

TOWARD AN EMANCIPATORY SOCIAL SCIENCE

Lecture 3: On Holism, Historicism, and Perspectivism

I

So what do I hope to have accomplished in the first two lectures? In the first, I sought to take the measure of Hegelian Marxism. I think Joseph McCarney (a prominent contemporary Hegelian Marxist), along with some others, is right in arguing that Marx was, through and through, a Hegelian. With only minimal changes, Marx adopted Hegel's dialectical method, historicism and holism. Marx didn't, as he and Engels thought they did, stand Hegel on his head. Marx's methodology and much of his conceptualization is thoroughly Hegelian. McCarney's is one of the strongest attempts to deploy, without obscurantism, this distinctively Marxist and Hegelian method earlier expounded by Georg Lukács, but both attempts fail. History has no *telos* or goal and we do not know, and indeed cannot come to know, the universe's interconnected whole or totality. The very idea is an utter non-starter. Moreover, we need not know such a totality or even have a coherent conception of what we are talking about here, something that is supposedly necessary, adequately to know anything. There can be no purposiveness without purposes: purposes are things individual agents have (sometimes acting collectively) with beliefs, ends, intentions, and the like. The World Spirit, reason, or humanity cannot count as purpose or an agent, though individual agents (human beings), acting together and cooperatively, can act purposively to achieve some end. We can (*pace* Hegel) have causal explanations which are complete without taking in (comprehending) or indeed in any way grasping such a totality, let alone a *unified* totality. We have no coherent conception of what such a totality would be like and we, to add insult to injury, have no

conception of what it would be like for it to be so unified. Moreover, 'Absolute knowledge', even assuming the idea is somehow intelligible, is not available to us. Some people (or so these people say and believe) long for the Absolute, but that is pure self-mystification. They do not understand what they are longing for and the idea that in forging these things we must adjust ourselves to some form of epistemological skepticism, postmodern or otherwise, also has no warrant. That is another road not to be taken. Whatever the errors of logical empiricism may have been, it had the right ideas and the right attitude toward such matters. It took seriously the idea of the supremacy of evidence. We, however, can and do have knowledge without having Absolute knowledge, just as Rudolf Carnap showed long ago that we can have knowledge without having *certain* knowledge (Carnap 1949). We cannot and do not need to escape contingency and gain certainty. But we are no worse off for all of that. We, if we think otherwise, should take lessons from John Dewey here.

However, not all is dross that is McCarney. He is on target in his conceptualization of ideology. He is also an astute critic of the very idea of critical theory—the underlying idea that attracted many of us (including me once) to the Frankfurt school (Nielsen 1982; 1990; 1991a; 1991b; 1993a; 1993b; 1993c; 2003). Perhaps most interestingly of all, McCarney makes a strong case for what at first sounds like an oxymoron, namely, an emancipatory social science that is non-normative. There he builds on what has been called Hegel's and Marx's amorality. His argument is a controversial one, but he makes (as I tried to show in the first lecture) a strong case for it that deserves careful attention.

In the second lecture I argued on more controversial grounds for an emancipatory social science that *presupposes but does not contain norms*. I should add, qualifying my thesis, the *procedural* norms of scientific practices apart. But non-procedural substantive norms must be excluded from emancipatory social sciences. Indeed, they must be—or so I claim—if they are going to be sciences. This must be true of all sciences, emancipatory or not. So egalitarian norms (even radical egalitarian ones), along with all other substantive norms, should be excluded from science,

including Marxian emancipatory social science. This view, like McCarney's, builds on what has been called Marx's amorality, though it does not require it (Nielsen 1988; 1989).

This Marxian emancipatory social science, or so I argued, presupposes but does not contain a normative stance or viewpoint itself and is not reducible to a purely ethical or utopian socialism or to becoming (what Max Weber detested) a *political moralism*. It is an emancipatory social science and yet *does not, indeed cannot, endorse as part of its science a socialist moral theory or Weltanschauung or any moral claims*. It is a social science that is *explicitly normatively relevant without its science itself being normative*.

I expect this is something that will be strongly resisted in some quarters. Indeed, some will take it to involve a pragmatic contradiction. However, a morality or a normative ethical theory or normative political theory or politics is one thing; a science is something else. They are categorically distinct. Confusion, and sometimes worse, arises if we try to collapse them. But, as I have already advertised, a Marxian emancipatory social science presupposes a socialist normative orientation or *ethos*—I didn't say a theory—without this being a part of its science itself. That science is neither actually nor implicitly normative. (In that way we can, from another angle, see the strength of McCarney's claim while still quite consistently keeping a normative orientation. I don't think that McCarney would have disagreed with that.)

However, to stress again my central point, this emancipatory social science and the socialism it serves does not collapse into an ethical or utopian socialism, something firmly rejected by Marx, or commit itself to articulating a normative ethical theory or normative political theory or into being a political moralism (Nielsen 1988; 1989). Science is one thing and morality another. They are categorically distinct.

I argued this in the second lecture while characterizing and assessing analytical Marxism. I regard myself as an analytical Marxist or, as I prefer to say, an analytical Marxian, but as a maverick one much more sympathetic to a Davidson-like holism and a non-Hegelian historicism than are

most analytical Marxists. Unlike Richard Rorty, I would never call myself a neo-Hegelian (Rorty 2007, 129). I shall argue in this third lecture that we can and should take a holistic and historicist turn without sacrificing the rigor that analytical Marxists rightly prize and without abandoning the claimed, and indeed needed, scientificity of socialism (Levine 2003).

II

It is important to keep in mind that all four of the major analytical Marxists (Cohen, Elster, Roemer, and Wright) set themselves against historicism and holism and are methodological individualists. I shall, *au contraire*, articulate and defend here: (i) a form of non-Hegelian holistic Marxism, and (ii) a form of historicism and perspectivism. It should first be noted that the form of holism these paradigm analytical Marxists reject is a holistic dialectical obscurantism. It is something that goes with the Hegelian conception that I criticized in the first lecture and briefly repeated in Section I of this lecture. The holism I adopt is the kind that has been called, perhaps somewhat misleadingly, meaning or semantic holism, and *perhaps*, as I consider later, it is compatible with a methodological individualism that carefully distinguishes itself, as it should, from an *atomism*.

I shall first state and defend how I construe holism and then I shall move on to specify, explicate and defend the kind of historicist I am. In the course of doing this I shall attempt to give something of a justification of both holism and historicism.

I am as much opposed to Hegelian dialectical holism (sometimes called *radical* holism) as are Elster, *et al.* It is a holism that tends to be—indeed almost always is—obscurantist. Sometimes, as we have seen, it gets somewhat cleaned up but unfortunately still not thoroughly. My holism is what Andrew Levine has called a Quinean holism (Levine 2003). It has characteristically been called a meaning holism or semantic holism. Ned Block well defines it as “the doctrine that the identity of a belief content (or the meaning of a sentence that expresses it) is determined by its

place in the web of beliefs or sentences comprising a whole theory or group of theories” (Block 1996, 488). I would add, in order to make that characterization less rationalistic, that it has, and crucially, a set of practices so related. Such an addition leaves holism (as Block has just characterized it) “not clearly distinct from what has been called molecularism (a view which characterizes meaning and content in terms of relatively small parts of the web [of beliefs and sentences] in a way that allows many different theories [or sets of practices] to share those parts” (Block 1996, 488). ‘Holism’, however, has been given many different or partially different meanings (uses) and consists in many different kinds.

Methodological holism—a distinct species of holism—is a doctrine, like methodological individualism, concerning what is to count as a proper or at least a coherent *explanation*. It is not clear, for example, that one could not consistently be a meaning (semantic) holist and be a methodological individualist. Whether one reasonably or justifiably could is another matter. (We seek consistency, but that by itself does not yield adequacy.) But what it *is* to achieve reasonability or justifiability here is not clear. That aside, I doubt if many (indeed if any) analytical Marxists would reject meaning holism, but at least the most paradigmatic of them press the importance of being methodological individualists.

Should we, as good analytical Marxists, follow suit? Before we try to answer that, we should specify what we take methodological individualism to be. It has been, and still is, characterized in different ways. As Chandra Kumar points out, even Jon Elster (the analytical Marxist—by now a former analytical Marxist—most prominently concerned with arguing for methodological individualism) has in his numerous writings characterized it in several ways (Kumar 2008). However, Elster’s definition in his *Making Sense of Marx* gives a conception of methodological individualism that squares with what many conceive it to be. He defines it as “the doctrine that all social phenomena—their structure and their change—are in principle explicable in ways that only involve individuals—their properties, goals, beliefs, and actions. To go from social institutions and

aggregate patterns of behavior to individuals is the same kind of operation as going from cells to molecules” (Elster 1985, 5). However, Elster, as any Marxian or perhaps anyone else who has at all carefully thought about it, rejects atomism. Atomism rejects the notion that relations between individuals and, as well, social entities (classes, corporations, courts, etc.) are genuinely explanatory, claiming instead that all predicates properly applying to individuals are *monadic*. Atomists (but not methodological individualists) maintain, for example, that explanations of why capitalism tends to overproduction and crises or why, since 1975, inequalities have been growing is fully explained by causal processes internal (and completely so) to individuals. Levine, *et al.* remark:

The atomist would insist, in other words, that only entities which are fully constituted non-relationally are explanatory. On the face of it, atomism seems plainly unsustainable. In our everyday lives we exist within a network of relations to other people—as parents, siblings, employers, customers, and so on. These relations appear to be explanatory, and also, it would seem, irreducible: being a parent, for instance, necessarily involves another individual, the child (Levine *et al.*, 1987, 70).

Methodological individualism, which is often confused with atomism, shares with atomism the view “that social explanations are ultimately reduced to individual level explanations” (Levine, *et al.*, 1987, 71). But there is this important difference between them. Methodological individualists, as distinct from atomists, do not rule out or in any way reject irreducible relational properties from proper social scientific explanations or indeed the understanding of the lives of human beings. In giving social scientific explanations we often must go beyond just appealing to beliefs and desires of discrete individuals characterized by monadic predicates to inherently relational (dyadic) predicates. For many purposes, at least, appeal to relational predicates denoting relational properties of individuals is crucial, and indeed essential, to description and explanation. If we are to make in some contexts even remotely adequate descriptions and explanations, we must be able to speak of parents and children, brothers and sisters, employers and employees, teachers

and students, oppressors and oppressed, doctors and patients, and so on, though we should realize that some of these are society-specific. Some primitive societies, e.g., a hunting-gathering society, have no employers-and-employees or doctors-and-patients (though they may have *somewhat* functional equivalents). Modern societies will have no masters-and-serfs, though, again, they have its somewhat functional equivalents. We socialists hope that someday we will have a society—indeed a world—with no oppressors and oppressed or its functional equivalents. But we will never have a society without parents and children or at least something like it, as the short-lived experiment of the Shakers exemplified. The central point is that we will never have proper descriptions or explanations of social life and human behavior without the utilization of an appeal to relational properties which in being described must use dyadic predicates.

