

Atomism and holism in the understanding of society and social systems

[2008 37(2):187-207]

D F M Strauss
dfms@cknet.co.za

Abstract

Throughout its history reflection on human society was torn apart by the opposing views of atomism and holism. Traditional societies, the city state of ancient Greece as well as the medieval perfect society apparently resemble a whole with its parts. Early modernity continued this holistic inclination for a while but soon reverted to atomistic theories of the (hypothetical) social contract. Modern humanism dominated the subsequent views articulated in terms of the dialectical tension between nature and freedom (science ideal and personality ideal) – including mechanistic and vitalistic approaches as well as the more recent acknowledgment of irreducibly complex systems (Behe). In Wiener's *technologicism* sacrificed human responsibility and freedom. An alternative view is advanced in terms of the normativity of societal life as well as its many-sidedness. It is shown that theories of social systems increasingly tend to explore avenues transcending the limitations of the atomistic additive approach and the boundary-leveling whole-parts scheme entailed in social systems theory. This development is used as a starting point for the classification of social interaction and for underscoring the scope of the principle of sphere-sovereignty for a multidisciplinary understanding of social systems.

Opsomming

Dwarsdeur die geskiedenis is nadenke oor die menslike samelewing uiteengebreek deur opponerende atomistiese en holistiese sienings. Tradisionele samelewings, die stadstaat van antieke Griekeland asook die middeleeuse perfekte samelewing vertoon skynbaar ooreenkomste met 'n geheel en die dele daarvan. Die vroeg-moderne tyd het hierdie holistiese geneigdheid voortgesit maar het spoedig oorgeslaan na atomistiese teorieë van 'n hipotetiese sosiale verdrag. Die moderne Humanisme het die daaropvolgende opvattinge gedomineer, soos geartikuleer in terme van die dialektiese spanning tussen natuur en vryheid (natuurwetenskapsideaal en persoonlikheidsideaal) – insluitende meganistiese en vitalistiese benaderings asook die meer resente erkenning van onherleibaar-komplekse sisteme (Behe). Wiener se *tegnologisme* het die mense se verantwoordelikheid en vryheid opgeoffer. 'n Alternatiewe siening word ontwikkel in terme van die normatiewiteit van die menslike samelewing asook die veelsydigheid daarvan. Daar word aangetoon dat sosiale sisteemteorieë toenemend daartoe neig om weë te ondersoek waarlangs die beperkinge van die atomistiese optelsom-benadering asook die gresnuitwissende geheel-dele skema van die holisme te bowe te kom. Hierdie ontwikkeling word gebruik as aanknopingspunt vir die klassifikasie van vorme van sosiale intreksie asook vir 'n beklemtoning van die reikwydte van die beginsel van soewereiniteit-in-eie-kring vir 'n multidissiplinêre verstaan van sosiale sisteme.

1. Orientation

Humankind is known to have lived in societies since the dawn of history. It is therefore not surprising that the emergence of theoretical reflection on the human

predicament was accompanied by attempts to portray the *best way* of living together and the *best way* to understand what is entailed in the good (societal) life.

By and large the history of theoretical reflection upon the nature of human society diverges into two mutually exclusive (and oftentimes opposing) modes of explanation, an *atomistic* and a *holistic* one. Although both these approaches were already present in ancient Greece – where the atomism (individualism) of Callicles was opposed by the eventual holism (universalism) of Plato (advanced in his *Politeia* – Books IV to VIII (1966)) and Aristotle (in his *Politics*, Book I (1894)) – traditional societies appear to be close to a holistic perspective. The extended family (German: *Großfamilie*), sib and clan as well as the politically stronger organized tribe, are all examples of close-knit social practices where it is the *whole* that acts in various capacities, be it as a hunting, farming (agricultural), political or cultic unit.

In ancient Greece the undifferentiated patrician clans were the bearers of power within the Greek city-states (the *polis*). The latter took on diverse forms but within them the popular assembly of free citizens assumed a position of power. In the course of its further development the polis ended the dominance of the clans, tribes and brotherhoods in replacing the initial four Ionian tribes with ten new territorial tribes. This provided the basis for the well-known Athenian democracy that reached its peak under Pericles (446-404 B.C.). Soon after end of the Persian wars the reign of Pericles came to a fall. During the golden 5th century B.C. we witness the transition from the older undifferentiated clans and tribes to the relatively more differentiated legal order of the *polis*.

