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**Methodological Individualism and Institutional Individualism: A Discussion with Joseph Agassi**

**Joseph Agassi, Nathalie Bulle and Francesco Di Iorio**

Dr. Joseph Agassi (born in Jerusalem on May 7, 1927) is Emeritus Professor at Tel-Aviv University, Israel and York University, Canada. He is one of the most eminent Popperian epistemologists and has written extensively on a wide array of philosophical, logical and historical issues. His contribution to the individualism-holism debate, which has captured the attention of both philosophers and social scientists over the past few decades, is centered on the idea that we need to reject not only holism, understood as the idea that social wholes “have distinct aims and interests of their own” (Agassi 1960, p. 245), but also a large part of the individualist tradition. In his opinion, most of that tradition is more or less committed to psychologism, namely, the “theory that every social theory … is reducible to psychology; that every social explanation can be fully explained, in its turn, by a purely psychological explanation” (Agassi 1987, p. 119). Focusing on the reasons of the untenability of psychologism, Agassi has highlighted the necessity of endorsing an anti-psychologist version of individualism developed by his mentor Karl Popper, which Agassi has called “institutionalism” or “institutional individualism” (Agassi 1960; 1975; 1987). In his view, institutionalism is “Popper’s great contribution to the philosophy of the social sciences” (Agassi 1987, p. 119). A corollary of Agassi’s analysis is that the term “methodological individualism” is not the most appropriate way to describe the proper method of the social sciences because it is too generic and confusing, referring indiscriminately to both the variants of individualism mentioned above. He considers the term “institutional individualism” to be a preferable option.

Two differences between psychologism and institutionalism should be emphasized. The first is that while, according to psychologism, only individuals exist, institutionalism claims “that certain social entities exist, and are of primary importance to the social sciences” (1987, p. 123), though they exist “not in the same sense in which people exist” (1987. p. 127). However, while institutionalism assumes that these entities – namely, institutions – exist, it denies that they have “(distinct) interests” (*ibid*.). According to this anti-holistic view, an institution “may have aims and interests only when people give it an aim, or act in accord with what they consider should be its interest” (*ibid*.). Yet, Agassi contends, both the individual and the institutional background exist, which means “that we cannot reduce psychology into sociology and we cannot reduce sociology into psychology” (*ibid*.). The second difference between psychologism and institutionalism is that the latter approach claims that the explanation of social phenomena assumes that “individuals are affected by social conditions, and in their turn affect them” (1987, p. 129). Social phenomena are produced not only by individual psychology, but also by the existing institutional structures (1987, p. 145). In Agassi’s opinion, the problem with psychologistic explanations is that they do not give institutional factors any causal role and assume that the very analysis of institutional phenomena must be carried out in atomistic terms. He firmly rejects this atomistic view: “It is an error to assume that the only satisfactory explanation of institutions is by assumptions which say nothing about institutions” (1987, p. 146). In his view, arguing that institutions exist and produce social constraints means arguing that individual behavior takes places within a coordinated system of actions: the institutional framework. The framework of the “existing social co-ordinations” constitutes “an important factor in determining the rational or purposeful behavior” of the agent and its social consequences (*ibid*.). The “inter-personal means of co-ordination” that are represented by institutions “can be explained as … attitudes which are accepted conventionally or by agreement” (1987, p. 150). According to Agassi, his view “accords with the classical individualistic idea that social phenomena are but the interactions between individuals. Yet it conflicts with the classical individualistic-psychologistic idea that interaction depends on individuals’ aims and material circumstances alone; rather it adds to these factors of interaction the existing inter-personal means of co-ordination as well as individuals’ ability to use, reform, or abolish them, on their own decision and responsibility” (Agassi 1987, p. 150).

**Bulle and Di Iorio**: Professor Agassi, you claim that institutional individualism – a term that is mentioned for the first time in an article that you published in *The British Journal of Sociology* in 1960 – is an approach invented by your mentor Karl Popper. However, Popper never discussed the concept of institutional individualism. Following the members of the Austrian School of Economics, he always defined himself as a methodological individualist. Moreover, he never argued that the entire individualist tradition before him was committed to psychological reductionism. Could you discuss this point and try to summarize the contents of your personal conversations with Popper about methodological individualism, institutional individualism and your interpretation of the pre-Popperian individualist tradition as mainly psychologistic?

