totality (an idea coming from the other prominent holist thinker of the 20th century, Adolf Meyer: *Ganzheit* – cf. Meyer, 1964 and 1965). An expanded connotation is given to *holism* when it is used in the sense of *universalism*, an approach which, in opposition to (sociological) *individualism*, wants to account for the meaningful coherence and mutuality within societal institutions, i.e. for *wholeness* or *totality* as an essential trait of *social collectivities* (as introduced by the German philosopher, sociologist and economist, Othmar Spann, in the twenties of the 20th century).[1]

The numerical properties of a multiplicity (such as a sequence of numbers) cannot account for the nature of *wholeness*. *Totality* is a *spatial* notion which cannot be reduced to a mere *numerical multiplicity*. Although set theoretic approaches in mathematics indeed attempted a complete *arithmetization* of continuity, Paul Bernays correctly points out that it is not warranted.[2] Consequently, whereas (sociological) *individualism* ultimately elevates our awareness of a discrete multiplicity to serve as explanatory tool for human society, (sociological) universalism (holism) promotes the spatial whole-parts relation to the same level. Notions of a multiplicity of individuals in social interaction (individualism) merely analogically reflect the meaning of number while conceptions of encompassing societal wholes (totalities) similarly analogically reflect

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1   Its negative counterpart eventually emerged as *methodological individualism*.

2   Cf. Bernays, 1976. (For more than two decades Bernays was the co-worker of the foremost mathematician of the 20th century, David Hilbert.) He states that the property of being a *totality* "undeniably belongs to the geometric idea of the continuum". And it is this characteristic which, according to him, "resists a complete arithmetization of the continuum" ("Und es ist auch dieser Charakter, der einer vollkommenen Arithmetisierung des Kontinuums entgegensteht" – 1976:74). This announcement is in harmony with his statement in another context, where he even claims that the classical foundation of the *real numbers* given by Cantor and Dedekind does not "manifest a complete arithemtization" (1976:187-188). To this he adds the remark: "It is in any case doubtful whether a complete arithmetization of the idea of the continuum could be justified. The idea of the continuum is any way originally a geometrical idea" (1976:188).

the primary meaning of spatial relationships (universalism).[1] Sociological functionalism explored the whole-parts relation by introducing the (functionalistic) terms *system* and *subsystems* (Parsons, Merton, Alexander).[2]

These opposing orientations received a directing impulse from the thought of Ferdinand Tönnies who published the first edition of his famous *Gemeinshcaft and Gesellschaft* in 1887.

Gemeinshcaft and *Gesellschaft*: **Tönnies**

In this work Tönnies first sets out to explain these terms (Book I) and then he continues (Book II) with an analysis of what he calls "essential will" (Wesenwille) – as characteristic of *Gesellschaft*, and "choice will" (Kürwille) – as characteristic of *Gemeinschaft*.[3] Tönnies conceptually divides the will into two parts by exploring the interrelationship between *willing* and *thinking*. "I distinguish between the will which includes the thinking and the thinking which encompasses the will." Each one of these two forms represents a coherent totality (Ganzes) "which unites in itself a multiplicity of feelings, instincts and desires. This unity should in the first case be understood as a real natural one; in the second case as a conceptual or artificial one." The will as *a real natural one* is called *Wesenwille* and the will as *a conceptual or artificial one* is called *Kürwille* (Tönnies, 1957:103). As an *organic unity* the *natural will* is characteristic of *Gemeinschaft*, whereas the mechanical unity of the *rational will* which, as thought-form, affects the body with mechanical force, is characteristic of *Gesellschaft*.

These two societal forms are explicitly understood in a *historical-genetic* sense: a period of *Gesellschaft* follows after a period of *Gemeinschaft*. "The *Gemeinschaft* is characterized by the social will as concord, folkways, mores, and religion; the *Gesellschaft* by the social will as convention, legislation and public opinion" (1957:231). The types of "external social organization" correlated to (a) *Gemeinschaft* and (b) *Gesellschaft* are: (a) family life (concord), rural village life (folkways and mores) and town life (religion); and (b) city life (convention), national life (legislation) and cosmopolitan life (public opinion).