While the pre-polis period was still strongly influenced by conceptions of *dikè* and *themis* (the internal legal order of the clans) as the guardian of the natural order of things, the 5th century witnesses significantly new developments. *Dikè* now designated the positive law formed by the *polis* and the punishment exercised by virtue of these positive laws. On the basis of his conception of a threefold soul Plato then develops a theory of justice in the form of his utopian view of the state, constituted by the (lowest) artisan class, the (intermediate) warrior class and the (ruling) class of philosopher-kings (50 years and older). The qualification *utopian* must be coupled with another characteristic feature, namely its all-encompassing, totalitarian focus. Furthermore, justice is seen as a *moral* virtue assigning to the virtues of temperance, courage and wisdom each their place. The ideal state is destined to achieve moral goodness – a view continued by Aristotle in his teleological

understanding according to which society develops from the family (as germ-cell) via the village to the state having as its goal *moral perfection*.

During the medieval era this view was subordinated to the supra-natural realm of grace – moral perfection is the natural portal of the supra-natural position of the church as perfect institute of grace, having eternal bliss as its final goal. The initial ideal of a perfect society was thus incorporated in the Roman Catholic view of the *Corpus Christianum* as the *societas perfecta*. When the power of the Roman Catholic church reached its peak under Pope Boniface VIII at the beginning of the 14th century it served as a relatively differentiated “super-structure” over-arching a relatively undifferentiated sub-structure. Both the guild system and the feudal order preceded the subsequent differentiation of Western society.

At the time of the Renaissance early modernity was acquainted with the inclination to contemplate an ideal society. When Thomas Moore therefore published his *Utopia* in 1516 he simply continued this long-standing inclination. Moore, on the one hand, criticizes existing society and alternatively portrays a perfect life without private ownership, centered in a market-place. The peculiarly *new* feature of the modern era specifically surfaces in Bacon’s *New Atlantis* for in it we find a starting-point of the modern ideal that believes that a science directed towards the pure facts will be able to liberate humankind from its burdens. This eventually turned into an essential part of the Enlightenment progress ideal.

However, this science-ideal soon turned utopian thinking upside down. Instead of contemplating an ideal not found in the empirical world, it sets out to break down reality theoretically (i.e. by means of a thought-experiment) in order to *reconstruct* a new world according to the plan of human reason. Hobbes explicitly explored the possibilities of such a thought experiment. In his work on material things he first demolished the ordered world into a heap of chaos and then, by using well-defined concepts, reconstructed it from rational resources. Applied to human society this resulted in the early modern theories of the *social contract* (Hobbes, Pufendorff, Thomasius and Locke). The natural science-ideal proceeded in an atomistic fashion, and extending its claims to the realm of human society entailed that the atoms of society, namely the *individuals*, should now be used as building blocks in the rational construction of society, as a hypothetical account of the emergence of an ordered society. Initially this atomistic approach served theories of the power-state (which is both absolutistic and totalitarian – such as defended by Hobbes who claims that the

social contract empowered the monarch to everything – see Hobbes, 1968:230), the state as *Leviathan* not acknowledging any limits to its power.

However, the initial driving force behind the natural science-ideal is found in the Renaissance motive of autonomous freedom. It was only in order to proclaim this freedom that an instrument was required and the ideal of an all-encompassing natural scientific analysis (in mathematical-mechanical-physical terms) provided such an instrument, considered to support the enthronement of the personality ideal.¹

Unfortunately this instrument turned out to contain the largest threat to its creator, because the mere idea that everything in the universe is subject to exact natural laws ultimately eliminates all human *freedom*. Those who were in the grip of the science-ideal and thought of the future of society became victims of a totalitarian view according to which everything could be mastered and controlled, envisaging also human society according to a fixed and pre-determined pattern.²

During the 19th and early 20th centuries we find new dominant principles of explanation entering the scene, although their core meaning already surfaced in Greek philosophy. This is particularly the case regarding the opposition of constancy and change – an opposition underlying the claim of Heraclitus that one can never step into the same river twice. The physicalist atomism (also known as materialism) of some Enlightenment thinkers was challenged by the focus on the *organic* during the Romantic period (late 18th and early 19th century. It was during this period that the rationalistic atomism of the Enlightenment made room for the ideology of the community, proceeding from an irrationalistic and holistic perspective. The rationalistic ethics of Kant sacrificed individuality to the universally valid law-giving entailed in the categorical imperative, whereas Romanticism claimed that each individual, and eventually each organic community (nation) is a law unto itself. Later on Darwin reverted to an extreme form of physicalism in his 1859 work (see Strauss, 2007). The rise of neo-Vitalism during the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century once again continued to impose the difference between

¹ When Edmund Husserl portrays the development of modern philosophy he characterizes its “rationalistic science-ideal” (Husserl, 1954:119). His contemporary, Georg Simmel, used the expression “personality ideal” (see Lotter, 2000:188). According to Dooyeweerd one can view *nature* (science-ideal) and *freedom* (personality ideal) as the basic motive or ground-motive of modern (humanistic) philosophy (Dooyeweerd, 1997-I:200 ff., 216 ff.).

² Both Huxley’s *The Brave New World* (1932) and Orwell’s *1984* (published in 1948) continued to portray an encompassing stable community solely guided by a concern for the self – although Orwell ultimately sacrifices freedom to the power of the elite (the tyranny of a power-state) (see Van Riessen, 1952:58-67).

physicalistic and organicistic approaches upon views of human society – still accompanied by the opposition between atomism and holism.

The incredibly complex nature of living entities more recently – once again a century later – inspired considerations concerning the structural plan (German: *Bauplan*) of living things, particularly advanced by Behe in his idea of *irreducibly complex systems* (see Behe, 2003:39 ff.).³

With his specific understanding of information as the reverse of entropy – the one is simply the negative of the other (Wiener, 1950:18) – Wiener introduced his new discipline of cybernetics. His understanding of information is closely connected to communication and since sociology and anthropology are basically sciences of communication they are considered to be parts of cybernetics. Yet he orients himself to physics and logical positivism (Wiener, 1964:89) as well as to pragmatism. This explains why he holds that words such as “life, purpose, and soul are grossly inadequate to precise scientific thinking” (Wiener, 1954:31). He therefore advises that it is best “to avoid all question-begging epithets such as ‘life,’ ‘soul,’ ‘vitalism,’ and the like.” There is no reason why “machines” may not “resemble human beings in representing pockets of decreasing entropy in a framework in which the large entropy tends to increase” (Wiener, 1954:32).

What used to be seen as a unique feature of living entities, their constant exchange of materials (already in ancient Greece connected to *fire* as the symbol of life), is merely a characteristic of thermodynamically open systems (just recall Von Bertalanffy’s generalization of the second main law to open systems – 1973:149). It therefore does not contradict Wiener’s physicalistic inclination to highlight an open system when he says: “We are but whirlpools in a river of every-flowing water. We are not stuff that abides, but patterns that perpetuate themselves” (Wiener, 1954:96).

Since Wiener equates the human person with cybernetic machines and identify information with structure (pattern) his physicalistic fantasy truly envisages what, according to him, it is in principle (although currently not practically executable) highly plausible: “In other words, the fact that we cannot telegraph the pattern of a man from one place to another seems to be due to technical difficulties, ... The idea itself is highly plausible” (Wiener, 1954:104).

³ Sussenbach supports this idea of Behe and explains cell-division as an example of an irreducibly complex system (Sussenbach, 2005:138).

His combination of communication and *control*, combined with his mentioned comparison of machines and human beings, underscores the ultimate physicalistic determinism present in his thought, in principle eliminating human freedom. Schuurman is therefore justified in his critical stance towards Wiener. He rejects the equation of entropy and information for it is only through technological formation that the physical energy-structure can become information (Schuurman, 2008:185). In this way energy becomes *structured* energy, such as in signals – and this leads him to the conclusion that “[I]nformation theory is really the theory of signal transmission” (Schuurman, 2008:392). According to him “[P]hysical energy is the basis for information conceived as the analytical substratum of language. The transporting of information – communication – is a total event in which the lingual object function retrocipates, *via* the analytical function, on the energy function” (Schuurman, 2008:186). With his ultimate concern for “mechanical control” Wiener’s “philosophy is a form of technologism” (Schuurman, 2008:205). Human responsibility and freedom are not accounted for.

2. The matrix of normativity in human society

When the accountable human freedom to respond to normative principles is acknowledged human society can be appreciated in terms of modes of explanation exceeding the one-sidedness entailed in atomistic, holistic, mechanistic, physicalistic or vitalistic approaches. A mere focus upon aspects of nature, such as those of number (the point of orientation of atomism), space (the starting-point of holism), the kinematic (explored by mechanistic views) the physical (distorted by physicalism) cannot furnish us with an insight into the normative accountability of human beings. This unique human freedom first of all manifests itself in the normative contraries present in our everyday experience of life, such as those between logical and illogical, kind and hostile, legal and illegal, thrifty and wasteful, beautiful and ugly, polite and impolite.

Without a yardstick, a norm or principle, it will not be possible to differentiate between what is logical, i.e. conforming to logical principles such as those of identity, non-contradiction, the excluded middle, sufficient reason, thought-economy, and so on. Although there may be differences of opinion regarding the nature of these principles it cannot be denied *that* principles are involved.

