

“Number one for ever”: Benthamite Utilitarianism, *Oliver Twist* and the Doctrine of Methodological Individualism

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Abstract: Charles Dickens often satirised and sharply criticised the unfortunate social realities of nineteenth-century England through his works such as *Oliver Twist* (1838), *David Copperfield* (1850), *A Christmas Carol* (1843) and *Hard Times* (1854). In my paper, I will be putting forward the argument that Dickens’s novels advocate for social change by exemplifying the theoretical doctrine of methodological individualism. As a social science doctrine, methodological individualism was first introduced by Max Weber in his work *Economy and Society* (1922). The central precept of Methodological Individualism, according to Weber, is that individual actions and motivations rather than social and cultural realities should be considered as the chief drivers of social change. However, it should be precisely noted that methodological individualism as a doctrine is not a reckless celebration of individualism, but, more importantly, a careful analysis of how the intentional states of individuals contribute to the unfolding of social changes in a given society. In other words, the doctrine of Methodological Individualism proposes that social structures are influential but they are not superstructures whose influence exceeds the agency of individual members of a society. In order to illustrate the argument, I will be specifically focusing on the novel *Oliver Twist*. The historical and social context of the novel consists of 1834 Poor Law Reforms and widespread economic and social inequalities in nineteenth century England. Within these contexts the characters of Fagin, Mr Bumble, Nancy, