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John B. Davis

Marquette University, john.davis@marquette.edu

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Response to Vinca Bigo

By/Par **John B. Davis**

I do not believe that Vinca Bigo has quite grasped much of the argument of my book, particularly as regards her main complaint that the book is about tests and overlooks ontological analysis. The entire book is an exercise in ontological analysis, and the tests employed are a direct expression of it. The tests only have meaning within this context, as is argued in the first chapter and then summarized in the last. The primary focus of the book was indeed the evaluation of the two main conceptions of the individual in economics, given the centrality of the concept of the individual in mainstream economics, but this does not imply that the argument was not ontological in nature. In what follows, I will focus on the points where I believe Bigo most misunderstands my argument.

1. Bigo asserts that though I appear not to be unaware that my tests are embedded in a theory, I seek to distance myself from an initial ontological analysis.

The tests are said from the beginning of the book to be based on identity analysis of entities. Identity analysis of entities is rooted in being able to say what kind of thing any given entity is ('no identity without identity'). Contrary to Bigo, it is not a simple matter to refer to entities or things; one must have a systematic way of doing so, and this is what the ontological analysis of things is all about. Though I did not discuss it in the book for fear of discouraging readers unfamiliar with the history of philosophy, the ontological analysis of things and identity analysis has its origins in Aristotle's theory of individual substance in the *Metaphysics* and rejection there of Plato's theory of forms. Indeed the 'principle of individuation' is Aristotle's notion, and is central to his account of what an individual of any kind is. Identity analysis *is* ontological analysis, but Bigo misleadingly gives the impression that the two tests in the book have nothing to do with this by repeatedly suggesting that the test are shallow instruments of evaluation, are used in 'an *ad hoc* fashion,' and that I am from time to time 'shifting away from the theory altogether.'

2. Bigo charges that I limit my engagement to the fit between theory and reality.

Overlooked here is the identity theory of reference (pp. 15), which is not about 'fit' but about the conditions on which one is entitled to assert that a term in a given conception

successfully picks out something in the world. The theory of reference is the standard ontological strategy for talking about the existence conditions of things, though it cannot be summarized in the form of the 'fit' metaphor. Bigo never offers an alternative view of how one speaks about things or entities in the world.

3. Bigo believes my discussion of reflexivity and individuals being able to self-impose is circular because it does not invoke the basis on which we are agents.

This circularity claim is not actually explained, but is simply asserted. The statement is also confused in that these properties are exactly the basis on which I claim individuals in the socially embedded individual conception *are* agents; there is then no need to further invoke a basis on which individuals are agents with this as the basis.

4. Bigo then claims a solution to the circularity problem 'can be found by explicitly drawing on ontological presuppositions.'

This is then followed by quick sketch of the critical realist view that the world is structured, and not characterized by event regularities, so that 'structure both facilitates and constrains individual actions' with 'group actions can be easily understood emerging from individuals.' Of course I hold the structure-agent view, and have argued that it does not explain how individuals are agents or individuated. Thus it is odd that Bigo simply repeats the description of the view, and concludes 'group actions can be easily understood emerging from individuals.' But I don't think that putting italics or bold on the term 'emerging,' or perhaps waving one's arms when saying it, tells us anything about how individuals are distinct. Simple assertions have not been convincing to critics of structure-agent view, and continuing to play to their strong suit does the view a disservice.

Shortly later we get this assertion:

'But we do not yet need to draw on such substantive accounts of the individual, when it suffices that we reject both voluntaristic and deterministic accounts of the social realm. A notion of constrained agency (or choice), in which individuals and emergent social structure are not conflated, but are seen to interact and to transform each other respectively, explains that individuals are not reducible to groups.'

It is of course always easier to make one's point if one simply assumes the conclusion, which Bigo does here. How does one know one can reject voluntaristic and deterministic accounts of the social realm? On what grounds should we suppose that 'individuals and emergent social structure are not conflated, but are seen to interact and to transform each other?'

A considerable part of my discussion in this part of the book is devoted to addressing these problems by way of the question of how we may succeed in seeing individuals as genuine agents. Bigo has not only missed all this, but has gone on repeating the usual statements of the structure-agent view without seeing that the book has an argument about the vulnerability of that view and how it may be addressed.

5. Bigo asserts, 'Davis' focus on reflexivity and the question of its voluntary nature appears to be somewhat problematic, in so far as it is made central to the reidentification test.'

Bigo misses an essential aspect of my argument about self-imposing behavior in collective intentionality contexts. Individuals are both constrained and free in such settings, not simply free and voluntary. To put it the latter way is to give the impression that socially embedded individuals are somehow transcendent of social context, where the point of the characterization was rather than they are both constrained and free simultaneously in social contexts – as one would assume from the structure-agent view.

6. Bigo asserts that the problem of re-identification in the socially embedded individual case can be 'easily and better understood ... at the level of tendencies and powers versus the actual outcome at the level of events.'

The argument is as follows:

'it may be the case that someone acts against her desires, because of group pressure or torture ... But this is *not* to say reflexivity is lost ... That would be to conflate the internal motivations, the external structures (such as the group), the adjustment to the group ... with the ultimate decision that is manifest, which is likely to be a combination of all these.'

But why? What does 'likely to be a combination' mean? That reality can be seen as stratified as it is here does not tell us *how* event level developments transpire based on underlying forces. To say that tendencies and powers can combine does not tell us how they might or whether they do to have any particular effects on individuals' status as individuals.

7. Bigo regards my use of Sen as one unlikely to be shared by heterodox economists, and suggests that it would have been better to have used 'a sufficiently generalised level of abstraction, one that is shared by heterodox economists.'

Sen is certainly not a heterodox economist, but I advanced five reasons in the book why they might consider the capabilities framework of interest:

'Much of Sen's work has been devoted to criticizing the traditional understanding of the individual as a utility maximizing agent, especially in terms of how this understanding frames standard welfare economics and normative reasoning in economics generally... His longstanding interest in poverty and basic needs, particularly in connection with economic development, is contrary to the standard view that wants and needs cannot be systematically distinguished, and that the latter have no place in economics. He has consistently defended interpersonal comparisons, which have been off limits for most economists since Robbins. Perhaps most importantly, the concept that ties his entire capability framework together – freedom ... – has no real equivalent in neoclassical and mainstream economics. In fact, his focus on freedom provides a normative framework alternative to efficiency analysis.'

I believe most heterodox economists share much of this framework.

8. *At the outset of Bigo's comment doubt is expressed that 'we really need to concern ourselves' with homo economicus, which most mainstream economists as much as admit is a fiction.*

I believe this misreads the situation in mainstream economics in a radical manner. Mainstream economists have shown virtually no reluctance to continue using the *homo economicus* assumption, however they happen to understand it. One of the main purposes of my book was to challenge the very coherence of this conception, which has played such a strong ideological role in the profession for decades. Specifically, the point was to show that this conception *cannot* refer to real individuals, and thus cannot represent a correct way of understanding individuals. Moreover, in the final analysis I believe that how we see individuals in the world today is a human rights issue, particularly for the poor and vulnerable, since mistaken conceptions of individuals have been historically used to their disadvantage. Thus I take it as an important responsibility that heterodox economics advance an adequate conception of individuals. But advancing such a conception is in my view unlikely to be successful as long as economists generally believe that mainstream economics possesses a coherent conception.

Despite these disagreements with Bigo, I thank her for contributing to this review symposium.