The first task of this kind of approach will be to identify the different kinds of normative principles guiding human societal activities. For example, if one considers societal collectivities such as universities, cultural associations, sport clubs, states, or marriages it is always possible to find a guiding or leading normative perspective. Universities, for example, as academic institutions, are guided by *theoretical-logical* concerns captured in the idea of scholarship (teaching and doing research). Likewise, states, as public legal institutions, are guided by concerns for *public justice*, business enterprises by considerations of *frugality*, i.e. avoiding what is excessive. A tentative list of all the normative aspects of reality is given by the following: the *logical-analytical* aspect, the *cultural-historical* aspect, the *sign* mode, the *social* facet, the *economic* function, the *aesthetic* mode, the *jural* side, as well as the *moral* and *certitudinal* spheres.

It is clear that human beings do function within all these normative aspects, because they are capable of thinking and arguing; of cultural forming and shaping; of speaking, listening and interpreting; of socializing; of acting in frugal, non-excessive ways; of appreciating what is beautiful; in observing the rights of others; in respecting and loving fellow human beings; and in trusting, believing and confiding. Whereas animals experience reality exclusively from their natural inclination,⁴ directed at that which is important to them in a physical, biotic and sensitive sense,⁵ human beings have the flexible freedom to choose alternative guiding functions for their actions. Since those aspects in which a person typically functions are not instinctively assured or bound humankind has a flexibility making possible an incredible specialization in differentiated civilizations. Even Simpson emphasizes this: “Such specialization, which is non-genetic, requires individual flexibility and could not occur in a mainly instinctive animal” (Simpson, 1969: 90).

Portmann typifies the peculiar human freedom of choice as follows: “The narrow limitations of animal interests is opposed to our freedom of choice and direction. Animals can escape the bonds of their urges only to a limited extent, while I myself can, in every moment, in accordance with my whole attentiveness, turn my entire inwardly participative dedication to some or other matter, however insignificant it may appear to be” (Portmann, 1974:102).

⁴ Portmann characterizes animals as *Umweltgebunden* (constrained by environment) and *Instinktgesichert* (protected by instinct) (Portmann, 1990:79).

⁵ Animals experience reality in terms of that which is negotiable and not negotiable, edible and inedible, in terms of same sex and opposite sex, comforting and alarming.

However, human beings functioning within various aspects and under the guidance of particular normative vistas are not isolated individuals, they are organized in diverse social collectivities and these social entities display a unique intertwinement owing to the fact that every human being can assume multiple social roles within them without ever being exhausted by any one of them. Over and above these collective roles human beings also live out a personal domain of freedom not absorbed by any societal institution. It was particularly the discipline of sociology that accepted the challenge to account for the complexities of human social interaction. An analysis of the history of this discipline reveals a variation of positions in this respect, with the earlier mentioned atomistic and holistic views as extreme opposites.

3. Basic concepts: an interdisciplinary many-sidedness

Unfortunately sociological theorizing attempted to come to terms with the complexity of human social interaction without explicitly and critically entering into an analysis of the *basic concepts* involved in its theoretical analyses. The basic concepts I have in mind can be phrased in combined phrases where the qualifying term in each instance designates the perspective of the discipline under consideration, the *social*. No single sociological theory managed to side-step the implicit or explicit use of the following elementary basic concepts:

Social order, social stratification, social constancy and dynamics, social differentiation and integration, social sensitivity, solidarity and consciousness, social consensus and conflict, social power and control, and social symbolism, meaning and interpretation.

These elementary basic concepts must be distinguished from true metaphors. Their (implicit or explicit) use proved to serve as the foundation for the widely diverging theoretical designs operative during the past two centuries of sociological theorizing. An explicit and articulated account of these elementary basic concepts may enable us to develop an integral perspective on sociology as a discipline. In addition such an analysis will demonstrate that the discipline of sociology evinces an encyclopedic coherence with all the other academic disciplines, because in each case the second term, qualified by the term “social,” reflects the meaning of a different aspect of reality serving as point of entry for a distinct special science.

It happens frequently that a particular sociological approach over-emphasizes a specific basic concept of sociology. Sometimes even a combination of certain elementary basic concepts is overestimated. These privileged basic concepts then serve as the encompassing or root perspective of the theoretical design under consideration. In such a case one or a limited number of basic concepts are removed from their coherence with all the other basic concepts and elevated to the comprehensive level of an all-determining totality or root perspective. In this process many pseudo-roots are created. Each such pseudo-root subtly provides an encompassing anchoring for all the other basic concepts covered by its 'umbrella'. Though research shows, for example, that certain concepts are used more frequently by symbolic interactionism than by the structural functional approach, it does not mean that either of these theoretical trends could sidestep the inevitability of using all the elementary basic concepts of sociology. The only difference is that each orientation attaches its own "pseudo-root color" to the non-central ones used.

Of course these approaches did see some worthwhile traits in reality but unfortunately distorted the meaning of what they discovered through an one-sided over-emphasis. Even the most extreme reductionistic approach, after all, did see something "out there" in reality – something all sociological approaches have to account for in their own way.

As we all know the modern scholarly dispensation is characterized by a large number of distinct academic disciplines – basically differentiated in the natural sciences and the humanities. Within the natural sciences perhaps the two most familiar but also most perplexing realities are found in the nature of *matter* and the complex nature of living entities ("life" – compare the above-mentioned view of Behe regarding irreducibly complex systems) – and Wiener added *information* as something irreducible to matter (and its equivalent: energy). Within the humanities the reality of *complex social (global) systems* appear to pose a challenge to a multidisciplinary understanding in which the diverse academic disciplines (special sciences) play their role. A truly complex system cannot be decomposed or reduced to the angle of approach of any distinct special science focusing on it. The modern state or the business enterprise, for example, exceeds the scope of both the disciplines of law and economics, for the simple reason that neither a state nor a firm can be completely reduced to either of these perspectives (aspects) – the *economic* or the *jural*.

Even the most basic concept of physical nature, that of *matter*, exceeds the grasp of merely one angle of approach; and that in spite of the aim of superstring theory to produce a “theory of everything” it turned out that not even matter could be explained exclusively in physical terms. It is therefore not surprising that Stegmüller believes that one of the most difficult questions facing science in the 20th century is indeed given in the concept of matter, which he considers to be mysterious in the utmost sense.

When Stegmüller continues his explanation of the problems attached to an understanding of the nature of *matter* the most basic aspects of empirical reality surface. In the first place he distinguishes two global basic conceptions regarding the nature of matter and he points out that currently these conceptions once again, as previously, occupy a prominent place in the discussions. He calls these two basic conceptions the *atomistic* conception and the *continuity* conception.⁶ Also Laugwitz points out that insofar as physics subjects itself to auxiliary means from mathematics it cannot escape from the polarity between continuity and discreteness.⁷

As we noted the opposing extremes of atomistic and holistic approaches in the understanding of nature (physics and biology) are also present within the humanities. One merely has to reflect upon the connection and difference between the biotic aspect and the social aspect of reality. Without any doubt there are marked similarities between biotic phenomena and the structure and functioning of human society. Certain sociological trends of thought were so impressed by these similarities that they viewed social phenomena *as* living organisms – thus neglecting the differences between social phenomena and biotic phenomena. Of course this theoretical approach could manifest itself in multiple ways. It includes the social theories of Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Hegel, Comte, Spencer, Spann, Wiener, Parsons, Von Bertalanffy, Buckley, Alexander and Münch – to recall a few. Most of these thinkers share the theoretical conviction that society ought to be analyzed in terms of a(n organic) whole and its (organic) parts. This is what we designated as a holistic or universalistic approach.

⁶ “Selbst die beiden großen Grundkonzepte über die Natur der Materie stehen heute nach wie vor zur Diskussion, wenn auch mannigfaltig verschleiert hinter Bergen von Formeln. Diese beiden Grundkonzepte kann man als die atomistische Auffassung und als die Kontinuumsauffassung der Materie bezeichnen” (Stegmüller, 1987:91).

⁷ “Die Physik, insofern sie sich mathematischer Hilfsmittel bedient oder sich gar der Mathematik unterwirft, kann an der Polarität von Kontinuierlichem und Diskretem nicht vorbei” (Laugitz, 1986:9).

Of course an over-emphasis of the biotical analogy within the structure of the social aspect of reality by its very nature contradicts those theoretical approaches which over-emphasize other analogical structural moments within the social aspect. Therefore it is insufficient simply to relativize the presence of diverse “schools of sociological thought” since they are genuinely, due to diverging reductionistic perspectives, mutually exclusive. Such a relativizing attempt was undertaken by Fletcher (cf. 1971a:815 ff.) Waters correctly remarks: “The pleasures of complementarity notwithstanding, theories which contradict one another cannot all be correct or true” (Waters, 1994:345).

A consistent organicistic holism find its theoretical opposition in an atomistic individualism according to which all societal entities are mere collections of *individuals*. Alexander casts this opposition in the following terms: rational-individualistic versus rational-collectivist (Alexander, 1987:12). Another way to formulate this dilemma concerns the problems related to *action* on the one hand and *order* on the other hand (Alexander, 1987:12). Alexander also speaks of “subjective voluntarism” and “objective constraint” (Alexander, 1987:376). He believes that these problems are not optional: “every theory takes some position on both” (Alexander, 1987:12). Yet, according to him no intellectual tradition can be grounded in conceptions of action alone. We are concerned here with social theories, and every social theory must also be concerned about the problem of *order* (Alexander, 1988:13-14).