**Agassi:** There was nothing to discuss: Popper’s position was clearly stated in Chapter 14 of *The Open Society and Its Enemies* on the autonomy of sociology. His new argument against psychologism is stunning: psychologism entails the methodological myth of the social contract. Needless to say, we should avoid methodological myths. Popper never responded to my paper except once when I expressly asked for it. He said he liked the assertion that institutions have no aim of their own. This idea is found in his *The Open Society and Its Enemies*.

**Bulle and Di Iorio**. It seems to us that your analysis of the history of the individualist tradition, which leads you to brand most of this tradition as psychologistic, possesses some problematic features. The fictional and unrealistic models or situations outlined by mainstream mathematical economics and social contract theory can certainly be regarded as tendential forms of atomistic individualism that more or less deny the relevance of social structures. However, precisely because of their fictional assumptions, these approaches must not be confused with the explanatory logic of methodological individualism properly understood. For example, interpretative sociology has little to do with these oversimplistic constructs.

In your opinion, according to pre-Popperian individualism, only individuals exist, while institutions, understood as social co-ordinations accepted conventionally by individuals, do not exist as relatively independent entities. This is why you consider pre-Popperian individualism atomistic, that is as a theory that denies that action takes place within a pre-existing set of social structures that influence it.

However, it seems to us that well-known non-atomistic individualist sociologists and economists such as Menger, Weber, Simmel, Spencer, Mises and Hayek never claimed that institutions do not have real existence and are explanatorily irrelevant, but developed a more articulated and defensible position. This position can be summarized as follows: social factors and social institutions should not be conceived in terms of naïve realism. This means that they should be studied and taken into account in economic and sociological explanations, but they should not be interpreted in holistic terms as *sui generis* entities, that is as entities that “exist independently of the individuals which compose them” (Hayek 1948, p. 6). Institutions should be regarded rather as abstract models that describe typical and systemic modes of interaction between concrete individuals. This is not a denial of the existence of the institutions and their influence in terms of social conditioning: it is rather a criticism of the misuse of collective concepts in the social sciences and the tendency to regard wholes as entities acting on their own as separate causes.

Take, for example, Menger’s methodological reflections. He claims that social phenomena must always be explained in terms of individuals, but also affirms that action takes place within structures of interaction that affect it and are created by rules commonly accepted by the actors (1985 (1883), pp. 139-142). In his opinion, the methodology of the social sciences needs to focus on the systemic features of the social world: each part of the global system called society – each individual or each social subsystem (e.g. a firm, a university, a family) – he contended – “serves the normal function of the whole, conditions and influences it, and in turn is conditioned and influenced by it in its normal nature and its normal function” (ibid. p. 147).

While we admire Popper’s social theory, it seems to us that what you call institutionalism is older than his work. In our opinion, Popper’s theory of institutions is in line with the anti-holistic theory of the collective concepts developed by Menger and the other scholars mentioned above. For Popper (1957; 2002, p. 126), institutions are not *sui generis* entities, but “abstract objects”. They “are theoretical constructions” or “models” that are “used to interpret our experience” (ibid.): “Even ‘the war’ or ‘the army’ – he pointed out – are abstract concepts, strange as this may sound to some. What is concrete is the many who are killed; or the men and women in uniform, etc.” (ibid.). He pointed out that this anti-holistic view “does not assume the existence of collectives; if I say, for example, that we owe our reason to “society”, then I always mean that we owe it to certain concrete individuals – though perhaps to a considerable number of anonymous individuals – and to our intellectual intercourse with them” (Popper 1966, p. 421).

**Agassi:** The question that you raise applies generally to all modern western social thinkers. Consider John Locke. He studied property, which is as much a social institution as you can find. Did he study it as an institution? Yes. Did he consider it as such? I suppose the answer is, no: why else would he present it as an extension of one’s body? Did Weber and Mises assert that institutions exist? Did they deny that institutions exist? Twice, no. It seems you slightly misrepresent them. I may be in error, of course, but no one has corrected my assertion thus far: collectivists say only collectives exist; individualists say only individuals exist; Georg Simmel says both exist; Popper says, collectives have no aims of their own. Popper refers to Simmel once, regrettably dismissing him with little familiarity (since his epistemology is old-fashioned).

I have discussed briefly the contrast between ontological and methodological institutionalism: they are logically independent, since the one is a proposal, the other is a statement.

**Bulle and Di Iorio:** From a methodological standpoint, individualism takes into account the relevance of social and intersubjective factors. Focusing on Popper's theory of World 3 helps us to understand this point. Your interpretation of Popper’s methodology of the social sciences in terms of institutional individualism seems to be partly related to this theory. However, this point is not extensively discussed and carefully analyzed in your works. According to Popper, ([1977] 2003, 38), the relationship between mind and body has to be explained in terms of interaction between three worlds: (a) the physical world, or World 1;(b) the world of mental states, or World 2; and (c) the world of culture, or World 3. Authors such as Chalmers (1985) and Udhen (2001) argue that methodological individualism as traditionally understood is incompatible with Popper’s three worlds theory. This is because, for Popper, World 3, which includes all cultural artifacts (e. g. scientific theories and institutions), must be considered real and somehow autonomous from the other two worlds. Moreover, in his opinion, World 3 is “irreducible” to either World 1 or World 2 and “exerts a causal influence upon” the World 2 of individual mental states (Popper [1977] 2003).

**Agassi:** All this is much ado about very little new. For example, the theory says that a symphony is not any of its performances, much less any of the scores of it (not even the initial score, since it is often lost). What is it, then? Or, what is a text? Carnap faced this question. He said it is ink spots. This is as silly as possible, since the ink spots may include errors, be translated, etc. Putnam said it is that or sound tracks. He forgets semaphore! How silly can one get? All Popper did is to avoid the current silly suggestions. A text is something abstract. This is all of the world 3 idea

**Bulle and Di Iorio:** We see no reason why Popper’s theory of World 3 should be regarded as incompatible with methodological individualism. According to Popper (1978, p. 145), the objects of World 3 exist as “abstract objects”. They are not merely mental, but objective knowledge pertaining to a public, intersubjective world. This requires that they are formulated “in some language” and therefore can be the “object of criticism” (1978, p. 159). For example, a scientific theory exists as such not because of subjective mental states, but precisely because it is publicly criticizable knowledge. In Popper’s opinion, human beliefs, including empirical descriptions of the natural world scientific thories, are World 3 objects only if we can speak of their “truth” or “falsity” or of their “logical relationship” with other beliefs (1978, p. 160). If a mental state is not expressed in language, it cannot be discussed and criticized. As a consequence, it “is merely a world 2 process, it is merely a part of ourselves” (ibid.). It does not exist as objective knowledge. According to Popper, the relatively autonomous existence of World 3 objects also depends on the fact that sometimes their physical realization is impossible. For example, since the sequence of natural numbers is infinite, “there is no embodiment “of it (1978, p. 161). Popper also contends that, given that the objects of World 3 are expressed in an understandable language and can be publicly criticized, they can “cause” individuals “to think” (1978. p. 163).

**Agassi:** You say, “In Popper’s opinion, human beliefs, including scientific theories empirical descriptions of the natural world, are…” This cannot be true. From the start Popper ignored beliefs as belonging to psychology and so logically after methodology, not prior to it.

**Bulle and Di Iorio:** We mean here the *contents* of beliefs. Their contents can be either true or false and thus can be regarded as belonging to objective knowledge, to World 3.

Let’s focus on issues strictly related to the philosophy of the social sciences. It seems to us that the theory of World 3 presupposes methodological individualism and should not be regarded as incompatible with it for at least four reasons. First, since this theory defends the existence of objective knowledge, it is also supportive of universally shared fundamental rational mechanisms. The existence of these inter-cultural mechanisms is a basic assumption of interpretative sociology.

