

The Abandonment of Ontology: From Abstract to Concrete Individualism

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Thesis:

The goal of my talk is to understand the shift from abstract individualism, which is expressed as equality before the law, to what I call concrete individualism. Concrete individualism is the idea that our concrete differences (e.g., race and intelligence) are not real, and that equality before the law must be sacrificed (e.g., by adopting “civil rights”) in order to achieve equality of outcome. I hope to achieve this goal by examining the ontological foundations of abstract individualism, and by showing how concrete individualism is not based on any explicitly defined ontology, but instead represents the abandonment of ontological inquiry by mainstream liberal thinkers such as John Rawls.

I will explain the concept of ontology in **Part One**, provide a historical analysis of the abstract individualism in **Part Two**, and prove my thesis in **Part Three**.

I. Ontology: An Introduction

1. What is ontology?

The term “ontology” derives from two Greek words:

- “ontos” [ὄντος] meaning “being”
- “logos” [λόγος] meaning “science”

Ontology is therefore the science of what exists, or what existence is like.

2. What kind of science is ontology?

Ontology is a metaphysical science. Metaphysics simply means what is beyond, or what comes after physics:

- “meta” [μετά] meaning “after”
- “physia” [φυσικά] meaning “physics”

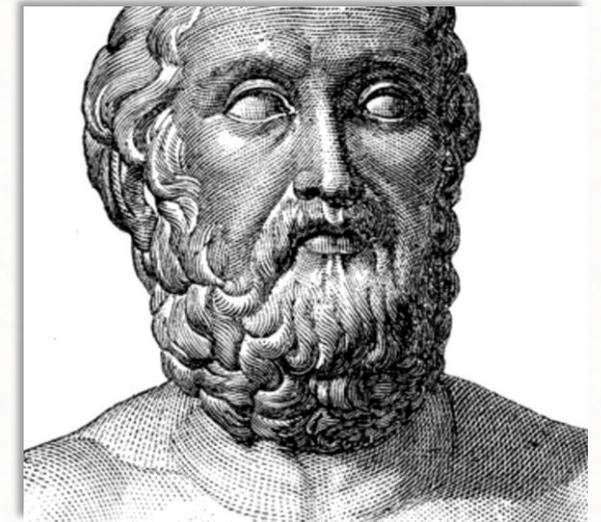
Whereas in physics we study **particular beings** such as planets, in metaphysics we study **being as such**.

3. Why do we study ontology?

We study ontology to determine the status of things. For instance, one might hold that beauty is “in the eye of the beholder”, while another will argue that beauty is objective. If the latter is true, then it is only because **something greater** exists, something that **transcends** these particular instances of beauty. For that which transcends them also unites them, and thus **provides a rule**. This is one of the main themes of the *Symposium*, where Diotima defends the latter:

the quest for universal beauty must find [man] ever mounting the heavenly ladder, stepping from rung to rung... to every lovely body... to the beauty of institutions of learning, and from learning in general to the special beautiful itself... until at last he comes to know what beauty is. (Plato, *Symposium*, 211c)

Ontology thus permits us to determine the scope of epistemology, or what we can know.



4. What kind of questions can ontology answer today?

Consider those other sciences that “cut off a part of being”. In biology, we study living beings, in sociology social beings, and in law legal beings. In ontology however, we study the element that unites these three: being. Ontology thus permits us to determine the status of the objects of these sciences, and how they **relate to / underpin** one another. An ontological question would then be:

Are constitutions and laws only the product of consensus (Legal Positivism), or do they have their origin in human nature (Natural Law)?

5. How is ontology useful for our current project?

To the extent that ontology gives us insight into the objects of other sciences, it tells us what their **presuppositions** are. Such presuppositions would be less problematic if they merely reflected self-evident phenomena, but this is rarely the case. For they almost always comprise ontological content, and thus strong claims about the nature of things. In light of this, Tony Lawson argues that:

the study of the ontological *presuppositions* of theories and practices of different groups and communities can facilitate an understanding of varying cultural systems or even of ‘academic tribes’... (Lawson, “A Concept of Social Ontology”, 2014, p. 5)

II. Ontology: A History

1. Modern Ontology: René Descartes

Perhaps everyone knows Descartes' famous saying "*cogito ergo sum*", but few appreciate its true significance. He arrives at this conclusion by adopting a radical method of doubting. This means that we must:

get rid of *all* our previous wisdom, renounce *all* our opinions, and make ourselves free of *all* blindly accepted certainties, reject *all* existing authorities... (Alexandre Koyré, *Descartes: Philosophical Writings*, 1979, p. xx)