A consistent individualistic or atomistic method of concept formation and research, aims at reducing all societal relationships, processes and collectivities to “individuals-in-interaction.” It is opposed to an universalistic or holistic approach. The latter always proceeds from one or other social whole – sometimes plainly designated as “society” or the “social system” and, consequently, assigns a subordinate role to the individual – as being a mere part of this encompassing whole. In various chapters of his work on *Postmodernism and the Social Sciences* Hollinger at length discusses two “different models” with their accompanying methods of analysis: the “atomistic model” and the “organic model.”

He points out that the atomistic model, which is derived from Newtonian physics and defended by advocates of the enlightenment, especially by liberals and utilitarians, views society as an aggregation of individuals governed by the laws of nature, particularly the law of the maximization of one's rational self-interest. The

organic model, derived from Plato and Aristotle, is defended by romantics and other counter-enlightenment figures, including many political and cultural conservatives and reactionaries, but also by Marx. In this view, individuals are products of their community and can only realize themselves in it (Hollinger, 1994:5).

4. A classification of social interaction

Though one may argue that both these approaches highlight relevant facets of social reality, the one-sided claims they make – to the exclusion of each other – cannot both be maintained at the same time. The first step in overcoming the one-sidedness present in these two opposing approaches is to combine the elementary basic concepts of sociology in a complex analysis of the different ways of social interaction within a differentiated society. This is made possible by the fact that the social aspect of reality can only reveal its meaning through its coherence with all the other aspects, including those *preceding* the social aspect in the order of aspects. Because all concrete events in principle function within all aspects of reality, this concrete many-sidedness invites all the academic disciplines to make their distinct contribution to an understanding social action. If we restrict ourselves first of all to the possible ways in which an account can be given of social interaction it soon becomes clear that such social interaction cannot be described and classified without “borrowing” terms from non-social aspects. This is already evinced in the expression inter-action. The word “inter” means *between* and is derived from the meaning of spatial extension and positionality, while the word “action” comes from the meaning of physical activity. Particularly the physical analogy of thermodynamic open systems enables the conceptual understanding of social phenomena of mutual exchange. The coming and going of individuals do not eliminate the durability (identity) of that specific social relation. Of course incidental social events cannot constitute a durable whole which continues regardless of the exchange of participating social subjects.

Social interaction can occur within a social form of life that is integrated into a genuine whole or totality. Alternatively it can occur on a less rigid basis of standing-over-against-one-another or facing-one-another. The standing-alongside or in coordination with fellow human beings differ in nature from those forms of social interaction where definitive relations of sub- or super-ordination are found. This distinction between social next-to-each other (coordination) and social super- and sub-ordination reveals the intrinsic coherence between the social and the spatial aspects –

they represent analogies of the meaning of space within the meaning of the social aspect. However, in order to understand super- and sub-ordination more fully the analogy of *formative power* (control) is needed – i.e. an analogy from the cultural-historical aspect. Legitimate power in the case of human relationships is bound to an *office*, entailing certain *competencies* and involving an office-bearer exercising authority over fellow human beings. This is not the only context where the term competence is used – inter-individual relations which are on an equal footing presumes a certain social maturity or competence, even if it applies to something like little children playing. This competence for social exchanges constantly requires the ability to correctly *interpret* the response of other social subjects (analogy of the sign aspect), because without it the mutuality of interaction would become dispirited.

From these examples it is clear that a classification of the different underlying ways of interaction will have to keep in mind the meaning which a particular expression of all analogical structural moments in the social aspect acquires. Because a complete analysis of this would take us into an analysis of the complex (or: composite) basic concepts of sociology as scientific discipline, we just briefly mention the result of such an analysis.

The following two characteristics are important:

- (i) a solidary unitary character and
- (ii) a permanent structure of super- and subordination (i.e., of authority).

When a social form of life (life-form) possesses both a solidary unitary character and a permanent authority structure, it may be designated as a *social collectivity* (in German: *Verband*). Examples of societal collectivities are the state, the church, business, the school, the university, the (nuclear) family, the art club, the sports club, the cultural club and the language club. The state displays both a durable relation of sub- and superordination (authority of office-bearers and those subject to it, i.e. a permanent authority structure), while the unity and identity of a state is not abolished through the coming and going of its citizens (be it office bearers or subjects). The same applies for all the other societal collectivities that we named in the list of examples.

