

Methodological Individualism: Microfoundations of Macro Social Explanation

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Abstract: *Methodological individualism has a profound influence on the social sciences by privileging individual actions, intentions, preferences, and attributes as the foundational units of social explanation. Although this approach rightly emphasises human agency, its explanatory claims become problematic when individuals are abstracted from the historical, material, institutional, and relational conditions that shape their actions. This conceptual paper critically examines the epistemological and explanatory assumptions of methodological individualism and reconsiders the relationship between individual agency and macro-social structure. Its central contribution is to advance a relational understanding of social explanation in which agency is neither treated as analytically self-sufficient nor dissolved into structural determinism but understood as constituted and exercised within historically specific social and material relations. Moving beyond the conventional opposition between methodological individualism and methodological holism, the paper argues that neither individual action nor macro-social structure, considered in isolation, adequately explains social phenomena. Individual choices and practices are consequential, yet their possibilities, meanings, and effects are mediated by pre-existing relations, institutional arrangements, and historically produced material conditions. Conversely, structures are reproduced and potentially transformed through situated human practices. This perspective reconceptualises the micro-macro relationship as a relational and historically contingent process rather than a problem of reducing one analytical level to the other. The paper concludes that an adequate social explanation must integrate human agency with the structural conditions that constitute, operate, and reproduce it. Such an approach offers a critical alternative to atomistic accounts of social life while avoiding structural determinism, thereby strengthening the conceptual foundations of social theory.*

Keywords: Methodological Individualism; Methodological Holism; Human Agency; Social Structure; Relational Social Theory; Micro-Macro Relations.

1. Introduction: Methodological Individualism: The Problem and Origins

Methodological individualism (hereafter, MI) emerged as a nineteenth-century formulation in the history of ideas and ideologies. Grounded in materialist metaphysics and nominalist epistemology, it has exerted considerable influence on social-scientific inquiry since the Enlightenment. Its central methodological commitment is that social phenomena should be explained by identifying the properties, choices, actions, and interactions of the individuals who constitute them. From this perspective, social realities are ultimately rendered intelligible through micro-level accounts centred on individuals and their attributes.

Steven Lukes characterises MI as a “prescription for explanation,” according to which purported explanations of social or individual phenomena cannot qualify as explanations or, in Watkins’s formulation, as “rock-bottom explanations”, unless they are expressed wholly in terms of facts about individuals (Lukes, 1968, p. 121). Similarly, Bhargava observes that “in MI all social phenomena are analysed in terms of what individuals think, choose and do” (Bhargava, 1992, p. 12). The rationale is that explanations which appeal to collective entities without accounting for the perspectives and conduct of their members remain incomplete. Holism, by contrast, explains social phenomena through entities and processes that are irreducibly supra-individual, including culture and institutions. The disagreement, therefore, concerns a foundational question in social explanation: whether social phenomena can ultimately be accounted for by individual actions, properties, and meanings, or whether they possess emergent properties and

causal powers that cannot be reduced to individuals. This tension has recurred across diverse fields of the human sciences.

The intellectual roots of MI can be traced to Thomas Hobbes ([1651] 1968), whose account of society drew on geometrical reasoning, mechanics, and materialist assumptions. Hobbes understood social organisation as arising from interactions among individuals driven by competitive and aggressive impulses. His contractualist account located the basis of political order in individuals rather than in an independently existing collective will, thereby establishing a precedent for later individualistic explanations of society. In this framework, society becomes intelligible through the characteristics and actions of those who compose it. Hobbes’s approach thus helped establish the individual as a starting point for explaining social order. However, it should not be taken to mean that every aspect of his political philosophy can be reduced to a single methodological principle.

John Stuart Mill (1829) gave this individual-centred orientation a more explicitly systematic methodological formulation. He argued that the laws of social phenomena must ultimately be understood through the laws of individual human nature, including its actions and passions. Whereas Hobbes placed individuals at the foundation of social and political organisation, Mill more directly framed individual human nature as the explanatory basis for social laws. The movement from Hobbes to Mill consequently marks a shift from a philosophical account of how social order originates to a methodological claim about how social phenomena should be explained. Together, their formulations illuminate the ambition of MI: to make social explanation answerable,

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ultimately, to individuals' conduct and characteristics. They also introduce the central issue that any assessment of MI must confront: whether explaining the individuals involved is sufficient to explain the social relations, institutions, and historical conditions through which their actions acquire meaning and consequences.

2. Methodological Individualism and the Interpretive Tradition

Methodological individualism (MI) also finds expression in the interpretive tradition, particularly in the writings of Wilhelm Dilthey (1883) and Max Weber (1947). However, their approaches differ from the mechanistic and naturalistic orientations associated with earlier formulations of MI, as they foreground individual experience, meaningful action, and human understanding in explaining social and historical phenomena. Their contributions, however, also raise a fundamental question concerning the relationship between individual subjectivity and the shared cultural and historical contexts within which meaning becomes intelligible.

Dilthey's anti-naturalist approach emphasised that human expressions cannot be understood independently of the shared meanings that connect individuals. Individual expressions embody what is common to many, whether through conventions of politeness, artistic creations, or historical actions. Understanding becomes possible because the person expressing an experience and the person interpreting it participate in a historically and culturally constituted sphere of shared meanings (Dilthey, 1883). Individual experience, therefore, is neither wholly private nor socially self-sufficient; it becomes intelligible through interpretive relations that transcend the isolated individual. Dilthey consequently introduces an important qualification into the individualistic tradition: social and historical phenomena require an understanding of subjective experience and expression, but the intelligibility of these experiences depends upon shared cultural and historical conditions.

Weber developed a distinctive methodological position by combining interpretive understanding with causal explanation. He emphasised the subjective meanings individuals attach to their activities and the orientations through which their actions relate to those of others within particular sociohistorical contexts (Weber, 1947). Seeking to bridge the explanatory concerns associated with Mill and the interpretive orientation associated with Dilthey, Weber advanced *Verstehen* as a method for understanding meaningful social action while retaining the possibility of causal generalisation. His approach resisted the reification of collective entities, maintaining that interpretive sociology must analyse social phenomena through the acts of individual persons and their modes of organisation (Weber, 1964, p. 88).

For Weber, action differs from mere behaviour through the meanings, intentions, and goals that actors attach to their actions. Human agency involves the capacity to interpret external circumstances, evaluate motivations, and orient conduct towards particular situations (Roth & Schluchter, 1979, p. 73). Social explanation must therefore establish how actors relate their interpretive capacities to the circumstances in which they act. Nevertheless, Weber's emphasis on

individual action does not render social structures, cultural norms, biological conditions, or natural events causally irrelevant. Although these phenomena are not meaningful social actions in themselves, they constitute conditions that shape the possibilities, orientations, and consequences of action. The explanatory significance of such conditions lies in their relationship to meaningful conduct rather than in their reduction to individual dispositions.

Taken together, Dilthey and Weber demonstrate that interpretive MI cannot be equated simply with reducing social reality to isolated individuals. Dilthey establishes the significance of shared meanings for understanding individual experience, while Weber makes meaningful action the analytical point of departure for sociological explanation. Their approaches nevertheless leave open a critical issue: whether the methodological priority accorded to individual understanding adequately captures the independent historical and institutional forces that shape agency itself. This tension provides a basis for examining the explanatory limits of MI without dismissing the indispensable role of subjective meaning and human agency.

3. Society, Individual, and the Agency-Structure Relationship

The challenge to methodological individualism (MI) emerges most explicitly in the holistic tradition, which maintains that society possesses an organisational and explanatory significance that cannot be adequately understood through its individual constituents alone. Auguste Comte ([1896] 2000) articulated this position by arguing that society is no more decomposable into individuals than a geometric surface is into lines or a line into points. His formulation challenges the assumption that social phenomena can ultimately be explained by reducing them to individual properties and actions. The fundamental issue is whether society represents merely the outcome of individual interactions or constitutes a relatively autonomous social reality with irreducible collective properties.

This controversy took on particular significance in the debate between Émile Durkheim (1938) and Gabriel Tarde ([1899] 1969), whose contrasting approaches offered competing explanations of the relationship between individuals and society. Durkheim emphasised the social determination of individual life, treating supra-individual phenomena as social in origin and opposing what he regarded as Tarde's psychological dogmatism. Nevertheless, Durkheim did not deny the significance of individual consciousness. He acknowledged that consciousness is not identical even among members of the same society (Durkheim, 1938, p. 173), recognising a distinct psychic life of the individual alongside that of society. He also located the sources of creativity, initiative, and invention in individuals. As Lehmann (1993, p. 173) explains, personality encompasses individual consciousness, originality, freedom, behaviour, and difference. Durkheim's position thus complicates any straightforward opposition between social determinism and individual agency.

This complexity becomes more apparent in Durkheim's concept of the cult of the individual, through which he sought

to reconcile individualism with a socially grounded conception of moral life. Collective consciousness and individualism are not necessarily incompatible because individualism itself can become an active component of collective consciousness. As Lehmann (1993) argues, the modern individualised collectivity incorporates individual distinction, difference, and autonomy into a shared moral framework. Durkheim consequently located the resolution of the antagonism between individual and society in moral individualism, understood as a social creation rather than an innate or exclusively individual attribute (Durkheim, 1953, p. 59). Individualism, like morality and religion, is produced through social relations; even the moral beliefs that elevate the individual derive their authority from society.

Durkheim's account of collective consciousness further challenges reductionist explanations by treating it as more than an epiphenomenon of its morphological foundations, just as individual consciousness cannot be regarded merely as an expression of the nervous system (Lehmann, 1993). As individual consciousness develops, collective consciousness becomes less extensive and determinate, while individual differences assume greater significance; the two therefore vary inversely in their relative scope and strength (Lehmann, 1993, pp. 172–173). This formulation illustrates the dynamic relationship between social integration and individual differentiation rather than establishing the absolute primacy of either term.

Durkheim's conception also resonates with Immanuel Kant's ([1783] 1950) account of the conscious subject as a formal condition of experience and with Jean-Jacques Rousseau's ([1762] 1947) philosophical concern with the individual and the social order. As Lehmann (1993, p. 173) explains, this individualism is neither utilitarian nor egoistic; it concerns humanity in the abstract, rather than the glorification of the particular self. However, a critical ambiguity remains. When the individual becomes sacred because each person embodies humanity and possesses an inviolable moral status, the apparent elevation of individualism simultaneously expresses the authority of collective values. Durkheim's formulation can therefore be understood as a cult of the individualised forms of collective forces (Durkheim, 1915, p. 472), revealing how individual autonomy may itself be constituted through society.

The foregoing debate connects to Weber's interpretive approach and the broader problem of agency and social structure. Weber's methodological emphasis on meaningful action avoids treating individuals merely as bearers of dispositions or passive products of structures, while recognising that social conditions shape the circumstances within which action becomes intelligible. Structures, cultural rules, and norms cannot be treated as independent explanations without examining how human action conditions, constrains, and reproduces or transforms them. The central theoretical question, therefore, extends beyond the opposition between individualism and holism: it concerns how individual agency and supra-individual social conditions can be integrated into an adequate account of social reality. This problem exposes the limitations of both absolute holism and reductive methodological individualism, establishing the need for an explanatory framework that recognises the

constitutive relationship between individuals, institutions, and historically formed social structures.

4. Social Structure, and the Problem of Social Explanation

Methodological individualism (MI) extended beyond its philosophical and sociological origins into economic and political thought, where it became a strategy for explaining social processes through individuals' actions and interactions. Joseph A. Schumpeter (1942) regarded MI as a scientific strategy particularly suited to explaining certain economic processes. Its central methodological commitment was that economic and social outcomes should be made intelligible by identifying the individual actions that give rise to them. This formulation strengthened MI's position as a general approach to social explanation, while raising the question of whether reference to individual action is sufficient to account for the organisation and consequences of collective life.

Schumpeter influenced Friedrich Hayek (1948), Karl Popper (1966), and J. W. N. Watkins (1957), among others, who argued that social phenomena should be understood as resulting from human action. Popper insisted that "we should never be satisfied by an explanation in terms of so-called collectives" (Popper, 1966, p. 98). The methodological implication is that explanations should identify the specific behaviours, characteristics, and interactions through which social outcomes are produced rather than treating collective entities as self-explanatory causes. MI thus became not merely a philosophical preference for individuals but a requirement concerning the adequacy of social-scientific explanation.

This methodological orientation is closely connected to Hayek's conception of liberty. For Hayek, liberty principally meant the absence of coercion, understood as intentional human interference with another person's action. The individual is therefore the primary bearer of freedom, and social arrangements are evaluated in terms of the extent to which they permit or constrain individual action. This position connects MI's explanatory emphasis on individual agency with a normative commitment to protecting individual liberty. It also shapes Hayek's disagreement with Karl Marx over inequality and social intervention. Marx envisaged social change as potentially requiring conscious political action to transform an initial distribution of natural and social endowments regarded as unjust. Hayek, by contrast, rejected the legitimacy of such transformation because unequal endowments resemble a lottery rather than coercion. From this perspective, collective intervention restricting individual liberty is not justified simply because resources and advantages are unevenly distributed. The contrast reveals that debates about MI are inseparable from normative assumptions about freedom, inequality, and the legitimate scope of collective action.

The distinction between methodological individualism as an explanatory strategy and individualism as a normative doctrine is especially important here. Hayek's defence of liberty and his resistance to redistributive intervention are not simply consequences of the claim that social outcomes arise through individual action; they also depend on substantive

judgements about coercion, entitlement, and the legitimacy of collective decisions. Conversely, Marx's account of structural inequality does not eliminate the need to explain how people interpret shared conditions, form interests, and organise politically. The explanatory and normative dimensions of these theories should therefore be distinguished even where they intersect. An account may identify individual mechanisms without endorsing an individualistic political philosophy, just as an account that recognises structural causation need not deny agency. This distinction helps prevent the debate from becoming a false choice between individual freedom and social determination. It also clarifies why a satisfactory social explanation must examine both the mechanisms linking action to outcomes and the historically specific conditions under which agents acquire their capacities, interests, and opportunities in those contexts.

The conventional opposition between Marxism and MI presents Marxism as materialist, historical, dialectical, and holistic, while associating individualism with positivist or bourgeois social theory. This distinction, however, has been challenged by scholars including Jon Elster (1985), John Roemer (1994), Adam Przeworski (1977), and G. A. Cohen (1995). Elster's influential and controversial argument is that MI informs defensible aspects of Marx's thought (Elster, 1985, p. 4). Its importance lies in directing attention to the microfoundations of Marx's account of social causality, without necessarily reducing his theory to an individualistic ontology.

Elster argues that Marx offered an exemplary analysis of the complex relations between situated individual actions and their unintended consequences, through which social and historical forces acquire a degree of apparent independence. Marx thereby developed the insight, associated with thinkers from Giambattista Vico (1965) to G. W. F. Hegel, that history results from human action but not necessarily from human design, into a scientific methodology (Elster, 1985, p. 27; Popper, 1966, p. 93). On this reading, explaining macro-social outcomes requires identifying the mechanisms through which individual actions combine to produce consequences that no participant necessarily intended. Microfoundational analysis can consequently strengthen macro-level theories by clarifying the processes connecting action and structural outcome.

Class formation illustrates this relationship. Marxist analysis treats classes as collective actors capable of engaging in class struggle, but explaining their emergence requires attention to the mechanisms that enable or inhibit the development of class consciousness among individuals. Elster draws on rational strategic interaction and game theory to analyse such mechanisms, including the "free rider" problem: individuals may benefit from a collective good without contributing to its production. Collective mobilisation therefore cannot be assumed to follow automatically from shared structural interests. It must be explained through the circumstances, incentives, expectations, and interactions that facilitate or impede coordinated action.

Elster's account of Marx's analysis of the working class also highlights the significance of workers' interdependence and their concentration in large factories. Such conditions may

make workers more aware of their colleagues' likely preferences and behaviour, thereby creating opportunities for collective identification and action. However, these structural circumstances do not mechanically produce class consciousness; their effects depend on how individuals experience and interpret their social relations. Marx's account thus offers a way to connect the conditions of collective life with the processes through which collective agency develops.

In *The German Ideology*, Marx argues that historical explanation must take the practical conditions and implications of human activity (Marx, [1843] 1977a, pp. 165-168). These include, first, productive activity directed towards satisfying material requirements and engaging with external nature; second, the production of new needs and the reflexive transformation of human relations to internal nature (Marx, [1843] 1977b, p. 92; 1977a, p. 166); and third, familial relations associated with the reproduction of human life. A fourth dimension consists of social relations, understood as cooperation among individuals under varying conditions, forms, and purposes. Finally, these historically situated relations provide conditions for the emergence of language and self-consciousness, which develop as intrinsic features of human practices (Marx, 1977a, pp. 165-167). These propositions indicate that individual capacities and forms of consciousness cannot be adequately understood apart from material activity and social cooperation.

This insight has implications for how subjectivity itself is conceptualised. Elster argues that ideas of the self, including the self understood as instrumentally rational, should be explained as outcomes of individual activities situated in specific contexts rather than treated as presuppositions of social explanation (Elster, 1985, pp. 71-73). Individual capacities are therefore not simply pre-social or given attributes; they are formed and developed through historically organised practices and relations. This formulation complicates MI by assuming fully constituted individuals as the ultimate explanatory starting point, while retaining the value of examining the actions through which social processes unfold.

