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## **Methodological Individualism**

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Ideas about social scientific explanation lie at the core of debates about methodological individualism (MI). The spirit of MI is captured by definition by Jon Elster:

“... all social phenomena – their structure and their change – are in principle explicable in ways that only involve individuals – their properties, their goals, their beliefs and their actions” (Elster 1985: 5).

For many individualists, like Elster, the basic idea of MI, when properly understood, is obvious and almost trivial. However, in equal measure, for many opponents the doctrine is an obviously wrong and unnecessary limitation for social scientific theorizing. The main task of this chapter is to explain how this state of affairs is possible. Much hangs on how MI is formulated, it might be that David Ruben is still right:

“... methodological individualism has never been stated with enough clarity and precision to permit proper evaluation” (Ruben 1985: 13).

However, there is much more at stake than abstract issues about social explanation. Strong emotions are associated with the label 'methodological individualism'. It is connected to other highly charged but obscure notions like reductionism and political individualism. Reductionism is often believed to have strong implications for disciplinary autonomy and is thus highly loaded with disciplinary politics. For some social sciences 'methodological individualism' (without any precise definition) has become a part of disciplinary identity. In eco-

nomics, a denial of methodological individualism simply signals lack of understanding of economics. In contrast, for many sociologists, supporting methodological individualism still signals an anti-sociological attitude that overlooks many crucial aspects of social reality. Politics proper come into the picture, as it is often suspected that methodological debates about individualism are covert means to challenge or push political views like Marxism or liberalism. While the issues of identity and politics are important for understanding the debates about MI, I will set them aside in this chapter and focus on philosophical issues at the core of the debate.

### **1. The many faces of methodological individualism**

The debates about methodological individualism started in the 1950s. However, the term is a bit older. It was introduced by Joseph Schumpeter in 1908 to distinguish individualism as a methodological approach in economics from individualism as a political position. It is notable that Schumpeter did not present MI as a general principle that applies to all social explanation, but as a special method used in theoretical economics (Udéhn 2001: 104-106). Methodological individualism became a general thesis about social explanation through the work of JWN Watkins. Inspired by Max Weber, Friedrich von Hayek, and Karl Popper he formulated and defended MI as a general doctrine about social ontology and explanation that received a lot of attention. The starting points of both Schumpeter's and Watkins' discussions were Max Weber's writings, but as soon as the debate started this connection was severed and methodological individualism came to be discussed as a general idea about social explanation.

Watkins originally formulated MI quite loosely:

“All social phenomena are, directly or indirectly, human creations. [...] the social scientist can continue searching for explanations of a social phenomenon until he has reduced it to psychological terms.” (1952: 28-29)

It is quite clear that Watkins thought the latter claim about explanation to be a simple implication of the first claim about ontology and that the whole principle is rather trivial. It turned out that he was only half right. Hardly anyone would dispute the first claim about ontology. It is the second claim that turned out to be controversial. Although Watkins talks about reduction and psychology, his real claim (inspired by Max Weber) is that social phenomena are "only *explained* by being are shown to be the resultants of individual activities." (1952: 29). Thus the central claim seems to be that only the individual attributes, like "dispositions, beliefs, and relationships of individuals" (1952: 29) are doing any real explanatory work in the social sciences. This is the core issue. While most critics do not deny that individual attributes have a role in social explanation, they challenge the idea that individual attributes are sufficient. We will come back to this core issue, but let us first put Watkins' claim in some context.

Five years later Watkins articulates an important background assumption:

“If methodological individualism means that human beings are supposed to be the only moving agents in history, and if sociological holism means that some superhuman agents or factors are supposed to be at work in history, then these two alternatives are exhaustive” (1957: 106)

This implies that an important motivation for MI is to keep scientifically or philosophically suspicious explanatory factors out of the social sciences. For Watkins, Weber, and other methodological individualists, human intentional agents are the only irreducible source of teleology in the social world. Thus teleological historical laws that override or outflank

individual agency are out (Watkins 1957; Pettit 1998: Chapter 3). Similarly suspicious are uncritical attributions of goals, interests or actions to nations, classes, and other social wholes.