Second, Popper (2003, 43) stressed that his theory of World 3 must not be confused with the naive essentialist ontology rooted in Plato’s thought that inspired the holistic views developed by Hegel and Marx: “Though Plato’s world of intelligible objects corresponds in some ways to our World 3, it is in many respects very different. It consists of…. essences.” While I stress the existence of World 3 objects, I do not think that essences exist…I am an opponent…of “essentialism.” Thus, in my opinion, Plato’s ideal essences play no significant role in World 3”. (Popper 2003) In Popper’s view, Plato’s essentialism is the presupposition of the holistic assumption that we can grasp the laws governing a society as a whole (Popper 1957, p. 76), i. e. of the assumption that the true “significance” of an action is “determined by the whole” (Popper 1957, p. 22), understood as “the structure of all social and historical events of an epoch” (ibid., p. 78).

**Agassi:** So much discussion of so simple a point: Popper opposes methodological essentialism but allows that some essences exist — of human products such as science — introduced as hypotheses, not as definitions. They dwell in world 3.

**Bulle and Di Iorio:** We have further reasons we wish to outline. The third concerns Popper’s idea that World 3 has a causal role is not committed to holism because, according to him, “World 3 theories and world 3 plans and programs of action must always be grasped or understood by a mind before they lead to human actions” (Popper 1978, p. 164). This is at odds with the view that social factors determine human minds mechanically and unconsciously. For him, “world 2 acts as an intermediary between world 3 and world 1” (1978, p. 156). World 3 can affect the physical world only by means of human interpretations of it and according to individual goals and needs; that is, through a World 2 that Popper (2003, 36ff.) does not consider to be a simple epiphenomenon of World 3.

Fourth, the thesis that World 3 is “irreducible” to the World 2 of mental states can be regarded as incompatible with MI only if this approach is equated with the view that vocabulary about social concepts must be reduced to vocabulary about psychological properties. However, this equation seems to us impossible because historically MI is centered on explanations in terms of systemic phenomena and unintended consequences that are irreducible to mental properties.

Could you clarify the relationship between Popper’s theory of World 3 and what you call institutional individualism?

**Agassi:** To discuss properly a theory, says R. G. Collingwod, one has to begin with the problem that it comes to solve. Quite unusually, Popper’s World 3 theory comes out of the blue. He told me clearly that he held it for years but feared publishing it because of its bluntly metaphysical character. Indeed, in my memory this event comes with Bar-Hillel expression of shock upon his encounter with it. What problem Popper viewed as the one that comes to solve? He never reported his answer to this question. Clearly, human language is an institution (unlike the languages of other animals). Here comes Popper’s endorsement of the theory of levels of language of Karl Bühler. It also comes with no background and no question. Perhaps the omission is of something obvious.

My initial papers on Institutional Individualism offered a simple thesis: valuable social theory takes both individuals and institutions for granted, without necessarily any ontology.

**Bulle and Di Iorio:** During the last decades the interpretation of methodological individualism in terms of psychologism or psychological reductionism has been defended by different scholars. Your view is centered on ideas that have also been expressed by Roy Bhaskar, Margaret Archer, and Lars Udehn. One of the most common accusation against MI is that, as an approach based on *Verstehen*, it neglects the influence of objective institutional constraints on action because these constraints exist independently of the actor’s subjective standpoint. Legal constraints, for example, are not excused by the ignorance of law in the sense that they produce consequences independently of the individual’s opinion about what she is free or not free to do. This interpretation of MI as an approach incapable of taking into account institutional constraints because it only focuses on the subjective standpoint of the actor seems to us incorrect because of two reasons that are strictly interconnected.

The first is that methodological individualists such as Weber, Simmel, Spencer, Menger and Mises never assumed that strictly subjective standpoints are the foundation of social life. In explaining the social world, they did not apply the interpretative approach – *Verstehen* – to subjective psychological content, but rather to shared meanings or collective beliefs, i.e. to typical ways of thinking and acting (Weber (1978 [1922]). The second reason is that, according to MI, the interpretation of these shared reasons is strictly linked to the analysis of their consequences that are often unintended. This analysis allows for the explanation of social constraints in terms of objective and sometimes brutal results of these shared reasons (see Hayek 1952: 34). This means that MI conceives social interactions as resulting from both the intentions of the individuals and the objective structures that are preconditions of these interactions. An exemplification of the incompatibility between MI and psychological reductionism is Weber’s analysis of the caste system in India. Weber accounts for the existence and acceptance of this system, and its constraints, in terms of objective consequences resulting from shared normative beliefs that create the structure of the social positions and are in turn affected by it (Weber 1946: 396–415). The legitimacy of this structure depends on the relationship between its reality and the mental. According to Weber (1921/1962: 131), the caste system is “only a product of rational ethical thought […] Only the wedding of this mental product with the real social order through the promises of rebirth gave this order the irresistible power over the thought and hope of the people moored in it”