By understanding his distinction in a historical-genetic sense, Tönnies precludes any insight in *underlying structural conditions* which are given as the basis for historical change and development. Intrinsically seen the structure of the social aspect of reality is not a *historical phenomenon*. It is not something *historically transient*, since it makes possible our very awareness of *social change* and *social development*. In addition to this *structural problem* Tönnies also further complicates his understanding of the two forms of the will by employing the dialectically opposed extremes of an *atomistic* and a *holistic* view in his respective characterization of them. Though he uses the expression *social will*, he does not manage to come to terms with the inner coherence between the social and the sensitive-psychic dimensions of reality. In the final analysis he confines the human will to an *organic* and a *rational* part, respectively. The alternative option, namely to investigate the nature of the "social will," evident in phenomena of *social solidarity* and *social consciousness*, was explored by Durkheim.

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1   Note that the following terms are all synonymous: *coherence*, *totality*, *wholeness*. Continuous extension, which characterizes the uniqueness (and irreducibility) of space, entails that what is continuous in a spatial sense is *connected*, *coheres* in all its *parts* which are constitutive for it as a *whole*, in its *entirety*, as a *totality*.

2   I have treated the nature of the spatial *whole-parts relation* in Strauss, 1987, and the opposition between *atomism* (individualism) and *holism* (universalism) in Strauss, 1999.

3   The English translation by Loomis (Tönnies, 1957:103 ff.) renders *Wesenwille* and *Kürwille* as *natural will* and as *rational will*.

Is organicism *per se* universalistic?

Sometimes organicism is identified with a holistic or universalistic approach *per se*. In order to maintain the meaningfulness of our distinction between sociological individualism and sociological universalism as an appropriate systematic perspective on significant theoretical alternative positions in the development of sociological theory, a brief comparison of the thought of Spencer and Durkheim may be instructive.

The individualistic organicism of Spencer

Spencer acknowledges that his ideas were strongly influenced by K.E. von Baer (1792-1876), a well-known zoologist and embryologist who discovered the fertilized embryo of mammals and gave a description of the gradual differentiation occurring in the embryo tissue. Spencer in particular mentions von Baer's generalization, namely "that every individual organism in the course of its development advances from the homogeneous to the heterogeneous."[1]

> In passing we may note that this perspective does highlight an important difference between the *spatial* whole-parts relation and the *biotical* whole-parts relation. The former presupposes a *continuum* where *every subdivision* maintains the *homogeneity* of the whole, while in the latter case *biotical differentiation* takes place in such a way that the developing parts become *different*, i.e., *heterogeneous*!

According to Spencer, von Baer's generalization is valid both for organic and inorganic phenomena. His reflection on the nature of human society commences by making the (nominalistic) remark that "society" is just a *collective name* for *truly existing individuals*:

> Carrying the controversy between nominalism and realism into another sphere, a nominalist might affirm that just as there exist only members of a species, while the species considered apart from them has no existence; so the units of a society alone exist, while the existence of the society is but verbal (Spencer, 1968:49).

Spencer does not want to reject the basis of this nominalistic argument – only the conclusion should be questioned. There do exist, after all, durable relations between constitutive parts which produce the individuality of the whole – to be distinguished from the individuality of the parts (Spencer, 1968:49):

> Thus we consistently regard society as an entity, because though formed of discrete units, a certain concreteness in the aggregate of them is implied in the general persistence of the arrangements among them throughout the area occupied (Spencer, 1968:50).

Subsequently Spencer holds that these durable relations between the parts of a society are similar to the permanent relations between the parts of a living body.