Already these two quotations from Watkins show that from the beginning MI has been a confusing mix of quite different issues. Depending on whether one focuses on Watkins' definitions, his examples, or on the views he aims to criticize, one gets a very different idea of the key issue. Furthermore, when Watkins and other individualists responded to these criticism, they often reformulated MI, which in turn led to a new cascade of criticisms, defenses, and reformulations. Thus there are many different streams of debate about MI (Udéhn 2001), for example:

(1) There is a debate about the scope of rational choice methodology in the social sciences. Watkins' first paper discusses and defends Max Weber's reconstruction of model building strategy employed by economists. In this strategy you explain social phenomena as outcomes of rational and self-interested actions by agents who are characterized by preferences stipulated by the theorist and who are facing a certain kind of social situation. It is clear from Watkins' later writings that he intended MI to be a much more general thesis about social explanation, but the association between MI and rational choice methodology remains strong. The connection is very clear in economics, but also in sociology where MI is often just an alternative label for rational choice inspired approaches. This is natural, as this is precisely the methodology that Schumpeter originally baptized 'methodological individualism'.

(2) There is a debate about the reducibility of social concepts. Watkins' original definition talked about the reduction of social phenomena to individual dispositions. This was taken in the 50s and 60s to imply that the meanings of social concepts should be

defined in terms of individual predicates. The idea was that a person being a bank-teller is not a fact about that particular individual, but presupposes the existence of the social institution “bank.” As these social facts cannot be reduced to individual psychological facts – because the social concepts cannot be translated without residue to individual concepts – the critics of MI suggested that explanatory reduction also fails (Mandelbaum 1955). This debate about semantic individualism was important in the first decades of MI, but later it has become less and less relevant. Most people accept some sort of meaning holism (Pettit 1998: Chapter 4), but do not regard it as relevant to the MI debate about explanation.

(3) There is a debate about the scientific status of Marxist social theory. Watkins was a student of Popper and Marxist social theory was one his main targets. He was especially suspicious of Marx’s philosophy of history and his treatment of classes as subjects of historical processes. Given the prominence of Marxism in the latter half of the 20th century, it is no wonder that the most heated debates about MI were around this. It is notable that what started as an outside criticism transformed, with time, into an internal debate within Marxism when Jon Elster and other analytical Marxists attempted to reconstruct Marxist theory without teleology or functionalist thinking (Elster 1985, Wright, Levine & Sober 1992).

I will not discuss these themes more extensively in this chapter. In the following, the focus will be on understanding the core assumptions of MI: the ontological primacy of individual action and the explanatory implications of this idea.

## 2. The dialectics of the debate

One of the most surprising features of the MI debate is that many of the participants treat their position as obvious and find any opposition hard to understand. For people like Watkins and Elster, MI is almost trivially true once it is properly understood. At the same time, opponents like Steven Lukes and Geoffrey Hodgson, find the doctrine highly implausible once the distinction between ontological and explanatory doctrines is properly recognized. The difference in focus explains this puzzling discrepancy.

For most advocates of MI, the main motivation is purging suspicious explanatory factors from the social sciences. They are quite clear about what they oppose:

”Methodological collectivism [...] assumes that there are supra-individual entities that are prior to individuals in the explanatory order. Explanation proceeds from the laws either of self-regulation or of development of these larger entities, while individual actions are derived from the aggregate pattern.” (Elster 1985: 6)

In other words, methodological individualists want to rule out historical or functional laws that are incompatible with individual agency, attribution of agency or other psychological attributes to loose collective entities like nations or classes, and functional explanations that are not supported by underlying causal mechanisms. For them, the definition of MI is mainly a tool for ruling out these dubious ideas about social explanation. More generally, methodological individualism is regarded as an useful antidote against fuzziness and general conceptual obscurity. (Recall that MI-inspired analytical Marxism was also called non-bullshit Marxism.) Given this background, it not a surprise that they find it hard to believe that there would be any serious scientific opposition to their view.