**Agassi:** Lars Udehn has expressed full agreement with me. I ignore Roy Bhaskar as he wants certitude. Margaret Archer offers complex theories that are difficult for me to discuss for want of understanding of the problems that engage her. For my view on Max Weber see my “Bye Bye Weber”, *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 21, 1991, 102-109; for my view on Ludwig von Mises see my review of his *Theory and History* in *Times Literary Supplement*, 16 May 1958.

**Bulle and Di Iorio**: Both your article on Weber and your article on Mises are interesting, but they do not discuss the interpretation of MI in terms of psychologism. Your review of Mises’s (1957) *Theory and History* focuses on his criticisms of historicism and positivism, while your text on Weber’s *Science as a Vocation* challenges the latter’s claim that the social sciences can and should be value free (Weber 1917/1989). In your opinion, Weber did not understand that values change and are improved under the pressure of “empirical criticism”, when some set of values entail conflicting recommendations. You argue that Weber did not mean by axiological rationality what is usually meant by this term today and also that axiological neutrality in Weber’s sense is impossible. Do you regard science as necessarily committed to politics? Do you think that the empirical criticism of values mentioned above is indissolubly linked to politics?

**Agassi:** Popper has rightly viewed as the peak of his philosophy the unity of his theory of science and his theory of democracy. To repeat my claim, the combination of the negative theology of Maimonides with the theology of Spinoza (“*Deus sive Natura*”) amounts to negative science, which is Popper’s great contribution to the philosophy of science. He saw progress as correction and correction as the offspring of criticism. This is the Socratic view of both science and politics. The obstacle to the application of the Socratic method to science is Plato’s view of science as certitude. All the contributions to the philosophy of science after Hume were made in effort to answer him. This was felt necessary since Plato’s dismissal of the unproven was taken for granted. Kant even went so far as recommending censorship against publishing hypotheses. All efforts to answer Hume followed Bacon’s proposal to avoid hypotheses, especially bold ones. Popper said, science is bold hypotheses and (Socratic) efforts to refute them. Here Popper admitted Hume’s criticism as valid but denied his value system. In particular, he said Hume’s great contribution was his criticism, yet he never asserted the (Socratic) view that criticism is valuable (as the fuel of scientific progress). The background to Popper’s great contribution explains its greatness: the idea that some scientific errors are important was both taken for granted and vehemently rejected. Already Newton said (*Principia*, Bk. II) that Kepler’s and Galileo’s laws are false and (Bk. III) that they are true. Popper began with the recognition that Einstein has refuted Newton’s theory. In Einstein’s background was the effort to make electrodynamics fit Newtonian mechanics (obey Galileo’s transformations); he decided to make mechanics fit electrodynamics (obey Lorentz’ transformation), thus applying the famous field energy equation (E = mc2) to mechanics. He did that by showing that the Maclaurindevelopment of mc2— E = m0c2/(1-(v/c)2)1/2 **—** is E = m0c2 + ½.m0v2 + ... that replaces the one in the Newtonian framework that is E = mv2/2.  Here is Einstein’s great contribution to methodology. He viewed Popper’s contribution true as a matter of course but was appalled by his positivism. (In his “The Popper Legend” he says he never was a positivist, meaning, adherent to the doctrine of the Vienna Circle. He concealed his past traditional-style positivism in his 1959 English translation of his 1935 *Logik der Forschung*.)

**Bulle and Di Iorio:** Let’s come back to the topic of individualism.It is necessary to make a distinction between two different problems: the explanation of the reasons why institutions objectively exist and the explanation of how they causally influence decision-making. Let’s focus on the second problem from a strictly sociological standpoint. It seems to us that you and the pre-Popperian methodological individualists share a similar view: i.e., the idea that social structures do not mechanically affect decision-making because their influence is mediated by the interpretative skills of the actor. In other words, social structures do not act as separate causes of social phenomena because action depends on the meaning it carries out for the individual. Institutional factors such as the dominant ethical values of a given society cannot mechanically cause any action because only the way these values are interpreted by the actor can affect his/her behavior.