What is remarkable in this context, is that Spencer repeatedly speaks about an *organic aggregate* which is basically the same as a *social aggregate*. It seems as if he loaded his conception of a *biotic organism* with an atomistic (individualistic or aggregate) perspective in order to be consistent with his individualistic liberal political convictions. Compare in this regard Spencer's statement concerning a decrease of *authoritative control* in society:

> A more pronounced individualism, instead of a more pronounced nationalism, is its ideal (Spencer, 1968:22).

If an organism is viewed in such an *individualistic* fashion, it would be much easier to explain *society* in *organic* terms!

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1   Spencer, 1937:503; cf. Spencer 1968:22-23, where he refers to the "truth that all organic development is a change from a state of homogeneity to a state of heterogeneity."

On thus seeing that an ordinary living organism may be regarded as a nation of units which live individually, and have many of them considerable degrees of independence, we shall have the less difficulty in regarding a nation of human beings as an organism (1968:54-55).

Our general characterization of the opposition between *individualism* (atomism) and *universalism* (holism), namely that the former over-emphasizes the discreteness of the numerical aspect or analogies of this discreteness, whereas the latter elevates the spatial whole-parts relation to a basic denominator for the diversity within reality or analogies of this relation in other contexts, is thus adequately confirmed by the position here taken by Spencer.[1]

In passing we may remark that human societies certainly do not "grow naturally" – they are the result of an accountable process of free human formative activities, giving concrete shape to societal principles which are never to be reduced to *purely natural laws* and *processes*. Giving a concrete form to societal principles cannot be explained from the perspective of the natural sides of reality. Furthermore, no single societal whole is to be seen as a "living unity" – as if, in this respect at least, it is biotically *qualified* (such as all entities belonging to the realm of plants).[2]

The universalistic organicism of Durkheim

Durkheim more explicitly accounts for social solidarity in terms of his understanding of the "conscience collective." He distinguishes two types of solidarity:

There are in each of us, ..., two forms of consciousness: one which is common to our group as a whole, which, consequently, is not ourselves, but society living and acting within us; the other, on the other hand, represents that in us which is personal and distinct, that which makes us an individual. Solidarity which comes from resemblance is at maximum when the conscience collective completely envelopes our whole consciousness and coincides in all points with it (1972:139).[3]

As soon as this *conscience collective* exercises its power, "our personality vanishes, by definition, one might say, for we are no longer ourselves, but the collective being" (1972:139).

Without suggesting in any way that this type of solidarity arises in an artificial mechanical way, Durkheim does discern a similarity with the way in which molecules are bound together in an inorganic body (1972:139).

From this form of *mechanical solidarity* Durkheim distinguishes a *second* type of solidarity. This second type originates through the division of labour which causes individuals to exhibit mutual differences (1972:140).

1 Yet we have to keep in mind that Spencer advocates the following provision: "The social organism, discrete instead of concrete, asymmetrical instead of symmetrical, sensitive in all its units instead of having a single center, is not comparable to any particular type of individual organism, animal or vegetal" (1897, Part 2, p.592, cf. Buckley, 1967:11). He also holds that "parts of an animal form a concrete whole; but the parts of a society form a whole which is discrete" (1968:57), in spite of his earlier assertion that "society as an entity" does possess a "certain concreteness" (1968:50).

2 Even *marriage* and the *nuclear family* are, in spite of their close links with the biotical "bond of blood," still guided by their normative function in the ethical aspect of *moral love.* The contrary between 'love' and 'hate' evinces the *normative* nature of the ethical qualification of marital and family life. Similarly normative contraries like "logical – illogical," "polite – impolite*" and "legal – illegal"* demonstrate that analytical, social and legal relationships pertain to particular normative sides of being human which ought to be distinguished from (a-normative) natural sides such as the physical or biotic facets which are not subject to normative principles of ought to be since they are governed by *natural laws*.

3 Compare Rousseau's conception of the social contract – which also transforms the abstract individual into an indivisible part of the *body politic* as a transpersonal whole: "Everyone of us collectively subject ourselves and all our power to the final guidance of the *volonté générale* (general will), and we receive again every member back as an indivisible part of the whole" (1762:24).

