

Final Essay for Philosophy 560  
Fall 1988  
by David Mertz

Social change occurs not only without the wills of the individuals who purportedly compose societies, but actually despite them. Let us start where this is clearest, in the most interesting of human affairs, with speaking. At particular historical times people in particular geographic areas speak predominantly in particular ways -- certain phonetic, morphological, grammatical, and other patterns are dominant. The descendants of these people speak differently; each concrete difference having gone through a contiguous series of gradual changes. Imagine, to simplify, that the "*same word*" has undergone a transition from pronunciation A, at time t, to pronunciation B, at time t'. Speakers at time t not only do not *intend* to adopt a new pronunciation; they specifically *intend* to avoid any change in pronunciation. And so it is in all matters social.

Our example from diachronic linguistics does not, even purportedly, demand a category of 'the social' in a neo-Hegelian sense of a social whole -- all that are purportedly required ontologically are various particular social forms or objects: words, phonemes, dialects, languages or something of this sort. We should not expect in any event, however, to demand an ontology of social wholes for a methodologically collectivist science or philosophy. All we should expect to demand is some terms which are irreducible by methodologically individualist means. 'Words', 'phonemes', et al., are such irreducible terms, at least purportedly. So, also, are many other social terms such as 'class', 'gender' -- and arguably even such terms as 'IBM', 'The Catholic Church' or 'The People's Republic of China'. Many such social *objects* are ontologically privileged and methodologically

necessary in various human sciences -- or so we shall argue.

What can be answered to ontological questions of the basic composition of the raw universe? We must answer such questions, I suppose, with silence; for there is no raw universe, but only one which has, as it were, already been 'cooked'. Ontological questions must be answered as Quine does: the ontology of the universe is the collection of objects named by the terms quantified over by the ultimate scientific theory. As if pursuing Quine's methodological ontology Durkheim writes.

Sociological method [or that equally of, for example, linguistics] as we practice it rests wholly on the basic principle that social facts must be studied as things, that is, as realities external to the individual. There is no principle for which we have received more criticism; but none is more fundamental. Indubitably for sociology to be possible, it must above all have an object of its own. . . .*[T]here can be no sociology unless societies exist, and . . . societies cannot exist if there are only individuals.*

Our goal is not, of course, merely that *sociology* be possible; our goal is the best obtainable description of social facts. Still, Durkheim is quite correct in his principle.

Lest we proceed even more swiftly than need be in such a paper as this, let us allow the methodological individualists a short rejoinder. Let us allow them this response in our mentioned area, diachronic linguistics. Their first reaction is surely to deny that individuals' explanatory significance within diachronic linguistics lies with these individuals' *wills or intentions* -- rather linguistic change can be explained by some other, presumably nonintentional, "fact" about individuals. Clearly, individual native speakers do not *intend* or *will* a given pronunciation, even on a single instance of use -- they merely *intend* the word and the glottis and tongue make the sounds. Phonemes, words, or whatever are,

for a methodological individualist, merely shorthand for an unstructured collection of individual behaviors; and any temporal change in behaviors must be explained by properties of individual organisms taken singly and by "facts" of an asocial world. However, the methodological individualist who has made this nonintentionalist move suffers two related shortfalls.

Firstly, she has not really assigned any particular ontological significance to the human individual. Yes, if she insists on drawing the joints in linguistics at the boundaries of the single human organism she has definitionally circumscribed the explanation to explanation of this organism -- and, yes, a given person did, as specified, at time  $t$  utter A, and at time  $t'$  utter B -- but other than a positivistic optimism nothing leads us to believe that any general laws of the human organism (or of this particular human organism) can be specified which explain this particular change. The linguist, however, who sees linguistic terms as ontologically real, can explain a diachronic change such as, for example,  $/V[t^h]V/ \rightarrow /V[s]V/$  not as a general law of human organisms, which it is clearly not, but as a general law of a particular language in a given time span, which is itself a particular instance of the still more general tendencies across languages for full stops to reduce to fricatives. Secondly, even if nonintentional laws of human organisms can be formulated, these laws are not laws of human individuals in the ethico-ontological sense demanded by methodologically individualist political theory. Such laws would only be laws of humans *qua* a particular structured bag of matter; and hence ultimately would be laws about the matter of which humans are composed. It is noteworthy here that even those transformational grammarians who might offer nonintentional laws of speaking humans are, while purportedly ontologically individualist, methodologically linguisticist -- i.e. they

study, not the actual neurological construction of humans, but the very phonemes, words, etc. which set the terms of an anti-individualist ontology.