When a social form of life only displays one of these characteristics, we call it a *community*. A nation ('volk') in the cultural (ethnic) sense of the term and the extended family both possess a solidary unitary character (that is why there is continuity between a nation of a hundred years ago and today in spite of changes), but

no permanent authority structure can be indicated. In terms of these distinctions neither a state, nor a province, nor a rural town is a *community*. With reference to the state-side of the given facts, we are working with (higher or lower) forms of *governmental authority* – and therefore with relations of sub- and super-ordination which are absent from the communities mentioned in the sense defined above. A city and a town exhibit an interlacement of differently natured societal collectivities, communities and coordinational relationships.⁸

At this point social system theory in all its variants unfortunately fails to appreciate the distinct uniqueness of the multiplicity of social collectivities, communities and coordinational relationships for it adheres to an application of the whole parts relation (systems-subsystems relation) that is originally found in the spatial aspect and then erroneously extended to serve as a basic denominator in terms of which society on the whole could be understood. There are as many options within this holistic (universalistic) legacy as there are distinct societal collectivities or communities. Just consider the three “holy cows” of the West: *church*, *people* (ethnic communities) and the *state*. Each of them suffered from the ideological distortion of being elevated to the encompassing whole of human society, with all the others degraded to mere *subordinate parts* of the assumed totality.

5. Sphere-sovereignty

However, one finds points of connection for an alternative view amongst some of the most prominent thinkers in the field. In the neofunctionalism of Alexander and Münch the “own inner laws” of differentiated societal spheres of life are acknowledged. According to Münch the starting point of the theoretical debate of the 1980s is found in “Weber's theory of rationalization of modern society into spheres that are guided to an increasing extent by their own inner laws” (Münch, 1990: 442). In particular he mentions the “political system” with “its own inner laws” (Münch, 1990: 444). This idea is known as that of *sphere-sovereignty*. Since Van Prinsterer, Kuyper and Dooyeweerd, emphasized that no single societal institution or collectivity ought to be subordinated to any other, they *in principle* actually took a stance in opposition to the whole-parts scheme (systems and sub-systems). Although Rawls

⁸ Coordinational relationships have neither a permanent authority structure, nor a solidary unitary character – they concern the inter-relations of individuals and organizations on an equal footing with each other.

severely struggles with atomism and holism in his thought, he does evince an awareness of the inner nature of distinct societal entities.⁹ On the same page he refers to the distinctive autonomy of elements of society where principles within their own sphere fit their peculiar nature. This formulation indeed comes close to the idea of sphere-sovereignty.¹⁰

In a differentiated society various forms of life are institutional in the sense that they bind together individuals for their entire life or just for a part of their lives, independent of their own decisions (such as the state and the nuclear family). Yet not all societal collectivities possess such an *institutional* character. A business firm, a university or a sport club are all examples of societal collectivities which rest totally on voluntary membership. Yet it is impossible for any person to let his or her life be taken up completely in any of the various societal collectivities and communities in which she functions – simply because such a person at the same time also takes part in various other interrelations. Two families, for example, stand in a (inter-collective) coordinational relationship; two married couples in a (inter-communal) coordinational relationship. Furthermore, every individual is, in a differentiated society, taken up in countless inter-individual coordinational relationships where that individual relates informally to fellow human beings in coordinated contexts. Conversely, no person's life is ever completely absorbed in coordinational relationships, because at the opposite side we find institutional and non-institutional communities in which that person is involved. The variety of differentiated, partial, peripheral relationships is therefore nothing more than the multiplicity of social collectivities, communal and coordinational relationships in which human beings are socially involved.

A systematic analysis of the typical totality structure of social entities is found in the third Volume of the *magnum opus* of Dooyeweerd (see 1997-III) where he develops the idea of the foundational and qualifying functions of social collectivities and communities. The perspectives opened-up in this analysis successfully integrates the challenge of multidisciplinary perspectives on social systems while at the same time arguing for a perspective transcending the shortcomings inherent in *atomistic* and *holistic* approaches to human society. This view includes a distinction between

⁹ “But it is the distinct purposes and roles of the parts of the social structure, and how they fit together, that explains there being different principles for distinct kinds of subjects” (Rawls, 1996:262).

¹⁰ “Indeed, it seems natural to suppose that the distinctive character and autonomy of the various elements of society requires that, within some sphere, they act from their own principles designed to fit their peculiar nature.”

modal laws and type laws,¹¹ but an exploration of these distinctions exceeds the confines of this paper. Its purpose was merely to highlight the inevitability of explicitly accounting for the basic concepts (elementary, complex and typical) of a scientific reflection on human society, against the background of societal practices and theoretical approaches (mainly in the grip of the modern Humanistic motive of nature and freedom).¹²

The global world in which we live needs developments enhancing a further differentiation of accountable responsibilities – for fellow human beings and for our planet, unless it wants to derail into a path of de-differentiation, torn apart by the tensions between the science-ideal and the personality ideal, modernity and postmodernity, atomism and holism.

