Organicism

John B. Davis

Marquette University, john.davis@marquette.edu

Organicism has generally meant different things to different individuals, and the term is often used without clarity. The problem is that, though there is a core conception to organicism that most share, other, sometimes loosely related, ideas are often associated with this core conception or thought to be implied by it. The shared core conception involves an ontological thesis concerning internal relations between things. Two things are internally related if their natures and/or activities depend fundamentally upon their relation to one another. Internal relations are contrasted with external relations between things where the natures and/or activities of things related to one another are relatively independent of the relations between them. Thus organicism is first and foremost a view about the essential connectedness of things in reality.

Some philosophers have gone on from this characterization of kinds of relations to make further claims about what basic entities populate the world. On an external relations view, the world is made up of self-contained things or atoms, the relations between which are explainable in terms of what we understand about the atoms (for example, Wittgenstein, 1922). On an internal relations view, the world is rather made up of relations, such that the things they relate, or their relata, are explainable in terms of what we understand about relations (for example, Bradley, 1930). From this perspective, organicism is to be contrasted with atomism. Note, however, that casting organicism and atomism in terms of competing views of the whole of reality takes us beyond our focus on the core conception of organicism as a form of relation between things, since there is nothing in the idea of how two things are related that necessarily refers us to the nature of reality as a whole. Indeed, one could believe that reality as a whole included internally and externally related things, and consequently it would be careless to suppose that making a case for one sort of relation in one context implies that that sort of relation must apply universally. The tendency to make claims about the nature of the whole of reality is nonetheless often associated with organicist views, perhaps because seeing the world as a collection of things does not as naturally suggest the idea of a totality as does seeing the world as relation. A view related to organicism in the narrow sense which adds further claims about the whole of reality is holism.

Holism may be framed in terms of principles that apply specifically to the whole of some set of things or activities, or are emergent at the level of the whole (Jackson and Pettit, 1992), but it is perhaps more commonly framed in terms of whole–part relationships. Holist whole–part analysis is a species of organicism when the relationship between the two determines the nature and/or activities of each, or when whole and parts are said to be internally related. For example, interactionist accounts of the way social structure and actor agents transform and recreate one another can be whole–part organicist views (Giddens, 1984; Bhaskar, 1979). But not infrequently, holist whole–part arguments tend to make parts depend only upon wholes, and not the reverse. An example is the Post Keynesian inversion of the neoclassical reductionist project of developing individualist microfoundations for macroeconomics, namely the alternative project of developing holist macrofoundations for microeconomics. Holism in this instance is not
organicism, since the form of the relation between whole and part is not at issue, but rather whether whole or part has conceptual priority. Holism in this context is consequently better contrasted with reductionism. The related prescriptivist methodologies, methodological holism (sometimes collectivism) and methodological individualism, also counterpose holism and reductionism. Strictly speaking, these are not about organicism and atomism either, though confusion sometimes arises when methodological individualism is labelled ‘atomistic individualism’.

Holist arguments, then, need to employ an internal relations analysis to be organicist. But holism may also be thought organicist when the whole is modelled on the idea of a living organism. In this instance, not only are the parts of an organism typically thought jointly instrumental to the life of the whole, thus suggesting the idea of their being organically connected, but the connotation possessed by the term ‘organism’ is sometimes conflated with the ontological internal relations idea. Living organisms and societies, of course, are complex entities, and metaphorical transfer of the idea of an organism to societies and economies must necessarily elide important differences between them. Nonetheless, some writers, such as Menger (1985), Veblen (1899b), Hobson (1914) and Hayek (1973), have favoured organic analogies as an alternative to reliance upon mechanical ones in social science. Organicism in this instance contrasts with mechanism, the view that organisms are no more than complex mechanisms and that the laws of matter and motion govern the phenomena of life.