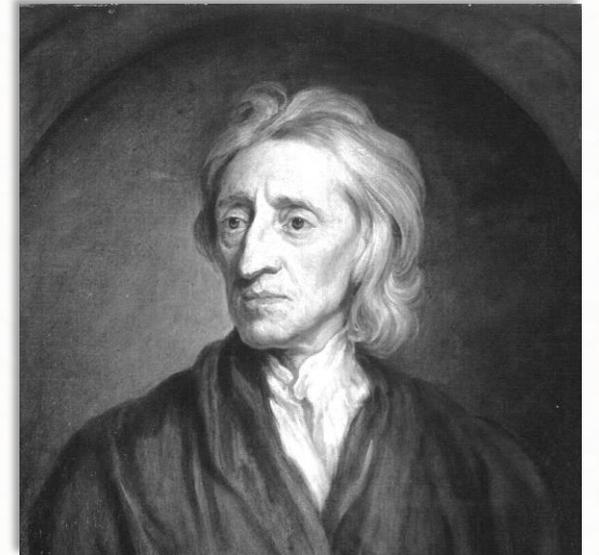


When we adopt this method, the existence of everything fails to meet the standard of certain knowledge, except "I think, therefore **I exist**". Descartes thereby reverses the ancient order, making ontology dependent on the thinking subject, or epistemology. As a result, he uproots man from the sublime ontologies of the ancients where knowledge is a divine key to beauty, virtue and the good. However, the subject also acquires immense power, becoming an **individual free from all authority**.

2. Abstract Individualism: John Locke

Liberal theories like John Locke's, which organized society around the individual and protected him from the authority of religion and the state through doctrines like tolerance, followed in the wake of Descartes' epistemology. Even in Locke however, the individual was not yet fully severed from those ancient ontological hierarchies. For his individual rights still depended on a general notion of God and the natural order.

Locke might be the main inspiration behind the Constitution of the United States, but it is hardly interpreted through the lens of **Natural Law** theories like his today. For the tradition of **Legal Positivism**, which *attempts* to do away with ontology and instead ground individual rights on consensus, has become the dominant paradigm. This owes to another development that can be traced back to the Enlightenment, particularly to the philosopher David Hume.



3. The “Naturalist Fallacy”: David Hume

Following Descartes, David Hume founded his “science of man” on the mind rather than ontology. In examining the consequences of this shift, he noted that transcendental arguments are unfeasible, and concluded that we can no longer look to nature to justify our morals / legal rights:

In every system of morality... the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way... when of a sudden I am surprised to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, *is* and *is not*, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an *ought* or an *ought not*. (Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 1739, p. 245)



Hume argues that we cannot derive a **moral or legal “ought”** from our observations about how **nature “is”**. This means we cannot look to the state of nature, as Hobbes and Locke did, to justify individual rights. I also think we can trace certain, moral radical lines of thought (e.g., that biological sex cannot determine how we ought to treat one’s gender) back to this moment.

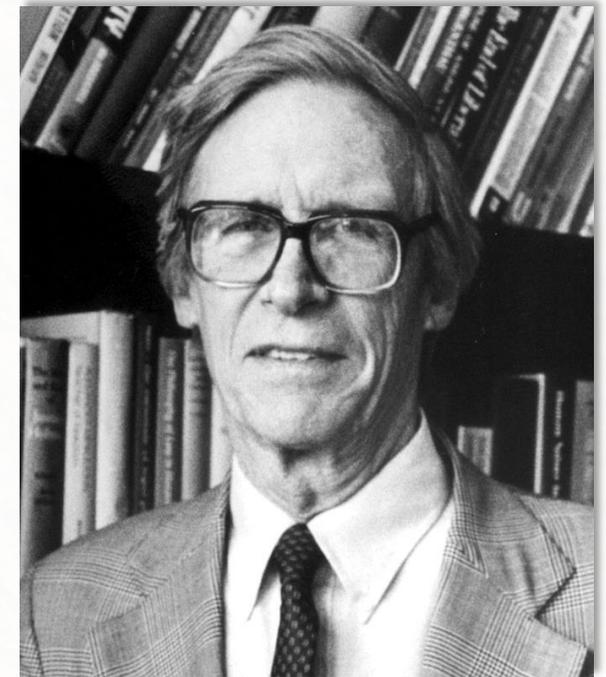
4. Abandoning the Common Good

When Hume proscribes naturalist arguments (i.e., attempts to derive an “ought” from an “is”), he not only deprives the individual rights bearer of his ontological foundation, but also his ability to justify moral practices—in Aristotle for instance, everything from race realism to patriarchy is justified by naturalist arguments. Thus, it will become increasingly difficult for nations to define **the common good** in the modern era. We notice this particularly in the wake of WWII, when the United States abandons its common good, which was defined racially and culturally, in favor of political theories like John Rawls’, which argues that we must be blind to the common good.