The critics of MI mostly focus on the formulations of the doctrine. Very few of them defend any positive program of collectivism, holism, or organicism. Nor do they defend intel-

lectual obscurantism. (It might be that methodological holism is a philosophical ideal type like skepticism in epistemology: it is a recognizable philosophical position, but very hard to find in real life.) What anti-individualists find objectionable are implications of the individualist doctrine as it is formulated. For them, MI is either trivial or too restrictive. When formulated too broadly, the doctrine accommodates everything that a sensible anti-individualist would want. In this case, it is hard to see what all the fuss is about. On the other hand, if the doctrine is formulated too strictly, it will rule out perfectly sensible social explanations, deem useful and unproblematic social scientific concepts illegitimate, and leave important parts of the social world unexplained. This is what anti-individualists are primarily motivated to defend.

Hodgson (2007) articulates this trivial or wrong dilemma clearly (for an alternative formulation see Lukes 1968). According to him, there are two ways to formulate MI:

- ”(a) social phenomena should be explained entirely in terms of individuals alone; or
- (b) social phenomena should be explained in terms of individuals plus relations between individuals.” (2007: 220)

The version (a) is a strong and interesting claim. However, it is difficult to see how one would practically implement such a program. Furthermore, most individualists from Watkins to Elster have formulated MI in a way that allows relations between individuals. They are not atomists who deny the importance of relations and interactions between individuals (Wright, Levine & Sober 1992: 109-113). Furthermore, they do not deny the role of social processes in the formation of individuals. For them social influences on individual beliefs, desires, dispositions or opportunities are completely acceptable as long as they happen through interactions with other individuals. According to Hodgson, this move already trivializes MI, by creating a backdoor which makes institutions and social structures acceptable

explanatory factors. He argues that in modern social theory social structures are usually conceived as sets of interactive relations between individuals, while social institutions are regarded as special sorts of social structures that involve widely observed rules. Thus, if MI legitimizes social structures and institutions, it is easy to accept but it is difficult to see what the fuss is about.

It is not difficult to see how individualists would reply. They would point out that Hodgson has all too optimistic a view of modern social theory: there is a lot of obscure social theorizing in which the connections between postulated structures, mentalities, discourses, etc. and individuals and their relations are not as unproblematic as Hodgson suggests. So, while the original targets of MI have vanished, there is still enough obscurity around to make MI relevant. This is the rhetorical setting of the debate: both parties provide only two options to choose from, but also argue that the opposition is posing a false dilemma.

### **3. The difficulty of being precise**

At the heart of MI is the idea that explanations in terms of individuals and their actions are somehow privileged. Making this claim more precise, we need a general consensus on how individual and non-individual social properties are demarcated, a common idea of explanation, and an articulation and justification for the assumption of explanatory privilege. The problem is that there is no consensus on these issues.

The formulation of MI presupposes that we can say which properties are individually acceptable, but the demarcation between individual and non-individual social properties is highly controversial. Given the centrality of this issue, it is surprising that the issue has not received more attention. For example, no one has provided a detailed account of social relational properties, although we already saw their relevance for the debate. Similarly,



a systematic taxonomy and analysis of various sorts of macro social concepts found in the social sciences (Ylikoski 2012) is missing from the discussion. Kincaid's observation that "... the individualism-holism debate has been long on rhetoric and short on clarity" (Kincaid 1997: 13), seems to be correct. Thus typically individualists operate with some intuitive set of individualistically acceptable properties and anti-individualists accuse them of cheating. Individualists are either defining individual properties so broadly that there is no difference from a moderate holist position, or they conveniently forget structural/institutional presuppositions of their allegedly individualistic explanations.

A similar observation holds for explanation. It is quite common to base the argumentation on some intuitions about social explanation. People have different intuitions about explanation, so it is no wonder that they might reach different conclusions. In the case of explanation, we also have a lot of explicit theories. In fact, the last six decades of MI debate have been very productive in terms of theories of explanation (Salmon 1989, Woodward 2003). The problem is that no general consensus has emerged about the right theory of explanation. Thus while the D-N account that Watkins utilized in his arguments has pretty much lost its appeal, it is unclear what the replacement should be. While most people would go for some sort of causal theory of explanation, the details matter. Different theories of explanation produce different results with respect to MI. For example, if explanation involves statements of causal or counterfactual dependence (Woodward 2003), various institutional and structural facts can easily be shown to be explanatory. They are causal difference-makers, so why can't they be fully legitimate explanatory causes? However, individualists might not be satisfied with this. For example, they could distinguish between mere causal claims and explanations proper. While it might be true that one can have sensible causal claims involving macro variables, these are not sufficient for explanation. Many individualists find mechanism-based

theories of explanation appealing (Elster 1985, 2007; Hedström & Ylikoski 2010). Thus, they could argue that full mechanistic explanation would include individuals and thus justify their belief that individual agency has a crucial role in all social explanation.

A popular strategy among philosophers of science has been to deploy conceptual tools from philosophy of mind to resolve the individualism-holism debate. The idea has been to view the problem as analogical to the mainstream way of conceiving the relation between the physical and the mental (Currie 1984; Pettit 1993; Kincaid 1997; Zahle 2006; Sawyer 2005; List & Spiekermann 2013). Anti-individualists have been excited about the possibility of presenting arguments that are similar to the arguments for non-reductive materialism. The idea is to have individualistically acceptable ontology without losing explanatory autonomy of non-individual social properties. The appeal of this strategy is based on the belief that the ideas of supervenience and multiple realization provide a neat way to argue against reductionism. The basic idea of supervenience is that higher-level properties can be multiply realized by lower-level properties, but once the lower-level properties are fixed, the higher-level properties are fixed as well. There can be no difference in supervenient properties without a difference in subvenient properties. Multiple realizability is assumed to block any reduction of social properties to individual properties while realization guarantees that nothing ontologically spooky is happening.

The problem with this approach is that although it has brought more technical sophistication to the debate, it has not really resolved the issue. The first problem is that while the early enthusiasm over supervenience was based on the vision of non-reductive materialism, the relation between supervenience and reduction has become quite unclear. There is no consensus on how to understand the idea of reduction: the results depend on how you understand reductive explanation. So, this strategy does not bypass the problem of having agree-

ment about theories of explanation. The second problem is that this strategy also presupposes a solution to the demarcation problem between individual and social properties. As long as there is general disagreement about individualistically acceptable properties, the philosophy of mind strategy cannot resolve the issue. In fact, without agreement about individual properties one cannot even evaluate the claim that social properties supervene on individual properties. The third problem is that this approach introduces a strong but possibly highly misleading metaphysical idea of levels to the debate. For philosophers it might be natural to talk about individual and social levels, but it is questionable how well this scheme – and the analogy with mind-brain relations – applies to the social sciences. As I argue elsewhere (Ylikoski 2014) the metaphor of levels might be a highly misleading way to conceive of social scientific micro-macro relations. Finally, this approach is methodologically quite sterile. The philosophical debate takes an end-of-science perspective that considers relations between future well-confirmed social and individual theories. This is an in principle debate about reductive relations between imaginary theories without a proper theory of reductive explanation. The practical methodological implications of this highly abstract debate can be expected to be quite sparse.

It seems that we have to tolerate some uncertainty and ambiguity on the questions of explanation and demarcation of individual properties. Without clear answers to these questions, we will not have a determinate philosophical solution to the debate. Some progress might still be possible by focusing on the idea of explanatory privilege. The claim that individual properties are explanatorily privileged can be understood at least three different ways. First, we have a strong formulation:

**S-IM:** All non-individual properties are not explanatory

This claim straightforwardly denies any explanatory relevance to non-individual social properties. This blunt thesis is the usual target of critics of MI. However, it is unclear whether individualists really subscribe to this principle. Starting from Watkins (1957: 106), individualists have contrasted unfinished or half-way explanations of everyday social science with ideal rock-bottom explanations. For example, Elster writes that

”In principle, explanations in the social sciences should refer only to individuals and their actions. In practice, social scientists nevertheless refer to supra-individual entities such as households, firms, or nations, either as a *harmless shorthand* or as a *second-best approach* forced upon them by lack of data or of fine-grained theories.” (2007: 13)