By means of on-going differentiation ever more freedom of action is provided to the *differentiated parts* of society, without detracting from the capacity of a society to act *collectively*:

> Society becomes more capable of collective action, at the same time that each of its members has more freedom of action. This solidarity resembles that which we observe among higher animals. Each organ, in effect, has its special character and autonomy; and yet the unity of the organism is as great as the individuation of the parts is more marked. Because of this analogy, we propose to call the solidarity which is due to the division of labour, "organic" (1972:140).[1]

In the final analysis, it turns out that Durkheim views society as a *whole* that could be assessed from the perspective of *two angles of approach*: *mechanical* or *organic solidarity*:

> Society is not seen in the same aspect in the two cases. In the first, what we call "society" is a more or less closely organized totality of beliefs and sentiments common to all the members of the group: it is the collective type. By contrast, the society to which we are all bound in the second instance, is a system of differentiated and specialized functions which are united in definite relationships. *These two societies really make up only one* (my emphasis – DFMS). They are two aspects of one and the same reality, but nonetheless they must he distinguished (Durkheim, 1972:138).

Due to the inclination to maintain the conviction that *society*, even in its differentiated state, is a *genuine whole* (totality), it is understandable that Durkheim eventually seeks the gravitation point of his analysis in the *conscience collective*. Parsons clearly sees this:

> Gradually the conscience collective came more and more to overshadow the conception of organic solidarity. The distinction of social types ceased to be between situations where a conscience collective did and did not predominate in action, but became a matter of distinguishing different contents of the conscience collective itself (Parsons, 1949:320).

Though Durkheim's acceptance of an original (be it historical or hypothetical) unorganized society composed out of an aggregate of individuals (called a 'horde' – 1972:170) gives the impression of an *individualistic* affinity, his *universalistic* (holistic) understanding of the *conscience collective* ultimately reigns.

Before we move on to an attempt to sketch an alternative approach, aimed at transcending the opposition between individualism and universalism, we briefly look at the universalistic orientation of (structural) functional approaches (Parsons and Münch). By focussing on the dependence of this line of thought on *biotic analogies* we already start explaining an important distinction implicit in our entire analysis thus far, namely that between *aspectual analogies* and *entitary analogies* (lingually designated by metaphors).

Remark about the nature and use of analogies in theoretical designs

In scientific language analogies between entities are presented as *models* (cf. Santema 1978). Strictly seen it is therefore redundant to speak about "metaphoric models" since a scientific model is nothing else but a metaphoric designation of particular analogies between entities – just compare the term 'waves' in wave mechanics. Max Black points out that metaphors have an expressive function and that they evince a suggestive richness (Black 1962:37).

Analogies between different aspects of reality cannot be replaced, except by *synonymous terms*, whereas it is always possible to replace a given metaphor with a totally *different* one. Look for example at alternative ways to denote the interconnections between our awareness of *spatiality* and the *social* dimension of real-

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1   The influence of Spencer is still to be seen in Durkheim's remark that through division of labor there is an evolution from homogeneity to heterogeneity (Durkheim, 1972: 142-143).

ity. Expressions like social *distance*;[1] the social *next-to-each-other*; social *super-* and *sub-ordination*; social *position*; and so on, are all dependent on an understanding of *spatial phenomena*. All these expressions are therefore in an important way *connotatively synonymous* – namely in so far as they (analogically) reflect some or other *structural feature* or *specific property* of the spatial aspect. If we substitute the phrase "social next-to-each-other" with the phrase "social coordination," or if we substitute the phrase "social position" with the expression "social status" or "social rank," then we are still merely using terms (analogically) reflecting *spatial properties*. This possibility to substitute, present in the case of aspectual analogies, is completely absent in the case of analogies between entities (designated by metaphors). One may replace the metaphor "the nose of the car" with something different by referring to the "bonnet of the car." Whereas we do have *denotative synonymity* in this case, *connotative synonymity* is absent.