The distinction between the two levels of analysis mentioned above – i.e., the objectivity of the institutions, on one side, and the individual interpretations that cause the action, on the other side – is fundamental to correctly grasp the relationship between the social framework and action from the standpoint of MI (see Huff 1984, pp. 73-74). To explain the objectivity of a political “institution” or “compulsory association” (Anstalt) like the state, Weber (1978, p. 277) argues that within it “the orientation” of human “action to the rules is expected…because the individuals…are empirically ‘obligated’ to participate in the social action constituting the community and because the probability exists that, if necessary, their opposition (however mild in form) will be restrained through a ‘coercive apparatus’.” However, this does not mean that the members of this political community’s typical behavior results mechanically from these constraints. Their actions are explainable, like those of the members of other institutional structures, in terms of typical rational evaluations that are “possible” only given the existing cultural “background” and “do not contain a single grain of "psychology"‘ (Weber, 1978 p. 277 n96; original emphasis).

Do you agree that institutional individualism and pre-Popperian individualism share the view that social structures affect decision-making only through the meaning that the individuals attach to them? Is it correct to say that, for you, the difference between these two approaches mainly depends on the fact that, while the former recognizes the relative autonomy of the institutions and their causal role in the generation of social phenomena, the latter does not?

**Agassi:** To your question: no; I do not agree. Also, allow me to add (so as to prevent confusion), I do not disagree. This paragraph is very puzzling to me. Do you remember Kipling’s Just So story of the invention of writing?

**Bulle and Di Iorio:** You maintain that institutions are “an important factor in determining the rational or purposeful behavior” of the agent and that institutions “can be explained as … attitudes which are accepted conventionally or by agreement” (1987, p. 150). Your view is clearly anti-holistic. This is because, for you, the influence of the institutions on the individuals is neither direct nor mechanical. The conventional rules that create the systems of coordination that you call institutions play a normative role but do not impose deterministically any goal or aim.

**Agassi:** that is correct: institutions have no aim of their own. (This holds for whole societies too.)

**Di Iorio and Bulle**: In your opinion, what is the difference between pre-Popperian individualism and institutional individualism with regard to the study of social conditioning?

**Agassi:** Mill said, all reference to institutions in an explanation should be eliminated for it to be satisfactory. Popper said, this leads to the methodological myth of the social contract. What can be simpler?

**Bulle and Di Iorio**: Different pre-Popperian individualists like Menger, for example, criticized the myth of the social contract and explained the emergence of institutions in terms of unintended consequences. Moreover, they did not provide an atomistic explanation of social action.

**Agassi:** why did Menger insist that institutions are unintended when legislation is a common phenomenon?

**Bulle and Di Iorio:** you display a mixture of admiration for and dissatisfaction with Weber’s approach that you consider the most refined form of psychologism (Agassi 1987, pp. 142-143; 2017). In your opinion, one of the problems with this approach is that it is “applicable only to a narrow range of problems” (ibid. p. 142). This is because it “ties us too much to the typical” and, as a consequence, “leaves no room for sociologically significant yet untypical characteristics” (ibid., pp. 142-143). For example, “it does not enable us to explain satisfactorily effects of detailed characteristics of one prominent individual” (ibid.).

**Agassi:** Yourexpression “a mixture of admiration for and dissatisfaction with” is very disturbing to me. I express admiration and dissatisfaction with many ideas, including, say, Newton’s metaphysics. Yet there is no mixture here anymore than, say, my admiration for Einstein and my admiration for his theory of gravity.

**Bulle and Di Iorio:** You highlight that, since social change is often “untypical”, Weber’s individualism cannot account for it. Moreover, in your view, his approach does not allow room for intended institutional reform (Ibid. p. 143). This is also because it denies the existence of institutions. For Weber, you contend, the existence of institutions is simply inconceivable because of his psychologistic idea “that if institutions exist, they are things with independent aims, interests and destinies” (ibid.).