Thus it seems that Elster would subscribe to a less harsh thesis:

**E-IM:** Non-individual properties can be derivatively explanatory and placeholders for proper individualistic explanations

This is one way to interpret the idea of half-way explanation. It saves the critic’s intuition that non-individual properties are explanatory and is compatible with everyday explanatory practices of the social sciences, but still retains a strong commitment to the idea of explanatory privilege. However, there is also another way to reconstruct the idea of rock-bottom explanation:

**W-IM:** Non-individual properties are explanatorily legitimate as long as they have satisfactory microfoundations in acceptable individual explanatory factors

The differences between these formulations are significant, but they all capture the idea that everything is ultimately explainable in terms of individual properties. In the case of S-IM this happens directly, while in W-IM this happens through chains of explanatory pre-supposition: non-individual properties are explanatory, but only if they can be given accep-

table microfoundations. E-IM is a compromise between the two, but it is based on a rather vague idea of placeholder explanation. Given this difficulty, accepting W-IM makes more sense. Notice that W-IM might also be acceptable to most anti-individualists, depending on how the idea of microfoundations is understood. If the demand of microfoundations is understood as reduction, anti-individualists would leave the boat, but if it only signals that it must be explicable how social wholes are constituted by individuals, their mental states, relations, and material resources, most would probably be ready to buy the argument. This is not a problem; there is no reason to assume that MI has to be a controversial doctrine. However, we still have not answered the question of why individual properties are explanatorily privileged.

#### **4. Methodological individualism in action**

The study of abstract principles does not take us far. One of the major problems in philosophical debates about MI is the rarity of real examples. So it makes sense to take a brief look at methodological individualism in practice. Game theory is often cited as MI in action. Thus we can assume that it gives us a pretty good idea what these individualists think MI would look like in practice.

Game theory studies strategic interactions by modeling them as games in which the agents are facing a choice between different behaviors whose consequences depend on the choices of other agents. For our purposes, the most relevant part of this setting are the rules of the game. They determine what strategies are open to agents, how information and resources are distributed to agents, and how individual payoffs (and other outcomes) are generated. The formal description of the game does not usually involve references to social structures and institutional rules, which may give an appearance that the model does not involve these

things. However, this impression is simply wrong. While some of the rules may be interpreted as a description of the physical situation in which the individual players interact, the rest of them describe exogenous institutions (Janssen 1993: 36). Thus it seems that in practice game theorists (and individualists) do not find social structures and institutions problematic as background factors for their models.

Furthermore, these factors seem to be central explanatory variables in game theoretical models. If this sounds strange, consider the following observations. Game theory operates with rational choice theory, which is not a very rich or empirical account of individual agents. The strong assumptions about rationality and knowledge are justified by their analytical convenience: the results of interesting models would remain robust even if these assumptions were relaxed. Game theory is not really focused on studying individuals' mental life. Rather, it is analysis of situations of strategic interaction. Furthermore, it is not primarily in the business of making point predictions, but of comparative statics that study how changes in game parameters change players' behavior and collective outcomes. In other words, the attention is on how changes in the rules change the agents' choices (and thus outcomes). If the key explanatory variables in a study are those that are systematically varied and whose consequences are observed, then we can conclude that social structures and institutions are among the key explanatory variables in game theoretical social science. Furthermore, it is hard to believe that the explanatory power of game theory would increase if these facts were reconstructed, assuming that it possible even in principle, in some "individualistic" vocabulary. Rather, the models would just get more complicated, without additional insights provided about the issues of interest.

These structural presuppositions have not gone unnoticed by the critics of MI and they have raised the accusation that individualists do not practice what they preach (Kincaid

1997). However, it is hard to believe that people would be this massively misguided about their own activities. Maybe the core of MI is having individual agency rather than reducing all properties to individual properties? Thus structural and institutional facts are allowed as long as they do not involve any dubious collective agency and they can be explained in a way that is compatible with the ontological requirements of individualism. In other words, institutional and structural facts are acceptable in explanations as long as they do not have problematic explanatory presuppositions and the explanations involve individual agency. This sounds much like W-IM and is compatible with what sociologists like Siegwart Lindenbergh, James Coleman, and Peter Hedström characterize as ‘structural individualism’ (Udéhn 2001: 318-319).