The overarching character of an analogy in the sense intended by us (its meaning pretty much runs through the entire history of Western philosophy) may be portrayed in a way that almost sounds contradictory: two phenomena (either aspects or entities) are *similar* in that respect in which they *differ*! In other words, in the moment of similarity the difference evinces itself (and vice versa). This remarkable feature underlies the apparent 'mystery' sometimes discerned in the nature of a metaphor. Max Black writes:

> So perhaps the 'mystery' is simply that, taken as literal, a metaphorical statement appears to be perversely asserting something to be what it is plainly known not to be (1979:21).

The connection between universalism and biotical analogies: Parsons and Münch

Most modern sociologists are convinced that they have 'out-*grown*' (!) the shortcomings of *sociological organicism*. However, the lack of a careful analysis of the nature of the biotical aspect and of the inability to discern true nuances of the biotical aspect as they are analogically reflected within the language of social theory, indeed blinded most sociologists to realize that many terms they are using still reflect genuine *biotical analogies*. For example, Giddens holds that there "are few today who, as Durkheim, Spencer and many other in nineteenth-century social thought were prone to do, use direct organic analogies in describing social systems" (1986:163). But without hesitation Giddens continue to speak about social *life*!

Buckley, by contrast, emphatically declares: "Presently functionalism in sociology represents the modern version of the biotic model" (1967:13). The four function paradigm operative in the system theory of Parsons (adaptation, goal-attainment, integration and latency: AGIL) receives its ultimate context from biotical analogies (as we shall argue below in more detail) – which therefore also colour the way in which the whole-parts relation (system-subsystem) is employed. Merton is correct when he says: "This usage is more often explicitly adopted from the biological sciences" (1968:75).[2] It is noteworthy that, partly due to the asymmetry between the concepts of 'structure' and 'function,' Parsons eventually preferred to speak about *functionalism* in stead of structural-functionalism (cf. Parsons, 1977a:49; 100; 116).

Also Johnsen *et al*. explain that Parsons structured his system theory "on the basis of the biological analogy" (1984:65). Sztompka gives a general characterization:

> In its orthodox form structural functional theory claims that a society is a self-regulating system with a persistent tendency to preserve equilibrium, the tendency being due to the normative consensus among the members of society, safeguarded by the mechanisms of socialization and social control, efficiently

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1 In spite of the *spatial proximity* of a President and the body-guard of the President, there remains a large *social distance* between them.

2 Note that there is an important difference between the words 'biotical' and 'biological.' The former denotes what is ontically given in reality (as living entities: plants, animals and human beings), whereas the latter designates the scholarly (theoretical) reflection upon what is ontically given.

eliminating deviations – some form of a holistic or organismic standpoint (ontological claim of collectivism) (Sztompka, 1979:23).

By recombining and integrating the different elements present in Parons thought we may say that his whole *ontological design* rests on his *four function paradigm* (*adaptation*, *goal-attainment*, *integration* and *latency*). It is constituted by a particular selection and combination of *analogical* terms amongst which the *biotical analogies* are most prominent, since three of the four terms reflect phenomena (primarily) evincing themselves within the biotical aspect [*in casu*: (i) adaptation, (ii) goal-attainment, and (iii) integration].

(i) Adaptation

Only in the case of thermodynamically open systems which are qualified by the biotic aspect of reality is it meaningful to speak about *adaptation*. Open systems that are physically qualified – such as a glacier and a fire – do not possess the physically unique features of living entities.[1] This explains why it is meaningless to speak about adaptation on the physical level per se.