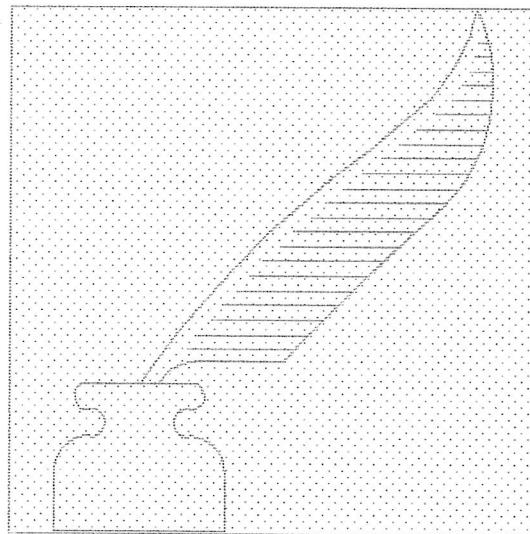


Perhaps needless to state, the tradition of political philosophy before the end of the eighteenth century was firmly committed to methodological individualism; or to what would later come to be called such when a possible alternative came to exist -- and much political philosophy since has made the same, ultimately obscuring, assumption. In particular, this assumption underlies the text of In Defense of Anarchism, by Robert Paul Wolff. The text would not be incorrect *sine* this assumption, it would simply vanish. Without the *a priori* assumption of methodological individualism, or at least of an individualistic ontology, it is impossible even to state the thesis of In Defense of Anarchism. Should it prove, as we imagine it will, that the ultimate social scientific theory governs not over human individuals, but over some social terms, then this venerable book will, along with most other extant political writing, be thrown onto the scrapheap of historical curiosities.

The text's supposed demonstration of the incompatibility of authority and autonomy rests, for its concept of autonomy, on the notion "that men are metaphysically free, which is to say that in some sense they are capable of choosing how they shall act." -- a necessary consequence of the stated "fundamental assumption of moral philosophy . . . that men are responsible for their actions." As Wittgenstein would say, this is where the decisive move has been made in the conjuring act. What follows is merely smoke and colored lights to build suspense about the already demonstrated impediment of "men's free will"

by political states. However, in reality, men cannot meaningfully be called free (nor can the women mysteriously absent in the text); neither, as the text states, "if their representatives vote independently of their wishes," nor in the contrary circumstance. Men are simply not the sorts of creatures of whom we can meaningfully predicate freedom.

Many trees have been killed in the exposition of the so-called "free-will versus determinism" debate. Despite possible appearances, and although we do not ourselves quite claim justification for our own killing of trees, we shall not discuss this issue. Rather, we will take a methodological look at the notion of human freedom. To suppose that persons are "in some sense capable of choosing how they shall act" is minimally to claim that individual human beings play a causal role in the determination of some part of the universe -- in particular, for In Defense of Anarchism, that part called politics. Let us accept herein the not entirely satisfactory definition of politics given by the first sentence of the book: "Politics is the exercise of the power of the state, or the attempt to influence that exercise." The umbrage we take with the narrowness of this definition is unimportant for the discussion below.



*Bob spills ink on the text*

Politics, like anything else, is a fit object of scientific investigation. The result of this investigation is, if anything, a theoretical system, correlate ontological

assumptions, and a selection of some subset of the ontology as causal terms. If it happens, as is likely, that individual human persons are not assigned any causal role -- or not even included in the ontology -- in the ultimate political theory, then "men [sic] cannot meaningfully be called *politically* free," though they may in principle still be called free as regards something other than politics. Any effort to smuggle back in human freedom, despite the absence of human individuals in political theory, is nothing more than ideologically motivated, and groundless, metaphysics.

The actual determinants of politics might be any of a number of things. Historical materialism fills the causal part of its ontology with classes and with, on a different level, means and relations of production. Weberian political sociology explains politics in terms of functional laws of institutional structures -- the "laws of bureaucracy." American political science explains political matters in terms of the competition of interest groups. None of these allows for individuals in any but an epiphenomenal role; individuals may become as they are as reflections of particular junctures of social entities, but they are quite passive in doing so. Even the antiquated "great-man school of history" does not assign any explanatory significance to the average individual. It is only some exceptional *men* whose individual traits determine political facts.



According to the book,

The defining mark of the state is authority, the right to rule. The primary obligation of man is autonomy, the refusal to be ruled. It would seem, then, that there can be no resolution of the conflict between the autonomy of the individual and the putative authority of the state.

Every word of this is muddled; though this feature is, admittedly, shared by ethical discourse as a whole. We shall take this passage as both representative and characteristic of the text -- in order to show the confusion in the text we shall simply have to go through this short excerpt word by word.

Our first suspicion arises when we reach the second word, 'defining'. Already we begin to suspect that we are being led into an *a prioristic* discourse about an empirical object, i.e. political states. Objects in the real world rarely, if ever, have *defining* features; at most they have *characteristic* or *most important* features. No new problems arise for six words, until we come to 'authority'. If *authority* is taken to mean *de facto* authority, the text just might have correctly named the characteristic feature of political states. However, the next clause creates a problem with this more sensible meaning; it defines authority as the *right to rule*. Again, if what were written were the *purported right to rule*, some sense could be gotten out of the sentence; but unfortunately, this is not so. Apparently, the author of the text is not attempting to describe some existing thing in the real world, but is laying down an *a prioristic* definition. Very well, so be it! However, no coherent theory of politics has ever included 'rights' in its ontology -- so *ipso facto*, nothing in the real world is a state. Already the text has vanished -- for all it could claim still is that were such things as states to exist they would impinge upon the autonomy of "man," whatever this means.

Let us be generous, though. Let us pretend that the text had been written as suggested: "The *characteristic* mark of the state is *de facto* authority, the *purported* right to rule." It can be demonstrated that the next sentence carries on the same *a prioristic* definition of "man" as the previous had of "state." Rather,