Game theory provides another surprising observation: agents in game theoretical models are not necessarily individuals. Economists and political scientists seem to accept firms, households, states, and other organizations as agents in their models, and individualists don’t complain about this. Furthermore, it is ironic that rational choice theory seems to apply better to corporate agents like firms and parties than to proper individuals like consumers and voters (Satz & Ferejohn 1994). What this suggests is that MI is not so much about purity about individual properties, but about agency. Firms, states, and households are corporate agents with legal status and defined responsibilities. They are not persons, but their inner workings are assumed to be well-understood in terms of individual actions. Thus they seem to be legitimate agents for the purpose of studying structures of strategic interaction. Again, this seems to be compatible with the W-IM interpretation of explanatory privilege.

Basically the same observations also apply to agent-based simulation models in the social sciences. Agent-based simulation methodology has been heralded as an implementation of MI that is more flexible than rational choice theory (Macy, Centola, Flache, de Rijdt &

Willer 2011). It allows detailed bottom-up modeling of micro-macro dynamics and it is not confined to assumptions about homogeneity or the rationality of agents. However, we have exactly the same thing: the rules of the simulation may reflect exogenous structural and institutional facts, some of the central explanatory variables are structural, and the agents may well be corporate agents. These things are typically not found to be problematic, so it is safe to conclude that they do not challenge the basic individualist commitment. What the agent-based simulations do show is that micro-macro dynamics are messy and that understanding them is a substantial cognitive challenge that cannot be resolved simply by appealing to abstract ontological principles like MI.

## **5. The primacy of agency**

If the argument of the previous section is right, MI is really about agency. But what makes individual agency so special? The underlying motivation for MI is the idea of the ontological primacy of individual agency. While the social world contains all kinds of things – such as meanings, institutions, collective agents, social structures, etc – none of these things would exist or operate without individual intentional agency. From this generally accepted ontological idea individualists infer that the operation of these things cannot be understood without understanding their relation to individual action. In other words, purely holistic explanations would miss something essential about the way in which the social world works. On this interpretation individualists are not denying the existence of these things, nor are they denying that they can engage in causal relations. What they are claiming is that explanatory understanding of these things requires connecting them to human agency.

This observation explains why so many individualistically oriented social scientists find the idea of mechanism-based explanation so appealing (Elster 2007, Hedström &



Ylikoski 2010). In this view the task of explanation is to open the black box of social processes and show the cogs and wheels that make it work. MI can be understood in this context as a claim that intentional individual agency is an important cog that cannot be ignored in any social explanation. On this interpretation households and corporate agents can be regarded as relatively well-understood compound components and there is no need to dissect them to their constituents for most purposes. In other words, their behaviors are assumed to be safely rooted in individual intentional action.

Anti-individualists may not dispute these points. They might agree about the ontological primacy, and also about what a full mechanism-based social explanation would involve. However, they might object that the mechanistic ideal is too demanding: it should be allowable to abstract away from individual agency. If this is the only disagreement, the debate about MI is really about the pragmatics of explanation: is it legitimate to explain without spelling out the mechanisms by which the non-individual social causes bring about their effects (Kincaid 1997)? This is a perennial issue related to mechanism-based explanation, but it has no special connection to individual agency. However, individualists might be committed to additional ideas about the explanatory primacy of intentional individual action.

One of these ideas is *intentional fundamentalism*. According to this view the understanding provided by intentional (rational) action has some special qualities that set it apart from all other causal explanations. The roots of this view can be traced to Max Weber's claim that for sociological purposes "... collectivities must be treated as *solely* the resultants and modes of organization of the particular acts of individual persons, since these alone can be treated as agents in a course of subjectively understandable action." (Weber 1968: 13). This is often interpreted as Weber's statement of MI, but here the most relevant part is the reference to subjectively understandable action. One interpretation is that Weber takes intentional ex-

planation to have some special qualities that make it somehow privileged. In the same spirit, many social scientists, especially those inspired by rational choice theory, describe rational explanations as ‘rock bottom’, ‘especially satisfactory’, or not requiring further explanation (Ylikoski 2012).