Organicism in this tradition additionally emphasizes the idea that socioeconomic systems are evolutionary in nature. Menger argued that society could be regarded as an organism in the sense that its institutions evolved spontaneously as the unintended result of individual human actions. Society exhibits an organic unity in that its institutions relate to society as organs relate to organism. Veblen believed that economic interest guided a cumulative growth in society’s conventions and methods of life, which he took to be the basis of its institutions. Evolutionary economics was ‘a theory of a cumulative sequence of economic institutions stated in terms of the process itself’ (Veblen, 1899b: 77). Hobson, influenced by Veblen, took the evolution of human wants and needs to be part of a wider process of organic development of society that was guided by a coordinating reason. This organic purpose or directive power expressed ‘a collective consciousness and will ... capable of realising a collective vital end’ (Hobson, 1914: 15). Hayek, in contrast, denied that social order implies conscious planning or deliberate design. Like Menger, Hayek held that the economy may be likened to an organism that evolves, but added that cultural evolution operates through change in rules of conduct that evolve when the groups who practise them are successful and displace those with other rules (Hayek, 1973: 18).

Putting aside holism, an altogether different phenomenon sometimes mistakenly taken to involve organic connection is interdependence. Individuals, for example, may be interdependent in the sense that one individual’s activities are seen to elicit responses from other individuals that then alter the first individual’s activities. This suggests a relatedness which appears to undermine the independence of the individuals so related, and which accordingly may be thought to imply organic connection between individuals. However, evidence of feedback mechanisms is compatible with the existence of external relations between interdependent things, as in Walrasian systems of interdependent agents. Individuals are unchanged in their essential nature as maximizing agents when prices, incomes and goods availability change, though such changes affect how individuals maximize. In effect, economic agents are defined prior to accounts of their interaction with one another. Interdependence would only imply organic connection
if individuals' interaction transformed their behaviours. Some forms of game theory appear to
verge on this stronger conclusion, as for example in Sugden’s (1986) arguments that conventions
emerge as evolutionarily behavioural stable strategies, though such a conclusion is controversial.

Finally, brief mention should be made of hysteresis and path-dependency analysis, historicism
and process views. Hysteresis denotes the persistent influence of past events on the present,
and pathdependent systems are ones which display a determinate, connected sequence of
events. But, necessarily, both notions only emphasize the transformative effects the past has
on the present, and clearly this unidirectional influence falls short of the two-directional
internal relations idea of organic connection. Historicism is the idea that historical events are
ultimately governed by general laws of history. Organist thinking has been linked to such views,
as in Hegel’s (1930) notion that history is the progressive realization of Geist and in some versions
of the inevitability of communism in Marxism, but in most cases historical events are
expressions of historical laws which remain unconditioned themselves. Process views, which
emphasize the category of becoming, have had a number of representatives in the history of
philosophy, including Bergson and Whitehead. The idea of becoming as a unity of what is and
is not logically depends upon the internal relations conception, but the idea’s meaning as coming­
to-be and passing-away also distinguishes it from the internal relations conception much as
hysteresis/path-dependence and historicism are distinguished.

Organicism, then, is often difficult to identify, because many related but different views are
said to be organicist. Accordingly, grand claims seem best avoided when using the concept,
and attention seems better focused on more narrow tasks of characterizing specific examples
of relations. This may be difficult to accomplish in evolutionary contexts where authors are
committed to saying wholes may be likened to organisms, given their tendency sometimes to
substitute the term ‘organicist’ for the term ‘organic’. Nonetheless, it seems important that such
a distinction be maintained, both to segregate the core internal relations conception and to allow
more clear development of the notion that wholes may be understood as organisms. The
former conception might thus be termed organicism and the latter termed the organic view.

JOHN B. DAVIS

References

Bhaskar, R. (1979), The Possibility of Naturalism: A Philosop­hic­al Critique of the Contemporary Human Sciences,
Brighton: Harvester.


Menger, C. (1985), Investigations into the Method of the Social Sciences with Special Reference to Economics, New