That notwithstanding, it is trivially true that among human beings there are only individual physical human beings; there are no supra-individual human beings or persons, though there are the super-rich. When asked to count the number of people in a room, we can identify and count them without appeal to such relational properties, though sometimes there are in the room some very tiny human beings (members of *homo sapiens*) as well as much bigger and talking ones holding them. We will typically then distinguish, appealing to relational properties, between parents and infant children. But even then we need not do it though even here we will have the dyadic distinction between big and small *homo sapiens*. If our concern is just to count the number of human beings in the room, we will count all such objects without differentiation between big and small or between talkers and non-talkers. Still, our descriptions and explanations of human life would be severely impoverished if we could not utilize relational properties in our explanations where those distinctions are relevant, as it often plainly is. If we tried to describe human life and proscribed relational properties, we would surely go very wrong. But methodological individualists, or at least those who do not *try* to equate methodological individualism with atomism, do not do this and such a justified criticism of atomism does not touch them.

Methodological individualists, where they are at all clear minded, appeal to relations between and among individuals and reject atomism as resolutely as do Hegelian Marxists (radical holists). As Levine, *et al.* well put it, “Nowhere does Elster (or any other Marxist defender of methodological individualism) claim that those relations are reducible to atomistic properties” (Levine, *et al.*, 1987, 71). There are, so far as what are *literally* designated as persons is concerned, only individual persons out there with relational and atomistic properties and with physical bodies (a pleonasm) of a somewhat distinctive type, e.g., big brained animals with opposable thumbs typically ambulatory and usually making patterned noises after they have reached a certain size. We are both social animals and, without exception, physical animals (another pleonasm). There is nothing here that either a reasonable holist or methodological individualist could not and should not accept. So what, then, is this dispute between methodological individualism and methodological holism about?

Perhaps, as some Wittgensteinians and neo-pragmatists think, the allegedly distinct views collapse into each other when both are plausibly articulated (Kumar 2008). We physical beings are also, as Aristotle emphasized, social animals. An adequate methodological individualism is indistinguishable from an adequate methodological holism. It is only *radical (Hegelian) holism and atomism* that get in the way and intellectually muck up things. The three most central writings on this are by Kumar (2008), Levine, *et al.* (1987) and Levin (2003). I shall build on them but also in an important respect go my own way.

What I have called, following convention, meaning (semantic) holism shouldn't be called that. Of four philosophical giants of our time—Quine, Davidson, Wittgenstein, and Rawls—three do not have a theory of meaning and two reject talk of meanings altogether, yet are what I, as well as Ned Block, have (again following convention) called ‘meaning holists’. I think all four of them should be called holists with respect to belief formation and fixation, explanation and justification. Two explicitly, and Wittgenstein implicitly, importantly qualify their holisms by rejecting what

Quine calls a coherence theory (better called a *pure* coherence theory). Quine qualifies it by appealing centrally to observation sentences which are rooted in what he calls (misleadingly) stimulus meanings. Taking these sentences holophrastically, they provide crucial links with the world, though not foundations. Most but not all positivists (i.e., Otto Neurath as an exception) speak of foundations and of relying on Quinean observation sentences when we are trying to fix belief or explain belief. These observation sentences to be coherent must fit in a coherent pattern with a web of belief. Without them, a web would be empty, but without a web these candidate observation sentences would be incoherent. But then the web could not constitute a web of belief (Nielsen 2008b). Rawls, in trying to get our beliefs into what he calls wide reflective equilibrium, appeals centrally to what he calls considered judgments in wide reflective equilibrium. These considered judgments have, according to Rawls, and I think correctly, some *initial* credibility. They are not just unreflected and unconsidered intuitions that just move us to action or intuitions which we must just accept on blind faith (Nielsen 2007; 2008a). They are *considered* judgments. Neither Quine nor Rawls are unqualified pure coherentists nor is Wittgenstein. (What also needs to be kept in mind is that Rawls rejects what he calls ‘rational intuitionism’, a view that Prichard, Ross and Sidgwick held; indeed G. A. Cohen has come to hold. Considered judgments should not be confused with that.)

However, getting a coherent pattern of beliefs, judgments and convictions is crucial. And this is so for all of the holistic philosophers I have mentioned. We determine the contents of a belief, explain beliefs, determine the use of a term or a sentence, justify a belief or a judgment, by determining its or their place in the web of beliefs, theories, sentences or practices, but not uniquely since the individual beliefs, convictions or judgments that we forge into coherence have *some* independent force as well. As Quine observed, our claims about the world are not confirmed or infirmed individually but only in conjunction with theories of which they are a part. For Rawls, we do not fully or even nearly so justify a moral belief individually but as being a part of the web of

our considered judgments at different levels of abstraction and our understanding of certain key relevant facts and theories about the world (Rawls 1999, 286-302; Nielsen 2008a, 219-52). (That is what distinguishes *wide* reflective equilibrium from *narrow* reflective equilibrium—something that G. A. Cohen misses in his critique of Rawls (Cohen 2008, 243).)

This holism is distinct from radical or Hegelian holism. Radical holism is the view that to be a genuine cause of anything it is necessary for it to be a macro-social category, to wit an institution like capitalism, a state, a government, the legal system, a class, a corporation, and the like. It believes like these, and they alone, according to radical holists, that do the real explaining. Particular relations among individuals are said by these Hegelian holists to be epiphenomenal with respect to social explanation. They are, as Levine, *et al.* put it in opposing them, “generated by the operation of the whole and in their own right they explain nothing” (Levine, *et al.*, 1987, 73). Moreover, to actually explain anything, according to these Hegelians, is to explain how it is part of the unified whole or the totality. We have seen in the first lecture how inadequate, indeed incoherent, such *radical* holism is. We must not identify meaning (semantic) holism with it.

This meaning holism is the kind of holism that I am defending, though, as I have indicated, I do not like the term. Both those taking a Quinean and a Rawlsian turn are such holists. In the conflict between Donald Davidson and Quine, though I am, with my old attachment to positivism, attracted by Quine’s appeal to observation sentences and to stimulus meanings—to what I, like Putnam, would call Quine’s empiricism but what Quine himself calls his naturalism. But I am also attracted (indeed more attracted) by Davidson’s counters. Still, I find myself unable firmly to decide which way to go there. But what is important for what I am arguing is that here in both cases we get what I have called semantic holism and certainly not a Hegelian, Althusserian or any other kind of holistic obscurantism.

What I do want to pursue a bit is whether one could reasonably be a *meaning or semantic holist and a methodological individualist*. Recall Elster’s definition of methodological individualism

“as the doctrine that social phenomena—their structure and change—are at least in principle explicable in ways that only involve individuals—their properties, their goals, their beliefs and actions” (Elster 1985, 5). Properties there include relational properties such as being a parent, employer, teacher, friend, enemy, oppressor, exploiter and these properties are irreducible. This makes individual humans, since they have such properties, irreducibly *social individuals*. With that, the distinction (or alleged distinction) between methodological individualism and methodological holism becomes more problematical. Also, there are such non-reducible concepts as corporations, religions, capitalism, classes and the like. There are, that is, some non-reducible social entities and there are irreducible *dyadic* relations such as friend or colleague. Moreover, there are social entities that do explanatory work. Think of Carl Schmidt’s distinction—a key distinction for him—between enemy and friend in state relations.

Could a meaning or semantic holist consistently and reasonably believe all genuine explanations must be in terms of individuals? Could she never coherently speak, for example, of class conflict or conflicts between states without speaking of the genuine explanatory elements being the behavior of individuals or assuming that for an explanation to be genuine it could at least *in principle* be put in terms of individuals? Of course she could, where it is just a question of just using shorthand for an explanation of what certain individuals would do. Suppose I say, ‘The Philosophy Department at Calgary voted for the new program.’ What I mean is that professors Jones, White, Petrovic, Walsh, and Major (members of the department) voted for the measure and that they outnumbered the professors (individually specifiable) who abstained or voted against the new program in what was agreed by all members of the department to be a decision to be made by straight majority vote. There are a lot of situations where a translation into the concrete yields such an individualist explanation. But perhaps not for all? And even in the above example non-monadic properties are appealed to, for example, ‘member of the department’. Moreover, suppose we say ‘With the coming depression there is increased fear, anxiety and anger in the population and

that will result in increasing class consciousness among working people and increasing conflict with capitalism'. I am not interested *here* in the truth or falsity of the just mentioned sentence, but I am interested in its meaning (use). We do not here have something like either an extensional or an intensional equivalence between that sentence and some individualistic paraphrase as in the department example. There is no specification of how many individuals among the population would have to be so affected before this would be said to obtain, i.e., to be true, anymore than we would have to be able to specify the *exact* number of individuals that were for Mubarak's ouster before we say that a considerable majority was for it. There is, as well, no specification of how many people would have to react in a certain way before we could say that class consciousness or class conflict obtained in a given society. Suppose I say, to take another example, 'Humanity would not tolerate torture' or 'Humanity believes that torture is an intolerable evil under all circumstances'. There, again, things are different. It is actual people who have those beliefs; it is people, not humanity, that find things tolerable or intolerable. Humanity or peoples are not something that think and believe. And it is individuals, and not classes, that are conscious. But are the above remarks about humanity or peoples thinking that torture is intolerable or not tolerating torture innocuous perfectly intelligible shorthands as well as is my remark about class consciousness, like my statement about the Philosophy Department votes, remarks that are something like an innocent counterpart of something that could be made in terms of talk of individuals? No, not exactly. We can't give either an extensional equivalence or an intentional one for the above examples as we can in the department example and it is just arm waving if we say that *in principle* we could. We need to give some indication at least of how this is possible. We can give polls as evidence or give graphic examples as evidence or (translating into the concrete) as at least exemplifications. But, it will be said, they could hardly be decisive enough; that there could be enough and sufficiently varied exemplifications or instantiations to count powerfully for the class claim or humanity claim, their useful metaphorical quality notwithstanding, to be a genuinely

plausible and to not be holistically obscurantist. But these examples could be telling expressions of what could have a potentially evidential political resonance. That is, they could be couched in genuine causal statements in what Elster metaphorically calls the nuts and bolts necessary for good causal explanations to be vindicable. They token the supremacy of evidence. No talk, however plausible, about what could have happened can trump evidence of what did happen. A plausible tale that Napoleon could have escaped St. Helena's will not override the evidence that he did not.