Intentional fundamentalism can be used as a basis for a regress argument for MI. This argument starts with the (often implicit) premise that a genuine explanation requires that the *explanans* is itself explained or is inherently intelligible. Following this principle, explanations referring to supra-individual social facts would only be explanatory when they themselves are explained by facts about individuals. Of course, this opens up a possibility of regress that will continue until fundamental physics, or even infinitely. (This regress argument is often raised against mechanism-based accounts of explanation.) Here the special status of rational explanation comes to the rescue: because it has the special character of being “subjectively understandable” it stops the regress and provides genuine explanation. As there is no similar special character for supra- or sub-individual explanatory factors, we would now have a unique justification for MI.

The problems with this regress argument are multiple (Ylikoski 2012). First, the premise of explanatory regress is based on a misunderstanding. An explanation only presupposes that the *explanans* is true, not that it is explained. The explanation of the *explanans* is a separate question. The second problem is that the idea of special understanding provided by intentional explanation does not go well with a more general idea of mechanism-based explanation. Although there are evolutionary reasons for the cognitive salience of folk psychological explanatory schemes, they do not provide the basis for explanatory privilege. Folk psychology might be indispensable in the social sciences, but there is no reason to turn it into a virtue. Rather, we should constantly pay attention to its limitations. Intentional fundamenta-

lism also makes it difficult to recognize that not all social scientific explanatory mechanisms involve intentional action. For example, some sub-personal psychological mechanisms might be highly relevant for social scientific explanations (e.g. stereotype threat). Similarly, some mechanisms might not involve individual or rational agents (e.g. selection mechanisms in organizational ecology). Thus it makes sense to think of intentional action as a (non-rigid) disciplinary stopping point for the social sciences rather than a privileged explanatory level.

Given the non-viability of intentional fundamentalism, the best strategy for individualists to defend MI is to appeal to the ontological primacy of intentional action, the need for deeper mechanism-based explanations, and the typical obscurity of social theorizing that does not take ontological primacy seriously. This does not imply a philosophical vindication of MI, but it might justify the heuristic idea of social theorizing: all or most credible social scientific explanations have intentional agents as their basic building blocks. Thus it would make sense as a heuristic principle to focus on individual agents and the situations they face, because this is the most reliable way to get a hold on relevant social mechanisms. Of course, this way of conceiving of MI may be too much for critics. After all, most of the controversial content is gone and it is hard to see what is at stake anymore. However, this reflects the historical development of the MI debate: modern versions of MI, like structural individualism, have become so close to moderate holism that the positions are difficult to distinguish from one another by their commitments (Udén 2001). There probably are some differences between the positions, but they are so small that they are made invisible by the variance within each camp and general imprecision of the formulations.

## **6. Conclusion**

Methodological individualism could be more properly called explanatory individualism. Also the emphasis on individuals might be partly misleading, as the real issue for many individualists seems to be agency rather than individuality as such. The long and unresolved history of MI is mostly explained by the ambiguity of more basic notions involved in its formulation. Thus, people have very different views about the content of MI. Most of the dragons that the original MI supporters fought are dead, so it is worth considering whether we should retire the notion of MI all together. If MI is motivated by something like intentional fundamentalism, it is a form of hermeneutic romanticism that should be given up. If MI is a tool for fighting against obscurantism in social theory, it is probably too imprecise for that. Explanatory obscurity is best fought directly rather than by appealing to highly abstract philosophical principles. And finally, while MI has played a major role in highlighting the complexities of micro-macro relations in the social sciences – for example in relation to collective action – these issues are highlighted more effectively by addressing the empirical and theoretical challenges directly rather than by focusing on vague philosophical doctrine. Of course, the retirement of the MI does not mean that all involved issues have been solved. It simply means that these issues are better discussed directly.

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