

Response to Alban Bouvier

By/Par **John B. Davis**

I thank Alban Bouvier for his thoughtful comments and for attending my March 2005 Paris lectures at Université de Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne Maison des Sciences Economiques which provided us the opportunity to discuss his comments. We seem now to be in agreement on most points, and I believe have reached a better understanding of the issues he has raised in his comments.

Bouvier has emphasized that methodological individualism is a versatile doctrine which can accommodate a variety of positions regarding approaches which emphasize individuals. It is not to be confused with ontological individualism, he emphasizes, which makes strong claims about the existence of individuals and often about the non-existence of other types of entities. In this regard, Bouvier follows Schumpeter, who I cited (Davis, pp. 35-6) as making essentially this same distinction. My main target in the first half of my book, however, was atomistic ontological individualist views, and I am not only not a critic of all methodological individualist views, but can even be seen as advancing a methodological individualism throughout the book and especially in the second half where I present the socially embedded individual conception as stronger than the atomist conception.

Thus the book is not methodologically holist as is charged. In fact, I argue that methodological holism has been something of a blind alley for heterodox economics (pp. 109ff), and that recent structure-agent models which allow for reciprocal influences of individuals and structures on one another represent an advance over the weaknesses in methodological holism regarding the role of individuals in the social process – something which has often been caricatured by opponents of the view. Structure-agent models, it should be added, are neither methodological individualist or methodological holist. If my book can be seen as methodological individualist with respect to the socially embedded individual conception, then it is to emphasize this side of the structure-agent framework – which in my view is underdeveloped – not to abandon that framework.

Methodological holism enters my discussion at one other point. In my discussion of the problem of multiple selves in the standard literature (chapter 4), I point out that not only has this problem never been adequately addressed within the confines the standard assumptions, but that if one is to remain steadfast in a traditional methodological individualist view with ontological individualist foundations, then one is implicitly committed to a methodological holism regarding an individual's multiple selves being united in one person (p. 69). The

general problem in this chapter was the individuation problem or how one goes about showing that the standard conception of the individual demonstrates the individual to be separate and distinct from other individuals. In connection with multiple selves, the problem is that without knowing how an individual's many selves count as one, one does not know where one individual begins and ends or how to count individuals. I argue that having failed to solve this problem standard economics has found itself left with an abstract individual conception, which concerns individuals distinct in name only. That is, the usual utility objective function approach used in economics modeling can be equally used for one or more individuals, and thus includes nothing in it which tells us whether it applies to one or more individuals. More simply, there is nothing in the abstract individual conception that tells us whether it refers to anything in the world at all.

Thus I disagree with Bouvier that methodological individualism is general in the sense that it takes its departure from a very abstract conception of the individual. Methodological individualism represents a strategy that emphasizes individuals, but on my view one can only emphasize them if one can be confident one is talking about real world human individuals. In the introductory first chapter of my book I argue that an ontological approach to evaluating conceptions of entities in economics requires an account of the semantics of reference (pp. 15-16) in order that one be able to say that the terms one employs can be reasonably said to pick out real things in the world. The account of reference I employ is what I referred to as an identity conditions approach that looks at a given ontological concept (here, the individual), asks what the requirements are for using that concept (here, individuation and re-identification), and then evaluates particular conceptions (here, the atomistic and embedded individual conceptions) according to whether they satisfy those requirements. When this is the case, the conception in question can be said to refer to real things in the world. The abstract individual conception, however, can be used equally to refer to one or more individuals (or even animals or computers). Thus its generality precludes its satisfying the individuation requirement, and as a conception it floats free of the world it is meant to describe.

One other point of disagreement between Bouvier and me deserves comment. He asserts that he finds my treatment of collective intentionality as heterodox puzzling, because Raimo Tuomela's discussion on which I rely is clearly individualistic rather than holistic. But as noted above, my book is not meant to be methodologically holist but individualist, at least with respect to the embedded individual conception. Thus Tuomela's account was chosen intentionally because of being strongly individualist. My strategy on this score was to avoid other contributors to collective intentionality theory such as Margaret Gilbert who are less individualist than Tuomela in order to offer for a highly individualist contemporary economics a clear comparison between two different accounts of the individual. Bouvier may be right that this is not what one expects of heterodox economics, but I think I provided good evidence (pp. 117ff) that traditional heterodox approaches take a position on this matter not unlike the one I take.

Thus the statement Bouvier finds awkward – that social relationships are embedded in individuals (p. 130) rather than the idea that individuals are embedded in social relationships – was specifically chosen to emphasize that individuals could be both social and nonetheless

still individual. As the collective intentionality discussion I develop then explains, use of 'we' language is fully the individual's own use, though it also possesses a distinctively social aspect. In this sense, social relationships are embedded in individuals rather than the reverse.

There are other minor points of difference between Alban Bouvier and myself, but on the whole – particularly after our recent discussions – I find a remarkable amount of agreement between us. I thank him again for his engaged reading of the book.