(ii) Goal-attainment

Although the emphasis on *finality* (the apparent goal-directedness of living entities) initially was seen as a *vitalistic prejudice* in biology, various non-vitalistic trends of thought eventually realized that purposiveness represents an *inherent feature* of living entities, requiring an explanation (or at least recognition) from any possible biological standpoint. For example, the organismic biology of von Bertalanffy explicitly accounts for phenomena of *equifinality*, i.e., the fact that "the same final state can be reached from different initial conditions and in different ways" (1973:79). More than hundred years ago Hans Driesch did important experimental work aimed at supporting his (vitalistic) position. He reacted against the machine-model used to analyse the structure of living things (which, in modern times, at least dates back to Descartes). Driesch admits that if we define a machine as a typical ordering of physical and chemical constituents in action capable of reaching a typical effect (1920:131), then it must be admitted that it is possible to view such a machine as underlying the genesis of the form of a normally developing organism (1920:132). The problem arises when disturbances occur.[2] From his own experiments Driesch knows that living things are capable of astonishing regenerative features. In the early stages of the development of many animals one can separate different portions that will regenerate a complete organism (compare the examples mentioned by Driesch, 1920:117 ff.). Every part of such an organism, therefore, equally possesses the potential to perform this astonishing effect. In the case of a hydra, for example, a 1/200th part can regenerate a whole new snake. However, when no part is separated, the original entity will mature normally without, by itself, developing into more than one individual.

Thus living entities display an internal order and harmony which keep, when the organism is not disturbed, the "equal potential" of each part in its proper place. However, when it is divided at an early stage, each part will explore its full regenerative potential. Consequently, Driesch calls a living entity a "harmonic equipotential system" (1920:135 ff.). No machine possesses parts that have this capability (1920:132-133,

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1   Karl Trincher mentions the following four macroscopic characteristics of the cell as a living entity (1985:336): (i) spatial macroscopy which defines the cell as a spatially delimited surface; (ii) temporal macroscopy, which determines the finite time in which the energy cycle of the cell occurs; (iii) the isothermal nature of the cell, which is responsible for the constancy of temperature throughout the cell; (iv) the persistent positive difference between the higher internal temperature of the cell and the lower external temperature of the environment adjacent to the cell surface.

2   Acknowledging that self-repairing machines are conceivable in terms of the modern theory of automata, also Von Bertalanffy points out that the "problem comes in with regulation and repair after arbitrary disturbances" (1973:148).

410, 512).[1] Driesch accounts for the internal order and harmony displayed by living entities by introducing his notion of an *immaterial vital force*, an *entelechie* (1920:139 ff.). This vital force is capable of 'suspending' physical laws, such as the second main law of thermodynamics (the law of non-decreasing entropy – 1920:434 ff.) By providing a generalization of the second main law of thermodynamics, Von Bertalanffy abandoned this notion of the 'suspension' of physical laws by an immaterial entelechie. He writes: "It appears that equifinality is responsible for the primary regulatability of organic systems, i.e., for all those regulations which cannot be based on predetermined structures or mechanisms, but on the contrary, exclude such mechanisms as were regarded as arguments for vitalism" (1973:79). Even from a neo-Darwinist perspective Walter Zimmerman had to acknowledge the reality of *purposiveness* in the realm of *living entities* (1967).

(iii) Integration

Biotical growth manifests itself in two inseparably connected processes: *differentiation* and *integration*. These two sides of the "growth-coin" provide a biotic specification to the spatial whole-parts relation. The differentiated parts are *heterogeneous* (thus differing from a *homogeneous spatial continuum*), though they have to *cohere* with the other parts as long a the living organism persists as an *integrally living unity* (*integration* analogically reflects the spatial meaning of connectedness/coherence within the biotical aspect of reality – *biotical coherence = integration*).

In addition to these three *biotical terms* employed by the theoretical design of Parsons' sociological theory, the term *pattern-maintenance* is also used. Although intended to represent an imitation of Galileo's law of *inertia* it actually refers to a *dynamic equilibrium* as its is called by Von Bertalanffy ('Fliessgleichgewicht'). This property of an open system has to be distinguished from the *equilibrium* of a (closed) physical system. The mediating form of these biotic and thermodynamic terms (adaptation, goal-attainment, integration and latency) is positioned with in the *spatial opposition* of *internal*/*external*. According to its *internal* side every "action system" should perform the functions of pattern-maintenance and integration, and according to its *external* side it should perform the functions of adaptation and goal-attainment.