5. The “Veil of Ignorance”: John Rawls

Rawls—who remains the most popular political theorist today—argues that citizens must wear the “**veil of ignorance**” when they act in the public sphere, and refrain from interpreting the laws in virtue of any one view of the good:

Behind this veil... You know nothing of your sex, race... or individual tastes. Behind such a veil of ignorance all individuals are simply specified as rational, free, and morally equal beings. You do know that in the "real world", however, there will be a wide variety in the natural distribution of natural assets and abilities, and that there will be differences of sex, race, and culture...
(Spencer Maxcy, *Ethical School Leadership*, 2002, p. 93)



Following Hume, Rawls refuses to explicate an ontology. Rather, he attempts to better understand liberal individualism by devising thought experiments such as this one, and thinking about how the “reasonable” individual would act. Of course, Rawls thinks his individual is not susceptible to the sort of particularistic claims (e.g., reparations) that would upset his basic rights.

III. Ontology: The Present

1. Understanding the Shift to Concrete Individualism

I am interested in the following question: if the abandonment of ontology, and more generally transcendental arguments, spelled the end of the common good in the post-WWII era, then why did Western nations immediately thereafter adopt laws such as “positive discrimination”, which are based upon such arguments and meta-narratives?

This question, I believe, can be answered by understanding what I call the shift from abstract to concrete individualism: the rejection of **universal individual rights**, expressed as equality before the law, for the **particularistic narratives** of various self-identified groups that demand equality of outcome in the private sphere, at the expense of universal individual rights.

Drawing on the power of ontology to uncover the “presuppositions of academic tribes”, I argue that no contemporary philosopher offers an explicit ontological justification for this shift; rather, it follows from the abandonment of ontological questioning itself, which we find in Rawls.

2. Rawls' Groundless Individual: Reasonable and Rational

Rawls rejects ontological questions. Instead, he thinks that we can take for granted the doctrine of legal individualism, and simply try to understand what a “**reasonable**” individual would do: wear the “veil of ignorance”. However, this does not mean that Rawls intends for us to wear the “veil” in the private sphere too. For he also thinks that individuals are “**rational**”, possessing various ends and visions of the good, which they take calculated steps to satisfy. Individuals must act “reasonably” in the public sphere, but can act “rationally” in the private one, where they can remove the “veil” and associate with members of their own group for instance. Rawls maintains that this conception of the individual is sufficient for protecting his equal rights. But in a brief passage from his *Political Liberalism*, he confesses that despite his intentions, he might have left the door open to ontology:

I remarked earlier that the idea of the original position and the description of the parties may tempt us to think that a metaphysical doctrine of the person is **presupposed**. While I said that this interpretation is mistaken, it is not enough simply to disavow reliance on metaphysical doctrines, **for despite one's intent they may still be involved**. (Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 1993, Lecture I, §5, p. 29)

3. Peeking from the Veil: Charles Mills

Rawls' notion of the 'reasonable and rational individual' ultimately fails to fill the void that ontology leaves behind, for the thought experiment on which he founds this conception proves unconvincing. Thus, the 'rational individual' peeks from beneath his 'veil' in the public sphere. One of many such intellectuals who peek from the 'veil' is Charles Mills, who writes:

But the veil is thinner on *social* knowledge. We know we're going to emerge into a society whose basic structure has historically been shaped by white supremacy... (Mills, *Black Rights, White Wrongs*, 2017, p. 213)

Of course, this 'rational individual' is only rational insofar as he is **ends directed**. For his end is the basest imaginable: what was for Aaron but a stupid trick to end the Israelites' quibbling, to place all their ills on the head of a sacrificial lamb. But he is not content with peeking from his veil in the public sphere. Demanding now that everyone else wear their veil in the private sphere too, he usurps our natural rights to achieve equality of outcome.



5. Conclusion: Among the Ruins of Ontology

Many years ago, Allan Bloom noticed Rawls' attempt to ignore metaphysics, and wondered what the avoidance of the most important question in political philosophy would usher in:

Rawls banishes nature from human and political things. The state of nature was the result of a comprehensive reflection about the way all things really are. Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau could not be content with a figment of the imagination as the basis for moral judgments. Nature is the permanent standard; what the good man and the good society are, depend on human nature... Metaphysics cannot be avoided. (Bloom, "Justice: John Rawls vs. Political Society", 1975, p. 651)

By avoiding metaphysical questions about ontology, we do not overcome ontology, but simply end up with simplistic and vindictive ontologies like Mills'. The demand for reparations, political correctness and positive discrimination have supplanted those liberal rights, such as freedom of speech, founded on natural law. At the same time, the basest sentiments have drowned out the wisdom of classical metaphysics. For Seneca's essay *On Anger*, we've traded "moral outrage". For Plutarch's *On Enemies*, petty vengeance. And for Xenophon's self-mastery, slave morality.