A related difficulty arises in structuralist interpretations of Marx. Louis Pierre Althusser (2005) and Nicos Poulantzas (2000) treat social structures as conceptually fundamental. In contrast, Antonio Gramsci's (1971) conception of Marx as the philosopher of praxis emphasises practical activity as the more encompassing category. From this perspective, neither maximising behaviour nor class structure alone captures the full scope of Marx's account; both are secondary elaborations of historically constrained social relations. One difficulty in Marx's own formulation, however, is that his ontology of practice is grounded especially in productive activity, leaving aesthetic, moral, and linguistic practices less fully developed (Marx, 1975, pp. 190-191). This limitation has contributed to uncertainty about the logical status of social structures in later Marxist theory.

Susan James (1984) describes Althusser and Poulantzas as "absolute holists." Although these theorists recognise Marx's refusal to reify personal demands and capacities, they can be read as assuming that rejecting MI requires the opposite position: individuals become little more than products of

social institutions. These alternatives risk reproducing the very dichotomy it seeks to overcome. Marx's account, as interpreted by Elster, instead suggests that capacities for subjectivity and rational action emerge as possibilities through social interaction. The opposition between social determination and free individual agency is itself historically produced by particular forms of society, as are other polarities between self and society (Elster, 1985, p. 9). Rather than treating either term as an unquestioned starting point, social theory should employ concepts that explain how their relationship is constituted and transformed.

The persistence of the individualism–holism debate demonstrates the difficulty of resolving this problem within a single methodological tradition. Georges Gurwitsch (1942) and Morris Ginsberg (1957) also sought to address it. However, the controversy resurfaced in response to Talcott Parsons's (1951) macroscopic theorising and the work of his critics and interlocutors, including George Caspar Homans (1967) and Dennis Hume Wrong (1961). It also informed the polemics associated with Hayek (1952) and Popper (1966). The recurrence of the debate indicates that disputes over explanatory priority persist whenever social scientists attempt to specify the appropriate relations among individual action, collective processes, and social organisation.

At its core, MI concerns the conditions under which an explanation of social phenomena can be regarded as adequate. Lukes characterises it as a “prescription for explanation,” arguing that accounts of social or individual phenomena cannot count as explanations or, in Watkins's formulation, as “rock-bottom explanations”, unless they are couched wholly in terms of facts about individuals (Lukes, 1968, p. 121). Bhargava similarly maintains that “in MI all social phenomena are analysed in terms of what individuals think, choose and do” (Bhargava, 1992, p. 12). From this standpoint, holism is deficient when it invokes collective entities without accounting for the agents' own perspectives. Holistic explanations, however, emphasise that culture, institutions, and other supra-individual phenomena may possess properties and causal significance that cannot be reduced to individual-level facts.

The historical debate therefore cannot be adequately represented as a simple choice between individualism and holism. Hobbes, Mill, Weber, Schumpeter, Hayek, Popper, and Watkins articulate different forms of individual-centred explanation, while Comte and Durkheim emphasise the irreducibility of social reality. Marx and subsequent Marxist theorists further complicate the opposition by examining how individual actions, social relations, collective processes, and structural conditions are historically interdependent. The central challenge is, consequently, to explain how social outcomes emerge through human action while recognising that the capacities, meanings, opportunities, and constraints that govern action are themselves shaped by historically constituted relations. Such an approach avoids both the reduction of society to isolated individuals and the treatment of individuals as passive effects of autonomous structures, providing a more adequate framework for analysing the reciprocal constitution of agency and social organisation.

5. Discussion

The preceding analysis demonstrates that methodological individualism (MI) is not a single, internally uniform doctrine but encompasses a range of positions that emphasise individual action, subjective meaning, choice, and personal properties as foundations of social explanation. From Hobbes and Mill to Weber, Schumpeter, Hayek, Popper, Watkins, and Elster, its proponents have sought to establish how social phenomena can be explained through the actions and mechanisms of individual actors. The enduring significance of this intellectual tradition lies in its insistence that explanations of social processes must account for the agency of human subjects rather than invoke abstract collective entities as self-sufficient explanatory principles. Nevertheless, the historical development of social theory reveals persistent difficulties in explaining social phenomena without reference to supra-individual processes, institutional arrangements, social relations, and historically constituted structures.

The debate between methodological individualism and holism, therefore, cannot be adequately understood as a simple opposition between the individual and society. Weber's emphasis on meaningful social action, Durkheim's analysis of collective consciousness, and Hayek's defence of individual liberty represent distinct theoretical positions, yet collectively illuminate the complexity of the relationship between individual agency and social conditions. The fundamental question is not simply whether explanation should begin with individuals or collectives, but how individuals and social structures should be conceptualised without treating either as an autonomous and self-sufficient explanatory starting point. Individuals are neither isolated atoms acting independently of their social circumstances nor merely passive effects of structural forces. Correspondingly, social structures cannot be reduced without remainder to individual actions, nor can they be treated as entities entirely detached from the practices through which they are reproduced and transformed.

The historical engagement of Dilthey and Weber with meaningful action further demonstrates that individual conduct becomes intelligible within historically and socially constituted contexts. Durkheim's analysis, meanwhile, establishes that individual consciousness and the very ideals of individualism are shaped by collective life. Their contrasting approaches reveal the limitations of assigning exclusive explanatory priority to either individual agency or social structure. Individual actions acquire meaning within existing social relations, while collective arrangements persist, change, and acquire significance through human practices. This reciprocal relationship challenges explanatory frameworks that either dissolve social reality into the properties of individuals or conceptualise structural conditions as determining human conduct independently of agency.

The Marxist engagement with methodological individualism further clarifies the theoretical stakes of this debate. Elster's emphasis on microfoundations highlights the importance of identifying individual-level mechanisms through which macro-social and collective outcomes emerge. However, the

explanatory value of microfoundations does not establish that social phenomena can be understood adequately by treating individuals as analytically prior to the relations in which they are constituted. Marx's conception of human activity, social relations, and historically situated practice provides a basis for examining how individuals acquire their capacities, needs, forms of consciousness, and possibilities for action within specific material and social conditions. Individuals act within historically specific relations, but their practices may also reproduce, negotiate, and transform those relations.

The principal limitation of strict methodological individualism, therefore, lies not in its recognition of individual agency but in its reductive tendency to treat individuals and their properties as analytically prior to the social relations through which they are formed. This distinction is crucial because methodological individualism may operate as a principle of explanatory inquiry without necessarily entailing the ontological claim that society is nothing more than an aggregate of individuals. Its methodological insistence on identifying the mechanisms linking individual action to collective outcomes remains valuable; however, these mechanisms cannot be fully understood when the institutional, historical, and material conditions that shape action are relegated to the background. An adequate account of social explanation must consequently examine not only how individual actions generate collective outcomes but also how historically constituted social relations shape the actors, interests, meanings, and capacities involved in those processes.

6. Conclusions

The historical trajectory examined in this paper thus suggests that the opposition between individualism and holism is itself insufficient as a comprehensive framework for understanding social reality. The more productive theoretical task is to conceptualise agency and structure relationally, recognising them as distinct yet interdependent dimensions of social processes. Individuals act within conditions they have not independently created, while their actions may sustain, modify, or transform those conditions. Structures, in turn, condition the possibilities and consequences of action through historically specific institutions, power relations, and patterns of social interaction. This relational perspective avoids both methodological reductionism and structural determinism without dissolving the analytical distinction between individual action and collective conditions.

Methodological individualism consequently retains its significance insofar as it directs attention towards human agency, subjective meaning, and the mechanisms through which collective outcomes emerge from situated action. Its explanatory limitations become apparent when the methodological principle of investigating individual action is converted into an ontological presumption that social relations and structures possess no explanatory significance beyond the individuals who constitute them. The central issue is therefore how to explain the historical formation and reciprocal transformation of individuals, social relations, and structural conditions.

The principal contribution of this analysis is to reframe the methodological individualism-holism debate as a problem of relational explanation rather than an exclusive choice between competing explanatory levels. Such a perspective preserves MI's analytical concern with agency, meaning, and mechanisms while resisting its reductionist implications, and acknowledges the significance of social structures without reducing individuals to their products. A more comprehensive theory of social explanation must therefore investigate how action, power, meaning, and material conditions interact in the constitution and transformation of social reality. The enduring significance of the debate lies not in establishing the universal primacy of either individuals or collectives, but in clarifying the historically situated relations through which agency and structure are mutually constituted. It is at this intersection of individual action and collective conditions that the theoretical foundations of a more adequate account of social explanation must ultimately be developed.

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