In our follow-up article we shall argue that the *selective* and *restricting* way in which Parsons shaped his four function paradigm actually inhibits a meaningful account of the *structural principles* of the distinct societal spheres which are constantly realized in a differentiated society.

One of the more recent revivals of Parsons' approach is found in the neofunctionalism of the German sociologist Richard Münch. In his fascinating article on *Differentiation, Rationalization, Interpenetration: The Emergence of Modern Society* (1990), Münch concisely assesses the last three decades of sociological theorizing. He points out that the 1960s were dominated by the "controversy between 'neopositivism' and its more sophisticated successor 'critical rationalism,' on the one hand, and the Frankfurt school of critical theory on the other." After a brief focus on Marxism in the late 1960s, the new topic of the 1970s was the discussion between Luhman and Habermas concerning sociology as a "social technology or as a critical theory of society" (1990:441). The 1980s pursued a different goal:

> "... constructing a theory of society and explaining and understanding the basic structures, roots and developments of modern societies. ... The great classics who contributed to a global perspective on modern society have been rediscovered, particularly Weber, Durkheim, and Parsons. They are used as more or less stable building blocks for a theory of society and an understanding of modernity" (1990:442).

According to Münch the starting-point of the theoretical debate of the 1980s is "Weber's theory of rationalization of modern society into spheres that are guided to an increasing extent by their own inner laws.

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1   In a different context M. Polanyi explains that it is not even possible to account for the nature of a machine as a machine purely in physical or chemical terms: "The complete knowledge of a machine as an object tells us nothing about it as a machine" (1969:330). In Polanyi 1967 and 1968 we find more extensive arguments in favour of the irreducibility of 'life.'

This theory of rationalization has been combined – by Schluchter and Habermas – with the theory of functional differentiation as it was formulated by Luhmann" (1990:442).

In following a systems perspective on differentiation, Münch subsequently discusses the increasing complexity of the process of *differentiation*. Complexity causes decision-making to differentiate and be confined to "ever smaller systems (my emphasis – DFMS) of interaction" (1990:443). When Münch proceeds with his analysis by arguing that differentiation is a self-perpetuating process (it increases complexity requiring further differentiation), his explanation uses the *system approach* (system/subsystems; whole/parts). In our search for an alternative we shall return to this point by showing that in spite of his own intentions the universalistic implications of system theory overruled his acknowledgement of the *inner laws* of differentiated social spheres.

Concluding remark

Our preceding discussion 'located' the opposition between *individualism* and *universalism* in sociological theories first of all in the employment of the quantitative meaning (or analogical usage) of unity and multiplicity, and in the spatial meaning of a whole (wholes) with parts (or analogies of the spatial whole-parts relation). Due to the complexity of sociological theorising, we had to relate this problem to the influence of *nominalism* with its hybrid dependence on both *rationalism* and *irrationalism* (owing to the dialectical assessment of the relationship between *universality* and *individuality*). To the extent that the functionalism of Parsons and the neofunctionalism of Münch demonstrates their appeal to biotic analogies, the face of universalism is further complicated. The implicit golden threat running through our analysis surfaced in the inevitable use of *analogical concepts* in sociological theorising. In the follow-up article: *Transcending the impasse of individualism and universalism in sociological theory*, an attempt will be made to explore this feature of indispensable analogical concepts more fully. Different kinds of (unavoidable) concepts basic to social theory will receive attention, embedded in an understanding of being human, which aims at avoiding the tension between *atomism* and *holism*. This will be done on the basis of a positive assessment of the contribution of divergent sociological paradigms which may at first sight seem to contradict each other (owing to their emphasis merely on some modes of explanation), but which actually unveil *constitutive facets* of our societal experiential world – and therefore are also *constitutive* for sociological theorising as such.

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