6. Literature

- ALEXANDER, J.C. 1987. *Sociological Theory since World War II, Twenty Lectures*. Columbia University Press, New York Columbia University Press.
- ALEXANDER, J.C. 1988. *Action and its Environments*, Columbia University Press, New York 1988.
- ALEXANDER, J.C. 1990. *Differentiation Theory and Social Change* (Co-editor: Paul Colomy). New York: Columbia University Press.
- ARISTOTLE 1894. *Politica*, Text edition by F. Susemihl and R.D. Hicks: *The Politics of Aristotle*, A revised text, New York: McMillan & Co.
- BEHE, M.J. 2003. *Darwin's Black Box*. New York: The Free Press, Paperback edition.
- DEKKER, C., MEESTER, R., and VAN WOUDEBERG, R. 2005. *Schitterend ongeluk of sporen van ontwerp? [Fantastic Accident of Traces of Design?]* Kampen: Ten Have.
- DOOYEWEERD, H. 1997. *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, Collected Works of Herman Dooyeweerd, A-Series Vols. I-IV, General Editor D.F.M. Strauss. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen.
- FLETCHER, R. 1971. *The Making of Sociology 1, Beginnings and foundations*. London: Thomas Nelson.
- HOBBS, Th. 1968. *Leviathan*. Hammondsworth: Pelican edition (originally published in 1651).
- HUSSERL, E. 1954. *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die Transzendente Phänomenologie*, Husserliana Band VI, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
- LAUGWITZ D. 1986. *Zahlen und Kontinuum. Eine Einführung in die Infinitesimalmathematik*. Mannheim: B.I.-Wissenschaftsverlag.

¹¹ Modal laws encompass all possible entities (such as the first two main law of thermodynamics), while type laws hold for a limited class of entities only (the law for being an atom does not hold for everything whatsoever).

¹² A systematic analysis of the elementary and complex basic concepts of sociology as a discipline is found in Strauss, 2006.

- LOTTER, M.-S. 2000. Das individuelle Gesetz. Zu Simmil's Kritik an der Lebensfremdheit der kantischen Moralphilosophie. In: *Kant-Studien*. Volume 2 (pp.178-203).
- MÜNCH, R. 1990. Differentiation, Rationalization, Interpenetration: The Emergence of Modern Society. In: Alexander, 1990 (pp.441-464).
- PLATO, 1966. *The Republic*, translated by F.M. Cornford, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- PORTMANN, A. 1974. *An den Grenzen des Wissens, von Beitrag der Biologie zu einem neuen Weltbild*. Wien: Econ.
- PORTMANN, A. 1990. *A zoologist looks at humankind*, translated by Judith Schaefer. New York: Columbia University Press.
- RAWLS, J. 1996. *Political Liberalism*. Revised Edition. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- SCHUURMAN, E. 2008. *Technology and the Future*. 2nd Edition. Jordan Station: Paideia Press.
- SIMPSON, G.G. 1969. *Biology and Man*. New York: Harcourt.
- STEGMÜLLER, W. 1987. *Hauptströmungen der Gegenwartsphilosophie*, Volume III. Stuttgart: Alfred Kröner Verlag.
- STRAUSS, D.F.M. 2006. *Reintegrating Social Theory – Reflecting upon human society and the discipline of sociology*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
- STRAUSS, D.F.M. 2007. Did Darwin develop a theory of evolution in the biological sense of the word? In: *South African Journal of Philosophy*, Vol.26(2):190-203.
- SUSSENBACH, J.S. 2005. Celdeling en de synthese van DNA: Evolutie of Ontwerp. In: DEKKER, et al., 2005 (pp.134-143).
- VAN RIESSEN, H. 1952. *The Society of the Future*. Philadelphia: The prebytarian and Reformed Publishing Company.
- VON BERTALANFFY, L. 1973. *General System Theory*. Hammondsworth: Penguin University Books.
- WATERS, M. 1994. *Modern Sociological Theory*. London: Sage Publications.
- WIENER, N. 1950. *Cybernetics; or Control and Communication in the Animal and the machine*. New York: John iley & Sons.
- WIENER, N. 1954. *The Human Use of Human Beings, Cybernetics and Society*. London: Eyre and Spottismoode.
- WIENER, N. 1956. *Why I am a Mathematician*. New York: Doubleday.
- WIENER, N. 1964. *God and Golem*. Cambridge Mass.: The Riverside.

Key conepts:

Atomism
 holism
 science ideal
 personality ideal
 social collectivities, communities and coordinational relationships
 sphere-sovereignty

Sleutelbegrippe:

Atomisme
 holisme
 wetenskapsideaal
 persoonlikheidsideaal
 verbande, gemeenskape en maatskapsverhoudinge

soewereinitiet-in-eie-kring