I am not saying that all good explanations are causal explanations or that all understanding, even scientific understanding, consists in the finding of causal explanations or that this is a *unique* aim of science or anything like that. I don't think that science has any *unique* aim. But I am claiming that: (i) the above claims about class, state and humanity are doing something that requires causal explanations for their vindication; (ii) causal explanations, often at least, require some causal *exemplifications*; (iii) if there is no movement in that direction, those types of explanations are suspect; and (iv) we are not going to get extensional or intensional equivalencies here yielding a reduction but exemplifications or instantiations. If they are sufficiently numerous and varied, they are enough for vindication, though (as always) a fallible one. Again, beware of the quest for certainty. (Point (iv) does not admit of a precise non-contextual explication but is none the worse for all that.)

III

In their section on anti-reductionism versus methodological individualism, Levine, *et al.* make the following claims. I shall examine their rationale and, where they leave us with questions, risk an answer.

1. The reductionist ambitions of MI cannot be realized.
2. Nonetheless, micro-foundations for macro-theory should be elaborated.

3. Defenders of MI take anti-reductionism to signify a commitment to *radical holism*. Defenders of radical holism regard MI to be atomistic.
4. MI is distinctive in maintaining that only relations of and between individuals can be *irreducibly* explanatory. Thus, MI denies that social categories themselves are ever irreducibly explanatory. [Thus, when we have an appeal to class, we have something that is not irreducibly explanatory.]
5. It is true, but trivially so, that if there were no people there would be no societies. This underwrites the claim by Levine, *et al.* that the methodological assumption that causal mechanisms or causal processes involving individuals are implicated in all social explanations that are genuinely explanatory.
6. The question is not whether individual levels of analysis can be eliminated but how they should be linked to macro-level social analyses.
7. Methodological individualism maintains that macro-level phenomena can always be reduced to their micro-level realizations, at least in principle. Anti-reductionism rejects this.
8. To understand why such a micro-reduction is not always possible, it is important to introduce the distinction between *tokens* and *types*. A particular token-event (the only kind of token-event there is—say, a particular strike at a particular Wal-Mart store—may be subsumed under a type but is not identified with it.
9. We might, however, get token-token reduction (reducing tokens to other tokens). A particular sit-down strike at a particular Wal-Mart at a particular time (i) may also be characterized and explained as (ii) an event in which Walmart employees occupied that Walmart store and refused to leave. Both (i) and (ii) describe, though somewhat differently, the same token event. They describe the same content.
10. The genuine problem is not with point 9, but concerns the reducibility of (i) macro-social *types* to micro-individual *types* and (ii) macro-social *types* to micro-individual *tokens*. Anti-reductionists argue that (i) is not in general possible and that (ii) is never possible. Why do they maintain those things? Are they justified in doing so? And why are these problems thought to be problems? Levine, *et al.* claim they are problems because science has explanatory possibilities beyond token-type explanations and showing how token-events warrant, though are not identical with, type explanations. Beyond, that is, why or how this of that organism survived or that firm survived we may want to explain what various objects or processes or some tokens have in common. What, for example, makes capitalism capitalism or socialism socialism or what makes workers class conscious or what is a revolutionary situation? It doesn't seem plausible to say these are either *how* questions or they are pseudo-questions. But do these questions commit us to *essentialism*? If they do, then are we not on the wrong track?

11. When the properties cited in answer to such questions supervene on properties at the micro-level, the explanations provided by the macro-theory will not even in principle be reducible to a given micro-account.

I shall specify what I take—I hope not dogmatically—to be the veridicality of these propositions, and where I take them to be controversial I will specify their controversiality for the assessment of methodological individualism. I will do this for the eleven propositions in order.

1. To be established and clarified in the conclusion.
2. To be explained in the section following this.
3. Both claims are plainly mistaken, indicating the falsity of both atomism and *radical* holism, both of which can and should be set aside.
4. A true and distinctive claim and a crucial way of characterizing such a claim.
5. What is claimed is true, indeed trivially so, and what it underwrites is plausible and indeed probably true.
6. True and crucial.
7. Anti-reductionism and anti-methodological individualism is warranted here. Moreover, the claim here is crucial. The question—a central one—is to see *why* this is so.
8. True.
9. True.
10. True, I believe, but controversially so.
11. True, I believe, but also controversially so.

Levine, *et al.* give a very astute explanation of why 9, 10, and 11 are true. Since I cannot improve on it, I will take the liberty of quoting it in full.

Methodological individualists are type-reductionists with respect to social phenomena. But to insist on type-reductions as an a priori methodological requirements is plainly unwarranted. The feasibility of type-reductions is an empirical question. It *could* be the case that type-reductions actually are possible in this domain. But they almost certainly are not. Type-reductions

would be possible if the relation between social phenomena and individual properties were like the relation between water and H₂O. But in so far as the relation of social facts to their micro-realizations is like the relation of mental states to brain states or like the relation of fitness to physical properties of morphology and physiology, type-reductionism will prove to be a fruitless quest.

Consider the fact that capitalist societies have strong tendencies towards economic growth. This property is explicable, in part, as a consequence of the competitive character of capitalist markets, which generate innovations and continual investments that, cumulatively, produce growth. This process, in turn, is explained by the survival of those firms which most effectively make profits in the market. Survival and profit-making, in this explanation, are similar to “fitness” in evolutionary biology. For each token instance of economic survival, we can identify a set of decisions made by individuals with particular beliefs, preferences, information and resources that explains why a particular firm survives. However, there need not be anything in common *at the micro-level* between the mechanisms that enable firm X to survive and the mechanisms that enable firms Y or Z to survive. X may survive because of the passivity of workers (enabling capitalists to introduce innovations without resistance); Y because of the ruthlessness of the owner; Z because of the scientific/technical rationality of the management team, and so on. The social-level explanation of growth in terms of the macro-processes of competitive market relations, therefore, can be realized by a vast array of possible micro-mechanisms. Accordingly, token reductionism is possible in this case, but type reductionism is not.

In short, the reductionist program of methodological individualism fails because science has explanatory projects beyond the explanation of token events. Besides asking why this organism or that firm survived, we also want to explain what various objects and processes have in common. When the properties cited in answer to such questions have multiple realizations at the micro-level, the explanations provided by the macro-theory will not, even in principle, be reducible to a micro-account (Levine, *et al.* 1992, 119-20).

It is said by Levine, *et al.* to be *in principle* possible to carry out the type-type reductions that methodological individualists want. But they also say this is cold comfort, as we have no idea at all what it would be like to do so. (How could we then know that it is in principle possible?) And as Levine, *et al.* also assert, it is almost certain that we cannot in fact do so. It, they add, is a fruitless quest (Levine, *et al.* 1992, 78). This talk seems to me confusing and overly problematic. How, for example, can we justifiably or even intelligibly say it is in principle possible if we have no idea at all what it would be like to do so? Isn't this mere arm waving?

The central reason for this skepticism concerning MI is rooted in recognition of the diverse explanatory projects that science has. I will fasten on two of them that have crucial relevance here. Sometimes we want to ask *how* questions. How, for example, was it possible in the recent (2008) recession for so many banks to fail so spectacularly? One answer is that they massively made risky loans that in turn could not be repaid. But we might not just want to know how it happened but *why* it happened. One possible answer is greed and the desire to make a fast buck on the part of officers, particularly the higher officers, of the banks. Both of these *may* be bad answers to both of their respective how-and-why operations. But they, or at least they seem to, illustrate both that and how these questions are distinct. Sometimes we may want to know how capitalism or socialism works or fails to work. We will, however, also want to know what socialism or capitalism is. We also might want to know why capitalism has persisted and why socialism failed in Russia and China and why it has persisted in Cuba. That is not the same as knowing how it failed or persisted. (We might want to say that in certain respects China is an incredible success story. But it isn't an incredible *socialist* success story for it has transformed itself into a corporate capitalism with lots of *laissez-faire* mechanisms.) We do not need to go—and should not go—essentialist here. We could rely on family resemblances. Or do what and why questions reduce to how questions? Is that implausible and too reductive? I think so. Sometimes we just want to know what capitalism is and what socialism is, and not just what are (if any) their 'mechanisms'—their nuts and bolts, their cogs and wheels, as Elster puts it metaphorically. We do not *just* want to know what causes or could cause (what brings about or could bring about) capitalism or socialism and how it works or could work. However, we want also to know what they are and why they either are or are not desirable and feasible. I do not deny for the feasibility question, and even for the desirability question, that how questions are relevant, but they do not reduce to that and they are not alone relevant to the why or that questions.

Even, to shift gears, if we adopt methodological individualism's own terminology and ways of conceptualizing things, it fails. It does not even begin to give us what could come to 'explanatory full coverage'. It is explanatorily enfeebled. We should not even adopt their talk of mechanisms, as Elster, Roemer and Cohen do. We should recognize that sometimes to explain or to have a scientific understanding is not to find a mechanism, though it sometimes is. Science doesn't *always* consist in having a reason for a mechanism and to apply it to all sciences is to talk of something that in some of them is not used at all or is infrequently used. And to speak of either macro-foundations or micro-foundations is not germane for such modest non-radical, non-Hegelian holists such as Quine, Davidson, or Rorty. It is a vocabulary, a conceptualization, for which they have no use. Setting things up in this way may very well lead socialists, Marxists and emancipatory social scientists (or just plain social scientists) into a lot of fruitless endeavors. They no more need it than a thorough going secularist needs or can accommodate the concepts of sin, redemption, and grace. (At most they could give some quasi-functional equivalents involving redefinitions.)

So if MI requires reductionism—the reduction, say, of macro-explanations to micro ones—MI is plainly a non-starter. Levine, *et al.* show that even if we play according to the rules of MI we cannot get such reductions. Even with Cohen's ideal of analysis we cannot get it. Chandra Kumar's article (the other cutting edge article in the debate about MI) points out that MI has meant many different things and, as we have seen, even Elster has characterized MI in many different and sometimes at least seemingly conflicting ways (Kumar 2008). But any characterization that tries in any way to reduce macro-social phenomena—talk of states, class, corporations, institutions, capitalism, socialism, religions, ethnic groups—to talk of individuals will fail. It is not only atomism and radical holism that fail but methodological individualism as well. Moreover, the very distinction between MI and MH is unclear.

Kumar, however, surprisingly speaks of non-reductionist methodological individualism (Kumar 2008). If that very problematic notion is admitted and not treated as an oxymoron, as it

would be by most methodological individualists *and* critics of methodological individualism (and certainly by Levine, *et al.* as well as by Elster who ends up saying that to explain is to provide a mechanism), then we need another argument against what is now being conceived as methodological individualism to decisively refute MI or to show a way that the dispute between MI and MH is now being so ill conceived that we should ignore it. That argument would show that anti-reductionism (at least here) is vindicated and here it is indeed the only game in town. (Something that Levine, *et al.*, Kumar and I all believe but not exactly for the same reasons.)

What I want to establish, *assuming* that MI is a reductionist view, is that, in spite of MI (so conceived) being false, as sometimes construed by Elster (as we have seen) and followed by Roemer and Cohen, on to something important, even though it is mistakenly taken to establish or even render MI plausible as Levine, *et al.* (following one of Elster's characterizations) characterize it.

What, then, is this 'rational kernel' of methodological individualism? What should be kept from it after it, as construed above, has been rejected? It comes to this: without any reduction. Individual properties can sometimes help explain social properties and vindicate their not being illusory properties. Is it not the case, to use conventional terminology, that micro-level analyses are *sometimes* importantly relevant to macro-theory? How (if it is) is this so? It is sometimes, for some purposes, important for claims at the macro-level to gain a micro-analysis specifying causal pathways to macro-accounts. Empirical conditions must be specifiable to give confirmation or infirmation to macro-theories or to macro law-like empirical generalizations or what has been called 'accidental generalizations' (e.g., 'All the books in her library are in English'). This need not be a statement-by-statement confirmation or infirmation. Quine has shown us that such a matching of each statement with a statement of the conditions of its verification is often not possible. But if the practices in question are to count as genuinely scientific ones, there must be causal links of individually specific sorts to the practices. *To be scientific practices they must not be without*

evidential warrant (Nielsen 2008b). It does not mean that each specific macro-statement must be verifiable (confirmable or infirmable) but that the system as a whole must admit of recognizable causal links—that *some statements must be verifiable (confirmable and infirmable)*. Without that, a system of thought would not be scientific. It would be, like radical holism, crucially untestable. Scientific practices must have evidential vindication.

Something like this was Quine's advance over Carnap and Hempel, even at their verificationist last and most sophisticated stage. Suppose I say 'A long and severe depression will give rise to a revolutionary situation'. I am dealing in types here. I am asserting that a certain category (a revolutionary situation) will, under certain conditions, probably come into existence. When I make a claim like that it is not like asserting that 'There is water on Mars' is a testable claim. We do not, with 'revolutionary situation' get any single thing like H₂O molecules for water. This is so because with a revolutionary situation we do not get a reduction. But we do get, though only if *some* directly individually observable things obtain, scientific warrant for the claim. We get truth-conditions or at least assertability-conditions. That is, we require certain distinctive token-events. But there could for similar situations where different token-events could yield evidence for there being in a revolutionary situation. It is not like one thing, namely H₂O molecules, that establishes that there is the substance water. There are different things that count as evidence for there being a revolutionary situation. But *some* such of these conditions must obtain for there to be warrant for there being a revolutionary situation. If, for example, militant sit-down strikes occur in Moscow, Montreal, Rome, Shanghai, Stockholm, Paris, Berlin, New York, and London, that the military in all those places are mutinying and the governments in all the countries with these towns have lost control of the effective means of repression, we have with such token-events evidence, indeed good evidence, for our being in a revolutionary situation. These are not the only indicators or even the necessary ones that will indicate that a revolutionary situation obtains but they are indicative of a revolutionary situation. There are no necessary and sufficient conditions that will give material

equivalents as we have between water and H₂O. There are a myriad of quite different things—different causal processes—which can indicate, exemplify, or instantiate that a revolutionary situation is occurring, but there is no reduction of revolutionary situation to all or even any of these exemplifying things. But without even the plausible possibility of *some* varied specific evidential things (token-events), there is no warrant, or perhaps even intelligibility, for speaking of a revolutionary situation or the obtaining of any other social type of explanation.

This allows Kumar to speak of a non-reductionist methodological individualism, but that could just as well be expressed as token-event evidence for a type, namely, methodological holism. This, in any event, could be called, though misleadingly and indeed mistakenly, methodological individualism. But while it refutes radical holism, it is equally compatible with an anti-reductionism or, as Levine shows in another writing, such a rational kernel is equally compatible with a Quinean semantic holism (Levine 2003). Thus it does not establish methodological individualism or even make it more plausible than such a Quinean holism. And, as we shall argue when we return in more detail to our discussion of Kumar, there are independent reasons for favoring such a non-radical, non-Hegelian holism. To summarize: We can get type-type reductions and token-token reductions but not type-token reductions. But we can, and usefully, get type-token *exemplifications* or *instantiations*, though they will be many and varied, but still crucial for they yield a way, and a vital one, of distinguishing science from mere speculation. They do this by showing how scientific systems or practices must be at least holophrastically be confirmable or infirmable.

IV

As I have indicated, I believe that Levine, *et al.* and Kumar are the major players in the current state of the holism/methodological individualism dispute—a dispute which I hope is dwindling away. Kumar's account comes later than Levine, *et al.*'s (2008 as distinct from 1992).

But things often move slowly in philosophical discussion. Kumar acknowledges the importance of Levine, *et al.* and makes some crucial points similar to theirs, but articulates important considerations which hopefully bring the dispute between MH and MI towards termination and opens up distinct vistas which are indicative of something of a way in which an analytical Marxism could prosper which departs from orthodox analytical Marxism (Roemer, Cohen, Elster, and Wright) while still retaining (and happily) an analytical spirit, though with a distinctively pragmatist twist. It is a turn which is my own as well, though I have not in the past applied it to the MI/MH dispute. I shall specify and critically discuss some of these themes. But first I shall point to what on the surface at least is an important difference between Levine, *et al.* and Kumar which, I *suspect*, is a difference that, when carefully inspected, turns out to be one which makes no difference and thus should be ignored by pragmatists and, I think, should be ignored by everyone. Levine, *et al.* wants to *resolve* the dispute between methodological individualism and holism by resolving it in favor of anti-reductionism which for them is a modest, broadly Quinean holism. Kumar, in a good Wittengensteinian and neo-pragmatist spirit, wants to *dissolve* it: to show it is a spurious problem—what used to be called by the logical positivists a pseudo-problem. When, according to Kumar, either MI or MH get stated with adequacy, they collapse into each other. There is then nothing left here to dispute about. The dispute dissolves like sugar in water, to use Wittengenstein's analogy. I am often, indeed typically, partial to such dissolution claims in philosophy. And even Levine sometimes talks this way as well. It seems to me true of the realism/anti-realism dispute, the compatibilism/hard determinism dispute, and the mind/body dispute. And, as Levine, *et al.* and Kumar note, there is a similarity between the mind/body problem (pseudo-problem?) and the MI/MH problem (pseudo-problem?).

However, the rational kernel point tends to point in favor of the resolution view rather than the dissolution view. The non-reducibility of any form of MH to MI shows that MH: (1) cannot be reduced to MI; (2) achieves things that MI cannot achieve but wants to; and (3) is inescapable. Even

with all this accepted, the rational kernel point reveals there is still something in MI, though mistakenly expressed, which is important—the thing it wants to achieve but cannot, namely a theory which is both testable *and* social. This *seems*, at least, to count towards the resolution rather than the dissolution view. Or again perhaps there is no pragmatic difference and thus, as we pragmatists say, no real difference. Be that as it may, the strong, basically Davidsonian, points made by Kumar for meaning (semantic) holism (points that I shall return to), to the contrary notwithstanding, the ‘rational kernel’ argument shows that all is not dross that is methodological individualism while Davidson’s meaning holism arguments still show MI’s strict falsehood. This seems, at least, to count for the resolution view, though Kumar reasonably thinks otherwise. *Perhaps* ‘resolution/dissolution’ is much ado about nothing? (Wittgenstein speaks in both ways.) This seems to be so particularly when it is kept in mind that the rational kernel point, justified though it may be, is perfectly compatible with anti-reductionism and the rejection of an MI that seeks a reduction along with the claim, though seemingly non-acceptable to Kumar, that a ‘methodological individualism’ that is non-reductive is a contradiction or an incoherency.

Where it seems to me we stand—or should stand—is with a *meaning holism* that is also a methodological holism which accepts the rational kernel claim and still takes it that all forms of methodological individualism (by definition, if you will) must be reductive. But one can, and should, be a meaning holist and a methodological holist while still accepting the rational kernel argument—an argument which does not require reductionism and is not properly characterized as individualist, but reveals what is valuable in methodological individualism though mistakenly put by it. Does this count as a vindication of meaning-cum-methodological holism or does it count as a dissolution of the whole problematic? I remain ambivalent and yet I guess and reasonably hope with Kumar that it counts for a dissolution view. In any event, at least the alleged importance of the problem or so-called problem of MH versus MI is greatly diminished. It doesn’t call for the passion

invested in it by, on the one hand, Hayek and Popper, and, on the other hand, Cohen and Elster. The whole dispute, as Rorty might put it, seems to engender terminal dreariness.

Before we conclude it is more much ado about nothing, should we not reflect that when we go through all the to-and-fro here we end up, with both Levine, *et al.* and Kumar, with a conceptual terrain having been considerably cleared up. However, without concluding it is much ado about nothing, we still might conclude that for us Marxists or otherwise socialists, it was love's labor lost. We Marxists and socialists (they need not be the same, as they are not, for example, for Chomsky and Chavez or historically for Michel Bakunin) could have better spent our time. I shall in my penultimate lecture turn to suggestions about how we on the Left (Left intellectuals, if you will) should spend our time while benignly neglecting such issues. Here (in lecture three) I return to Kumar's arguments for taking a meaning holist cum anti-reductionist stance (I think they fit like hand and glove) and then move on to my characterization and defense of historicism. I shall argue that holism and historicism have an affinity. But still one can consistently be a holist without being a historicist. Quine, for example, was a holist, but he certainly was not a historicist and ditto for Davidson. What holism and historicism, articulated in hopefully perspicuous and persuasive forms, should provide here is what a Marxian, wishing to travel *philosophically* light, but still in some way philosophical, needs by way of an intellectual or conceptual orientation.

However, to return to Kumar, his abstract sets out the bare bones of what he argues. It reads as follows:

The debates of the 1980s and 1990s on methodological individualism versus methodological holism have not been adequately resolved. Within analytical Marxism, G. A. Cohen, John Roemer, Jon Elster and others have come down in favour of methodological individualism as part of the effort to make analytical Marxism more 'scientific' and 'rigorous' than earlier versions of Marxism. In doing so they have presented methodological individualism as a necessary ingredient in ridding Marxism of obscurantism. This view is here challenged from a pragmatist philosophical perspective. It is argued that, from such a perspective, the debates between the individualists and holists should have been dissolved rather than resolved in favour of the individualists. It is suggested that such dissolution would even strengthen

analytical Marxism by redirecting analytical energies towards real social and political problems in the contemporary world and away from endless methodological debate (Kumar 2008, 185).

Kumar argues for the viability of meaning holism, anti-reductionism and methodological holism as do Levine, *et al.* but, in contrast to them, in a way that encompasses important points that methodological individualists argue for, Kumar shows that these views can be coherently held and put together without going methodological individualist. Kumar argues as follows:

1. Marxism does not need to be grounded—indeed, should not and could not be grounded—in MI. Yet MI, though mistaken, is a theory about what counts as an acceptable, properly formed scientific form of explanation in the social sciences (Kumar 2008, 188). It is a theory which asserts that all social theories, where genuinely scientific, refer only to individuals or must be reducible, at least in principle, to theories which refer only to individuals. But this bit of theorizing, though seductive, Kumar claims as have I, is still mistaken.

2. Kumar thus rejects Cohen's claim that we must represent "molar entities [macro entities] (such as quantities of gas or economic structures) as are arrangements of their more fundamental constituents" (Cohen 2000, xxiii-iv). "Analysis," as Kumar puts it, "in the narrow sense [a sense embraced with enthusiasm by Cohen]...obliges the theorist to 'represent' macro-level social realities like 'economic structure', 'class conflict', 'global capitalism', 'the state system' and so on, in terms of their 'more foundational constituents' *assumed to be individuals*" (Kumar 2008, 190). In the context of Marx's theory of history, Cohen says, "to claim that capitalism must break down and give way to socialism is not yet to show how behaviors of individuals lead to that result. And nothing else leads to that result *since behaviours of individuals are always where the action is, in the final analysis*" (quoted in Kumar 2008, 190; italics mine). But there is no non-contextual perspectiveless 'final analysis'. What is the 'final analysis', where one's spade is turned, in one context or practice is the beginning in another. What will be the 'final analysis' depends on what we are looking for, what is at issue, what assumptions we make, what we want to or feel a need to

explain or understand, and the purposes (*including different scientific purposes*) we have, that is to say, our perspective. Just as there is, except for certain purposes, no ‘in the final analysis’, except contextually and contingently, when for certain purposes or just out of exhaustion an examination temporarily comes to an end, there is no last word, full stop. That is more of the illusory quest for the Absolute and the non-contingent.

3. Be that as it may, can’t we get—don’t we actually have—empirical laws (scientific laws), sustaining counterfactuals, that are essential for much of social science and certainly for Marxian social science? Don’t we sometimes get them, even over big issues, by attending to intentions and similar type beliefs and to the desires of individuals—something that cannot be captured extensionally by extensionally-oriented physicalists? However, aren’t there sometimes matters that can adequately be characterized only by monadic predicates applicable to individuals? Could not persons be, for the purposes of setting out such laws, *only so characterized*, where what we are interested in getting are causal laws that would be the equivalent of the nuts and bolts, the cogs and wheels, that are the causal processes that show how macro-level phenomena work through the agency of individuals? But why must they, or should they, be characterized only in monadic predicates? Why not dyadic predicates as well? As far as I can ascertain, there is no reason to make such a restrictive claim. But that is not to ditch methodological individualism properly distinguished from an atomism.

However, stress on referring to individuals somewhere along the line in carrying out a confirmation/infirmation, whether described in monadic or dyadic predicates, is not a reduction. But, as I have gestured at, it might indicate the existence of a rational kernel that leads us to go in that way individualistic. Our, that is, testability claims—something that is crucial for science—are at least often individualistic. We seem to be led to say with Cohen that that is where the action is. (I think Cohen is giving us to understand that is not only where the action is, but that is also where it *must* be, at least if we would be rational.) But still we do not have here an MI reduction and there is

no one place where the action must be that will clinch our claims. As context and our purposes differ, so that is where the action is differs. Sometimes it is individuals, sometimes it is not. Sometimes we speak of class actions, sometimes of individual actions.

However, that aside, Kumar effectively deploys a Davidsonian argument to undermine a defense of MI. The attribution of a belief (intentional or otherwise) requires that we are able to verbalize it in a sentence. If, to use Kumar's example, I attribute to someone a belief that she is underpaid by her employer, in doing so I am automatically and unavoidably attributing to her a host of further beliefs, namely, "that there are employers and employees, that there is an employer-employee relationship, that employees are paid by their employers, that there are standards of payment such that one can be underpaid, and so on indefinitely" (Kumar 2008, 198). I can't just attribute that one belief to her without attributing many, many other beliefs. This way, we get a web of belief. We either get what Levine calls Quinean holism or its country cousin, molecularism. To recognize someone as a language user, I must be able to attribute such beliefs to her. Even to understand her, we must share some language together—some unavoidably public language. Furthermore, to understand her as a language user I must understand that she is a person and with that understand something of what it is to be a person. A language user could not just be a machine, even a machine making the correct patterned noises.

People, of course, can, and often do, have differences of belief and different wants and needs, but they have these only against a broad background of shared belief, interpretation and understanding. Without that we could not even come to disagree or even have beliefs. Beliefs, not even intentional ones, cannot be just in the head and language cannot be private, though with our having a language we might be able to work out a *contingently* private code that would be hard but not impossible to crack.

Moreover, in attributing a particular belief to someone we holistically and automatically attribute many more related beliefs to that belief and to her—"related by our own standards of

inference" (Kumar 2008, 198, italics mine). We cannot attribute beliefs and desires to someone without having a language that we share, though it need not be the same native language. But there must be a language that we in some degree share. So any language, as both Davidson and Wittgenstein stress, is necessarily a shared public language, at least shared by some language users and in principle at least shareable by all language users. "*Meanings in that way are as social as can be*" (Kumar 2008, 197). To have a belief, want or intention—any belief, want or intention at all—is to have something which is language dependent (public language dependent, to be pleonastic). *In that way* there are no private beliefs or understandings. To understand something or to have a belief or intention or want at all, is to have something which is language dependent and thus social or publicly interpersonal. "Individuals [persons] are physically separate from each other but our thoughts and desires have an ineliminably social character" (Kumar 2008, 197). This is true of intentions as much as any other type of belief. So the above defense of MI fails.

4. However, that is not the end of the story. Relatedly to the above, we should recognize that the very contrast between methodological individualism and methodological holism is problematic. Here Kumar's spin on neo-pragmatism, indebted as it is to Rorty's way of putting it, is very evident (Rorty 2007, 89-104; Nielsen 2005; 2007). It also has its roots in John Dewey. People who have deep metaphysical urges such as Rajeiv Bharghasa over these issues will be dissatisfied, but, I think, controversially of course, that those neo-pragmatists along with Wittgenstein (though without his anguish) and some Wittgensteinians are right in setting these metaphysical issues aside as something we have good reason to say adieu to (Bharghasa 1998; Rorty 2007). In any event, Kumar briefly here gives us some persuasive claims for not turning or trying to turn these matters into 'profound' ontological problems.

[T]he very contrast between individualism and holism is problematic. Suppose we say that individuals are the 'fundamental constituents' of society: society only exists insofar as individuals do. But conversely, individuals are social beings, members of societies. Should we then say that society is the 'fundamental reality' from which individuals emerge? If this is

regarded as an absurd way of speaking, why is it any more absurd than the claim about individuals being more 'fundamental'? Do we have any useful or plausible idea of what a human 'individual' is that is not an idea of a social being, always related to, associated with, interacting with or having interacted with, other individuals? From a pragmatist perspective, the whole idea of getting clear on what is *ontologically* more fundamental, the individual or the social (or collectivity), is a bad one. In some contexts, for some purposes, it is better to focus on individuals; in other contexts, for other purposes, it may be more useful to talk about institutions, social structures or groups. Why think that one of these ways of talking better represents social reality 'as it really is' than the other? If, as pragmatists stress, language is not a medium for representing the intrinsically real, but simply one more important capacity humans have evolved that helps us to cope with our environments and our lives, then to ask which vocabulary is more fundamental in the sense that it represents reality apart from any interests, needs or purposes that we may have, is to ask a bad, fruitless question. For a pragmatist, the question whether the individual or the social is more fundamental should itself be questioned: It should always be asked, 'more fundamental in what sense, in which context and for which purposes?' (Kumar 2008, 191-92).

However, pragmatism aside, Kumar gives some further arguments that have *some* overlap with Levine, *et al.*'s claims. Kumar remarks that methodological individualism encourages us to look for micro-foundations at the 'level of the individual'. But all human individuals are social individuals (social beings, social animals). To identify a human being as a being with beliefs, intentions, desires, thoughts, we must identify and take into account his social relations with other social individuals. There are, to repeat, only individual persons out there. But these individual persons are inescapably and ineluctably social beings. We do not identify a person by simply observing a moving patterned noise-making physical object, but also, and fundamentally, we identify a person as a social being who has relations with others persons with intentions, beliefs and desires which (or *at least* most of which) are social (dependent on socialization and enculturation).

There are no bodiless persons or supra-bodily persons (whatever that means), but likewise there are no persons who are not social animals having relations with and to each other. A person must, for example, have or have had a mother and a father. Persons, of course, are such macro-

objects from *some* perspectives and for *some* purposes, but we are never just macro-objects (just discrete members of the class of spatio-temporal objects of medium size).

5. The very distinction between macro and micro is context and purpose dependent as is going from the complex to the simple. By contrast, Elster and Cohen contend there is something not-context and non-purpose dependent, namely going from the complex to the simple. Elster and Cohen urge that analysis should reveal this. (There are shades here of Locke and logical atomism.) But they ignore the fact, or at least the very plausible claim, that these matters—distinguishing the macro and the micro and going from the complex to the simple—are context and investigative purpose dependent. The fundamental micro-constituents as well as what is taken to be a macro-constituent are not the same for economics as it is for psychology or again for chemistry as it is for physics. Moreover, the fundamental constituents for all inquiries, sometimes even in the same domain or discipline, at all levels, is not the same. Everything here is time, context and purpose dependent. Here we see the importance of perspectivism.

Science apart, if we are asked, without a context and without a distinct purpose in mind, to count the number of objects in a room, we cannot do it—indeed even begin to do it. Does a speck of dust count as an object? What about a microbe, a scrap of paper on the floor, a marble left by a child? Macro/micro is a discipline, practice and purpose relative distinction.

6. The strongest version of MI is the notion that any legitimate social explanation can in principle [at least] be reduced to explanations of the characteristics of individuals (individual persons). If it is not so reducible (at least in principle) methodological individualism so construed has been refuted. But, as we have seen, individual persons cannot be atomistically construed. Individual persons here have dyadic predicates applied to them. They are fathers, husbands, employers, slaves, maids, dominated or dominating, old or young, and the like. They are not (in the relevant sense) non-social persons. All individual persons, unlike all pebbles on a beach or microbes under a microscope, are social individuals. The very way we identify someone as a

person is to identify her as a social or potentially social individual (very young babies). This refutes methodological individualism. It refutes it either when we characterize it as Elster does where individuals have social relations or when we try to deny that they do. The latter alternative yields something that is plainly false. The former alternative yields something in which MI (as Elster and many others characterize it) collapses into MH or, if you will, MH becomes identical with MI. Terminal dreariness seems at least to be upon us.

V

A second way in which I am a maverick analytical Marxist is in my *historicism*. My historicism is a *minimal* historicism indebted primarily to the somewhat different accounts of historicism given and defended by Isaiah Berlin and Richard Rorty. Historicism, I shall acknowledge, has been understood in many different ways. In preparing for this third lecture, I visited, and in some instances revisited, the classical literature on historicism as well as some contemporary versions. Probably not unsurprisingly, I found myself half wishing that I had never called my views 'historicist'. While finding many of these views insightful, there are many things I disagree with or find problematic in the views of the paradigmatic classical historicists: Giambattista Vico, Johann Gottfried Herder, Ernst Troeltsch, Frederick Meinecke, and Benedetto Croce as well as some contemporary Continental philosophers, namely Hans Georg Gadamer, Gianni Vattimo and Santiago Zabala. I shall, for the most part, put their views aside and stick with my minimal *somewhat* stipulative characterization—perhaps better called a reformist characterization—which I will seek to elucidate and defend. But I do not want to give to understand that I have not in my views been influenced by classical historicists and their contemporary Continentals so that between my views and theirs there is only the name in common. Rather, I take myself, perhaps too stipulatively but I hope not arbitrarily, as defending what I take to be the rational kernel of such views.

Rorty characterizes historicism as “the idea that our philosophical vocabularies and problematics are attempts to deal with contingent historical circumstances rather than ‘perennial’ or ‘basic’ ones” (Rorty 2006, 152). [I would delete ‘philosophical’ in the above statement and replace it with ‘our most significant social and/or political vocabularies’. That is vague but, as I conjecture Rorty would agree, not all so affected vocabularies or problematics are even in the *weakest* sense philosophical, even in Wilfred Sellars’s sense of little *p* philosophy (Rorty 1982, xiv-xviii).

Berlin claims, as Rorty emphasizes too, that historicists “hold that human thought and action are fully intelligible only in relation to their historical context...” (Berlin 1991, 77). Both claim that *we can gain no substantial standpoint or perch that is history-transcendent enabling us to explain, understand and assess things in a way which is not time and place dependent. We can gain no such standpoint or viewpoint about any significant substantial social matter.* That can be nothing more than a philosopher’s or theologian’s dream—something that many people want but no one can get. This squares with but is not entailed by some standard dictionary definitions of ‘historicism’ as the theory that social phenomena are determined by history and the tendency to regard historical change, development and contingency as the most basic aspects of human existence.

Historicism is often thought to be a relativist or at least a historical relativist view. Both Berlin and Rorty deny that this is so. That we can’t in any significant way overleap history or gain an understanding, let alone a critical perch, that is not historically dependent doesn’t mean or entail or require what relativists, or at least extreme relativists, maintain, namely, “that every view is as good as every other. It [historicism] doesn’t mean that everything now is arbitrary or a matter of the will to power or something like that” (Rorty 2006, 126). Such relativist views, as Rorty rightly maintains, are absurd and historicism does not assert, entail or imply anything like that. A historicist need not be a nihilist *pace* Vattimo and Zabala (Vattimo 2010; Zabala 2009). (I should

add, however, that what is more properly characterized as ‘relativism’, particularly as historical relativism, is not as absurd as the conception of relativism that I have just characterized.)

Berlin denies that historicism implies even, what is a more reasonable relativist view, namely a historical or cultural relativism. The *alleged* relativism of Vico and Herder, paradigmatic and founding historicists, Berlin contends, is not what he calls a ‘true relativism’ (Berlin 1991, 77). A ‘true relativism’, on Berlin’s reading, is a view that is not of an 18th century vintage (Vico’s and Herder’s time) but one of a 19th century vintage. It is the view that men’s outlooks are unavoidably determined by forces of which they are often unaware (Berlin 1991, 78). It is indeed often extremely difficult to even fleetingly become aware of and take to heart how our outlooks are so determined—or perhaps we should say instead conditioned. It is very difficult to change them or gain an ideology-free outlook. However, Vico and Herder, as much as philosophers of the Enlightenment, believed not only “that passions and ‘interest’ could unconsciously mold values and entire outlooks, but they also believed that critical reason could dissipate this and remove obstacles to objective knowledge both of fact and value” (Berlin 1991, 78). Contemporary forms of relativism, setting aside its silly form (a form that, as we have seen, Rorty rightly rejects as just silly (Rorty 2006, 126), have come to have a different character than anything Vico or Herder recognized, let alone thought to be valid, namely, the view which *after* their time came to be known as a relativist view, to wit (1) the view that we are caught in incommensurable discourses or social practices that we cannot transcend and (2) the view that no social discourse or practice or set of practices has epistemological, ontological privilege or moral or normative political superiority to or over any other. A view or practice or set of practices is instead no more than a product or products of their time and place. We cannot non-question-beggingly and non-ethnocentrically critically assess the viability of any of these activities, though with a careful concrete, imaginative and empathetic understanding gained by placing ourselves either actually or with a sympathetic imagination into the life of these other outlooks, we can come to understand them (Croce 1921;

Collingwood 1946). But even with this we cannot stand back and critically claim superior cogency for any one of them except ethnocentrically and question-beggingly and thus illegitimately. We have no such ahistorical Archimedean point, though we have many such in good faith unwitting pretenders. We have, and can have, no culturally transcendent perch from which to make such assessments or such a critique. There is no ‘standpoint of the universe’, no ‘view from nowhere’, by which we can do it.

This historical and cultural relativism, as we have seen, is foreign to both Vico and Herder (Berlin 1991, 78-90). They, like the classical figures of the Enlightenment, thought there were viewpoints from which we could not only understand but could come to clearly and objectively assess and critique these distinct viewpoints, distinct *Weltanschauungen*, and ascertain whether or not they were mistaken. Vico and Herder did not differ from the classical Enlightenment in thinking that we could objectively assess such viewpoints, but they differed from them over *how* we could do it. They, that is, did not differ from them in the belief *that* we could do it, but over *how* we could do it. For Vico and Herder it required, in a way d’Holbach and Condorcet never dreamed of, empathetic understanding, what later came to be called *versthen*.

Later actual historical relativists and the kind of minimal historicists I am defending had or have the kind of skepticism—sometimes a thorough skepticism—concerning an ‘absolute perspective’ or an ‘ahistorical perch’ that could comprehend all that classical Enlightenment figures such as d’Holbach and Condorcet thought they had and, somewhat differently, Kant thought he had, and still more differently Hegel thought he had. These ‘minimal historicists’ usually thought with the classical historicists (Vico and Herder) that peoples have their distinctive viewpoints and that we can only understand other viewpoints by imaginatively and concretely entering (so to speak) the world—the *Weltanschauung*—of these other peoples—people of other times or places. But, though I am inclined to think any historicist (minimal or otherwise) should so reason, the minimal historicism that I am committed to need not accept this last claim. Such a historicist need only

claim that we cannot significantly overleap history, that we cannot get in a significant way a history-transcendent point of view. Peoples have their distinctive viewpoints and we cannot in some ahistorical manner just view matters in an utterly ahistorical way. There can be no 'point of view of the universe' (Sidgwick) or 'view from nowhere' (Nagel). We need not claim that one viewpoint is as good as another but only that we can be in no position to gain the kind of absolute perspective necessary to make such critical judgments. Historicists believe that unless we can gain some reasonably detailed and concrete understanding of other times and climes, we shall be locked in our own cultures with an ethnocentric and parochial view of the world. Berlin remarks:

Unless we succeed in doing this we shall not understand what these earlier men lived by, spiritually as well as materially. They [Vico and Herder] are not telling us that the values of these societies, dissimilar to ours, cast doubts on the objectivity of our own, or are undermined by them, because the existence of conflicting values or incompatible outlooks must mean that at most only one of these is valid, the rest being false; or, alternatively, that none belong to the kind of judgements that can be considered either valid or invalid. Rather, they are inviting us to look at societies different from our own, the ultimate values of which we can perceive to be wholly understandable ends of life for men who are different, indeed, from us, but human beings, *semblables*, into whose circumstances we can, by a great effort which we are commanded to make, find a way, 'enter', to use Vico's term. We are urged to look upon life as affording a plurality of values, equally genuine, equally ultimate, above all equally objective; incapable, therefore, of being ordered in a timeless hierarchy, or judged in terms of some one absolute standard. There is a finite variety of values and attitudes, some of which one society, some another, have made their own, attitudes and values which members of other societies may admire or condemn (in the light of their own value-systems) but can always, if they are sufficiently imaginative and try hard enough, contrive to understand—that is, see to be intelligible ends of life for human beings situated as these men were (Berlin 1991, 79).

This is a historicist view certainly but it is also *pluralist*, not historical relativist. Berlin asserts that while "there are many objective ends, ultimate values, some incompatible with others, pursued by different societies at various times...but their variety cannot be unlimited for the nature of men, however various and subject to change, must possess some generic character if they are to be called human at all" (Berlin 1991, 86).

A thorough going relativism—what Berlin calls a ‘true relativism’—would not acknowledge this. A ‘true relativist’ would claim variability all the way down and that we can make no utterly trans-culturally or trans-historically critical judgments that have any significantly substantive bite. However, Berlin maintains we can and must, if we would be fully rational, recognize a universal substantial bite about certain claims about human nature, claims that any rational being much accept to be rational. Both Vico and Herder and the classical Enlightenment figures claimed, and Berlin claims rightly, that this universality obtains.

A minimal historicism, however, is concerned to claim that knowledge of human affairs has an irreducibly historical character and that there can be no ahistorical perspective yielding an adequate understanding of human nature and society. It need not deny that all historical perspectives are constrained by non-historical features, e.g., that humans are mortal, that humans have distinctive sexual drives, drives that all normal human beings have, drives that are of a permanent and non-cyclical type contrasting with the cyclical drives of other animals. Compare dogs here with human beings. Moreover, human beings are unique in being language users, that they alone have a sense, though often rudimentary, of history: they are unique in making historical narratives about themselves as determinate cultural beings. Some of these claims may be false; *perhaps* (for example) some other animals have the rudiments of language, but, if true, as these claims at least appear to be, they are non-historical claims that attain for all human beings or all normal human beings. They, if that is so, are true of all (normal) peoples in all societies and in all periods of history since the emergence of *homo sapiens*. But while these things may be true, and indeed there probably are pan-human constraints, they leave room for plenty and often a very important variability and lead to many things that go way beyond these constraints. Berlin thinks these pan-human generic traits yield something that gives us some significant sense of what it is to be essentially human.

Rorty's form of historicism is in a way more extreme than Berlin's and mine as well. Rorty would say, I suspect, that there is an implicit and perhaps unacknowledged *essentialism* in Berlin's view of human nature and humanity. Berlin claims that "differences between entire cultures" have certain 'natural kind type' limits that are built into our very conception of being human. But Rorty claims, as do I, that neither humans nor human cultures have such an essence. Human beings have no center. 'Humanity' or 'peoples' do not name a natural kind, though perhaps '*homo sapiens*' does. Non-essentialists, if they want to go philosophical, can view humans, Rorty tells us, "as a centerless web of historically conditioned beliefs and desires..." (Rorty 1991, 192). *Here historicism goes all the way down*. But, as Rorty himself acknowledges, a historicist need not so view humans—he can, but he need not, take such a philosophical stance—any more than he need view them in Berlin's essentialist way, a way that reflects another philosophical stance. A minimalist historicist could benignly ignore such issues in his articulation of historicism. He could, that is, consistently ignore such philosophical issues. They are metaphysical (ontological, if you will) or epistemological issues historicists can benignly ignore (Rawls 1991, 175-96; 1999, 288-314).

These Berlinish philosophical views can be *made* into *conceptual* truths by making stipulations. But we need not make such stipulations and stipulations do not establish or make essences. Such philosophical views are not just built into our natural languages or into the way thought must inescapably be and a minimal historicist who wants to so view human selves as centerless webs of belief can do so but she need not do so. She could ignore such matters and go on with her historicism without these (or any) philosophical trimmings. Reasonableness *allows* her to go in for philosophical trimmings but *does not require it*. No such conceptions are built into our language or into inescapable thought ways. There are no facts of the matter here yielding an 'objectively true' answer (another pleonasm) or a well warranted substantive empirical answer about 'the human essence'. A historicist can just say, without bothering her head about such philosophical matters, that historicism is the claim that *our knowledge of human affairs has an*

irreducibly historical character and that there is and at least seemingly can be no ahistorical universalizing perspective that yields an adequate understanding of the life of human beings sans phrase. This she need not take to be an *a priori* truth, a philosophical postulate, but to be an empirical claim which she believes to be well warranted.

There is another distinction that might be useful here. There is a *strong* form of historicism that might be contrasted with *weaker* forms. A weaker but still substantial view reads (to repeat) as follows: our knowledge or understanding of human affairs is time and place dependent. There is no ahistorical perch (standpoint) from which to understand such matters. Here we have substituted 'there is no' for a strong form which says 'there can be no' and 'there can be no empirical laws here'. The weaker view turns a historicist view away from being a philosophical generalization or a controversial law-like claim—controversial because law-like claims sustain counterfactual claims and in social domains that is very problematic. What is unproblematic and travels philosophically light is that there could be true but possibly false empirical generalizations, what are called accidental generalizations, e.g., 'All the books in her library are in English'. This case can be made from the perspective of a weak form of historicism. It is a claim about how things are, not a claim about how things *must* be or can only be. Historicism, I defend, is a claim that when we study history and societies reasonably carefully, we will come to see that this is how it turns (of course, contingently) out to be, namely, it turns out to be that all significantly substantial knowledge of human affairs is time and place dependent. This does not mean that there cannot be a contingent *directionality* to history. But this is something, if true (as I think it is), that we have discovered or will discover to be the case. It is something that possibly could be false but perhaps is not likely to be false. But, true or false, it is an empirical claim and thus contingent and a claim that is without the pragmatic or self-referential contradictions of stronger forms of historicism.

Which, if either, form of historicism would it be more reasonable to adopt? The strong form tells us that our knowledge or understanding of human affairs (moral, aesthetic, political, economic,

even of our most securely scientific and mathematical practices) *cannot* be other than time and place dependent. There can, so a strong historicism has it, be no ahistorical perch—no ahistorical Archimedean point—from which to understand and assess such matters. But we need not give such hostages to fortune by making such a strong claim. A weak form of historicism can more reasonably read as follows: humans live in a world which has different, or partly different, practices. They are there just like our lives. They are not, and perhaps cannot, except ethnocentrically, be cross-culturally normatively ordered. Views and practices change; they typically rise and fall over time. There are, that is, different views and practices that themselves change, sometimes disappear and new ones sometimes come into being. Traditions are not written in stone. And such a practice orientation need not at all connote a commitment to conservatism. Historically, things are always in flux. But that does not make history a chaos or just one damn thing after another, though sometimes it can be. There can in certain respects be progress, most obviously (though not only) in the natural sciences. But people have no utterly non-ethnocentric cultural or historical ordering of things. This is, as far as we are able to ascertain, just how it is. Perhaps it might have been different or will become different, but our long historical and different cultural perspectives make that dubious.

My minimal historicism is a still weaker form. This *weaker* historicist view that I adopt is a kind of ‘meta-historicism’. It is (to explain) the claim that we have, as a matter of fact have, such historical limitations and that there is no good reason to think we can transcend them in the sense that we will gain some ahistorical standpoint yielding significant comprehensive culturally and historically transcendent normatively important truths. As far as we can reasonably expect, we cannot plausibly obtain such an objective or impartial way, some importantly transcendent way, to understand human affairs or at least human social affairs. Such a ‘meta-historicist’ claim is the best way, so it turns out, to understand human affairs. That is, we should understand them as in all significant respects being time and place dependent. That is why I call my weak historicism,

somewhat eccentrically, a *meta-historicism*. That is the way, so I propose, to conceptually organize our understanding of such matters. There is no sufficient reason to think that we will get anything about human affairs that is *significantly* historically transcendent. I remain fallibilist about this too so as to avoid tumbling into a pragmatic contradiction.

That does not mean that things cannot progress, but that it will always be by the lights of some distinctively historical and cultural peoples. For us—we moderns, we social democratic liberals, we socialists, we communists—all assess things by our own lights; there is nothing more transcendent for us. Indeed, how else could we assess things? And all people and peoples, whether they recognize it or not, are in that predicament. It could be called ‘the humanocentric predicament’. To self-consciously so see things is the best way—the best warranted way—to conceptualize things. But keep firmly in mind that this is a *proposal* concerning how to more perspicuously view things. I don’t deny—what is obvious—that other people and other peoples can and do make other proposals. But I do claim that this is the most reasonable one in this domain. I don’t deny that it could be mistaken. I am a fallibilist. But I do not see how it could be otherwise. And the burden, so I believe, is on the Absolutist to show how it is, or reasonably could be, otherwise. Here is a place for me, as Wittgenstein put it, where my spade is turned. Do not all of us, somewhere along the line, come to such a point?

This is, of course, a far weaker claim than the strong historicist claim that that is how things must be. My weak historicism is still weaker than even the weak but still a stronger historicist claim than mine, namely, that for us to have any kind of nearly adequate understanding of how things are is to recognize this as a matter of empirical fact is how things must be. My weaker version of historicism does not say this is how things are; that this is, as a matter of fact, how it is. My ‘meta-historicism’ is still weaker than the view which just makes the above weak historicist claim. I claim that there obtains a number of ways to conceptualize and order human affairs, but that the best one, the most practically efficacious one, is such a ‘meta-historicist’ one as the one that

I propose. This still weaker version of taking historicism does not assert that this historical variability actually tracks how things are (though, of course, it might, very likely might) but that this is the way that things, by way of attaining maximal clarity, should be viewed. It can properly be said to give fewer hostages to fortune than the other versions (the strong version and the more straightforwardly weaker version).

However, both of the weak versions travel philosophically light by making no controversial philosophical claims or indeed no philosophical claims at all. In making mine—my meta-historicist view—I simply make do with the *proposal* that says to think of human affairs most plausibly and reasonably we social beings should view such things as importantly, though not necessarily exclusively, as being historically and culturally dependent. In this we should recognize that we should think historically and give great weight to so thinking. But I do not mean for a moment to deny that history may have—indeed, like Marx I think it does have—a *causal* directionality (though not a teleological one). But if so, this is an empirical matter and, as such, this claim might be false. True or false, it is an empirical claim, not a metaphysical or purely speculative one.

However, as Berlin says, *understanding does not mean or entail acceptance or endorsement* (Berlin 1991, 86). A historicist can be, but need not be, a relativist or an utter moral skeptic, accepting as a relativist all moral views or all culturally or historically cultural views as ‘equally valid’ (assuming that such a notion is intelligible) or (more plausibly) as a moral skeptic, skeptical that any moral point of view can be more adequate (full stop) than any other. But she could also doubt that and claim instead that we have no knowledge of what the one true or most adequate moral point of view would be (Nielsen 2001, 1141-45). But can we know this to be true? Well, of course not. What else is new? But isn’t this the most plausible thing to believe? Call it what some contemporary Italian hermeneuticists call oddly ‘weak thought’ or even nihilism as opposed to metaphysical thought (Vattimo 2010; Zabala 2005). But isn’t this, whatever we call it, our humanocentric predicament?

All the minimalist historicism that I would defend and the kind of historicist that I am are people who claim that moralities are historical products differing over time and place. They do not go on to say that they are equally acceptable or 'equally valid'. (I put this in quotes for it is actually incoherent. A claim is either valid or not. Something cannot be more or less valid or equally or unequally valid.) We could very well be doubtful about characterizing *the* (or *a*) moral point of view as something that is 'required by reason' or by the considered judgments of *all* reflective and reasonable human beings. It could reasonably be doubted that is something that we in the geopolitical North have an overlapping consensus about or have much of a prospect of getting such a consensus about, to say nothing about getting a worldwide consensus above (Nielsen 2008a). In this way it is reasonable to be skeptical and historicist; to be, as Rorty puts it, against Absolutism (Rorty 2006, 126).

Whether that change comes to an *evolving* historical change or just to something new under the sun, a minimal historicist can leave open—indeed, *qua* minimal historicist should leave open. She will reject all forms of Absolutism, be a thoroughgoing fallibilist, contextualist, and perspectivist, rejecting the notion of *the* moral point of view, and rejecting relativism in the sense of the belief that (i) all values and norms are equally valid or sound, and (ii) that cultures are windowless monads or black boxes that are incomprehensible by someone from another culture except in brute terms—terms that would never yield even an approximate moral or political understanding, an overlapping consensus or reflective equilibrium. I am not claiming this is somehow conceptually or metaphysically (ontologically) necessitated, though I do think, as a matter of fact, there is no plausible alternative.

The weak views are either something that could be determined empirically *or* something that rests on a proposal about how to understand human affairs. In saying, as the strong view does, that our views of human affairs—e.g., of morals, politics, economics or religion—*must* be understood historically, we at least seem to land ourselves in a pragmatic contradiction. We make a

substantive ahistorical claim in claiming that all substantive views concerning human affairs must be historical; we thus unsay what we are trying to say. We, that is, make an ahistorically significant substantive claim in trying to deny that there can be such claims. However, we should note that the straightforwardly weak claim, though a claim that is not as weak as my so-called meta-historicist claim, is itself clearly a view that successfully steers us away from the risk of being caught in a pragmatic or self-referential contradiction. It does not say that historicism must be true.

Similar things obtain for Rorty's articulation of a historicist claim. Rorty remarks, "If, like Hegel and Dewey, one takes a historicist, anti-Platonist view of moral progress, one will be dubious about the idea that moral progress can be more than the systemization of the widely-shared moral intuitions of a certain time and place" (Rorty 2006, 369). Substitute, as we readily can, 'is' for 'can be' and we get something that is more plainly amenable to empirical confirmation or infirmation. We can examine anthropologically or sociologically the actual moral and political views which have obtained historically and where we get ones where there has been and still is a considerable consensus—what Rawls calls an "overlapping consensus"—we will then see that they are moral or political views which are systemizations of what for a time and place have been widely shared beliefs embedded in practices. But when we compare them in their importantly substantive detail with other views we will see that in spite of frequent superficial similarities they will importantly differ. There are for a class, culture or several related cultures widely shared for a time moral intuitions (considered convictions or judgments) of that time and place, but when we spread our view wide, we will get substantively different views. There will be highly abstract minimally substantive moral views that are the same or similar across cultures but they, like the so-called natural moral law, will be very thin (Nielsen 1991, 41-84). We get, for example, the idea that some control of sexuality and some form of matrimony are pan-cultural and pan-historical. But that leaves us with the thin idea that in all cultures sexuality is regulated, but how it is regulated will often widely differ from one culture to another, often leading to considerable cross-cultural

misunderstandings. We, of course, *have many such cross cultural regularities but their cross cultural content (their common content) is very thin.* And there are across the board very great differences and often conflictual ones. To take three more examples, all societies have some form of religion or magic (sometimes they are mixed or blurred, perhaps inextricably) but often they are very different such that not infrequently adherents of one religious or magical belief system or set of practices hardly recognize some of the others as having such a belief system or set of practices. They hardly see the foreign religious belief system and practices as religious. They may think of them as mere superstitions. Believers in a religion that is a religion of salvation such as Judaism, Christianity or Islam will typically hardly recognize a religion of inner enlightenment such as the lesser vehicle Buddhism or Confucianism as a religion. And this can and often does obtain for the others as well. Buddhism will often be seen by Christians or Islamists not to be a religion but just as system of rather strange moral beliefs and practices. *Perhaps*, to use another rather different example, it is agreed everywhere and everywhen that unnecessary suffering is to be avoided. But what is to count as 'unnecessary suffering' or even sometimes is to count as 'suffering' will widely differ across cultures and times. *Perhaps*, again to switch the example, it in some general form is universally accepted by all cultures and at all times that lying is wrong. But, again, what counts as 'lying' will be widely contested as well as when exceptions to its wrongness are to be tolerated. This will obtain within cultures and between cultures and at different historical times. What is *universally agreed upon* in examples like these is thin soup whose value is exaggerated.

Where ethical and moral beliefs, codes, practices and political cultures have sufficient substance to be action-guiding, they substantially vary over historical time and cultural space. And we have no ahistorical skyhook that has gained cross-cultural and cross-historical consensus while still being sufficiently substantive so that we can without an arbitrary *persuasive* definition say that all rational and reasonable persons living at any time or place would agree on them. ('Rational' and

'reasonable' and their different cognates at different times and places also get differently construed.)

However, such matters would attest only, if at all, to *a factual* historical and cultural relativism, not to an ethical or moral relativism and certainly not to the belief that all ethical and moral views are equally valid or equally sound. (Again, query the very intelligibility of such a notion.) In this way a historicist need not and perhaps (very perhaps) should not be a relativist. Perhaps she should be a moral skeptic, meaning that *she should reject the idea that we have a coherent idea of what the one true morality would be*. Indeed, *pace* Isaiah Berlin and John Gray, we do not even have a cogent idea that there is a diverse though limited number of *substantive objective values* that, while not infrequently conflicting and *perhaps* sometimes even being incommensurable, still are, as Berlin and Gray claim, somehow objective. They regard some of them, while being equally objective, as still being irreconcilable. These values supposedly equally constrain us and should do so. But there is no way of showing which one, if any, is top dog or even the more adequate or that they equally constrain us or that all of them constrain us. Rather, some constrain some and others constrain others. To think we can, they say, is a rationalist's dream and often a dangerous one. They regard these allegedly objective values as equally constraining but—they say—they are irreconcilable but still objective and they are not all constraining to all. They all, so it is often said, should bind us (whoever we are) to the limits of a 'truly human' morality: a morality that is recognizably something that a genuinely human being as distinct from barbarian will have. It will thus yield a pluralism but somehow *not* a relativism or a moral skepticism (Berlin 1991, 70-90; Gray 1995, 96-130). But while there are paradigm cases about some who are barbarians, there is wide disagreement about who is a barbarian and who is not.

A historicist, as I construe her, though not as Vico or Herder do, cannot be a consistent historicist and accept the idea that there can be a coherent conception of *the one true morality or a universal morality* with a substantive normative punch, with what is distinctly 'a truly human'

morality. Still, like Berlin or Gray, a historicist, even a minimalist one, could be a pluralist accepting a range of diverse and sometimes conflicting moral beliefs which would together, though not in one way, constrain what would count as a moral point of view and what all would count, if anything, as 'truly human moralities' but none as *the one truly human morality*. Yet still, as Berlin and Gray think, we have an objective morality. But a historicist, as I have construed her, *need* not accept that last claim of Berlin's and Gray's. She could be skeptical, as Rorty is and as I am, that any such objectivity or Absolutism could be known to be true or known to be warrantably assertable. A historicist could utilize what might be called a hermeneutical method to imaginatively and scrupulously 'get inside' an alien point of view in order to understand the purposes that such to them alien people have and in this way come to understand how these very different beings are recognizably human agents in the world with people having very different aims and conceptions of how life is to be lived. There are very different people that are not just seen as brutes by such hermeneuticists, behaving in causally predictable ways, but instead as persons acting in intelligible ways, ways which are recognizably human. But talk of '*truly* human' behavior or of behavior '*truly* worthy of a human being' would be dropped. Its attractive heuristics, but that is all. Where we need substance, we get heuristics; a cynic might not unreasonably say, hot air.

Still, if we succeed in so proceeding, will come to understand better (including more fairly) people and peoples, including the so-called brutes. And by understanding them we will recognize them as at least having, rudimentary as they may be, aims and a conception of how life is to be lived. Some may seem brutish to us moderns and indeed they may be brutish. (Remember Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.) Even Malinowski, as we can see from his diaries, so reacted to some of those he studied so perceptively. But some among us may be brutish, too. It would not be too hard to name names. But our so concluding *may* signal a limited understanding on our part. But if we learn to look at things in a historicist way, we may at least come to understand that even very different others are not just brutes but human beings with purposes and life plans. Historicists

teach us to think in that way and Vico and Herder have pioneered the way. We must be wary of concluding that 'these brutes' are beyond the pale and we must be wary of claiming that their conceptions of how to live are 'brutishly' rudimentary. But we should also be wary of being too wary, too. Not everything that goes on in any society at any given time and place is, morally speaking, tolerable. Think, to take a rather mild example, of arguments going on now in France and Québec about the wearing of the burka. Think, to take a more robust one, of the expelling of the Roma. And to take a more extreme one, think of the behavior of Gadaffi or of the sanctioning of torture by Bush. (I do not say they are equally horrific, but they both very much behave or have behaved in horrific ways.)

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