We do not agree with the criticisms that you level at Weber. Firs, the interpretation of the institutions as systems of interaction which exist independently of the individual’s mental contents must necessarily presuppose the use of typical concepts in Weber’s sense, namely the analysis of the typical ways of thinking and acting that produce these systems via their objective consequences. Moreover, the study of social change as understood by sociology must account for typical features such as, for example, Bolsheviks’ political viewpoint that affected the communist revolution in Russia. It is unclear for us in which cases individual untypical characteristics can be relevant from the standpoint of the sociological analysis of the social structure, its constraints and its historical change, while we recognize, like Weber, that untypical features can be relevant from the standpoint of other disciplines like psychology.

Max Weber’s ideal-typical approach is strictly related to an explicit criticism of psychologism. It must be noted that he does not mean by this term exactly what you mean. For him, psychologism means that the explanation does not refer to the typical culturally and socially situated rationality of the agents that produce the institutional forms of social behavior. In his opinion, to develop a sociological explanation, we do not “proceed to a ‘psychological’ analysis of the ‘personality’ by means of some odd mode of inquiry, but…to an ‘objective’ analysis of a given situation” (Weber (1902/1974, pp. 24). According to Weber (ibid.), “the specific character” of ideal-typical “constructions, their heuristic value, and the limits of their empirical applicability are based on the fact that they do not contain the least bit of ‘psychology’ in any sense of that term.” Moreover, in his view, ideal-typical constructs do not play a normative role in explaining the average kinds of behavior of a given society. Weber clarifies that they are not to be compared to “laws of nature” because they do not describe reality, but “[serve]to facilitate an empirically valid interpretation by comparing given facts with a possibility of interpretation.” (ibid.)

Our impression is that you interpret in too radical a manner Weber’s ideal-typical approach. According to this approach, the pure models are universal only from a very abstract standpoint and can be applied to concrete historical phenomena to develop a comparative analysis.

**Agassi:** You express on opinion that differs from mine. That is fine. You expect me to comment on this expression. I do not know what for.

**Bulle and Di Iorio**: Can you give an example of individual untypical characteristics that can be relevant from the standpoint of the sociological analysis?

**Agassi:** Of course. (1) Typically, Churchill was straight forward. Untypically, his attitude to the Shoah was shifty. (2) Typically, the British revered royalty. In the 20th c they shifted their attitude untypically because they felt that the royal family was maltreating Diana. (3) Typically, Israel is racist; untypically it allows a few Vietnamese refugees settlement within its borders.

**Bulle and Di-Iorio:** Saying that the attitude of the British towards the royal family changed because they felt that the royal family was maltreating Diana means talking about the reasons the British had to change their attitude. Here you refer to a typical rational evaluation: reasons shared by millions of individuals. The consequences of Churchill’s behavior can be regarded as sociologically relevant, but his behavior is per se not a sociological phenomenon. Weber’s approach requires us to apply the concepts of typical rationality and typical action only to the study of intersubjective phenomena.

**Agassi:** I do not understand you. You asked for individual untypical characteristics**.** I gave you the example of Churchill and the example of the British public. Are these not examples for individual untypical characteristics**?**

**Bulle and Di Iorio:** In discussing your view that pre-Popperian methodological individualism is psychologistic you develop some criticisms of Weber’s methodology of the social sciences, but do not analyze and discuss the approach of other major individualist scholars such as, for example, the members of the Austrian school of Economics: Menger, Mises and Hayek. Popper was clearly influenced by these social scientists. What, in your opinion, is the relationship between his individualism and the individualism of these three Austrian thinkers?

**Agassi:** For the Austrians let me mention Mises. He did not care about the question, are institutions objective: he spoke of them. Unlike earlier economists such as Smith, he spoke of the market (and not only of trade). He recommended the return to the gold standard so as to limit the ability of authorities to intervene in the market. He did not care about institutions but about free trade.

**Bulle and Di Iorio**: do you consider Hayek a psychologist?

**Agassi.** I do not know. Why do you think he wrote his *The Sensory Order?*

**Bulle and Di Iorio**: Could you develop this point more, please?

**Agassi**: You ask me a question and I say I do not know the answer. Why should I develop this?

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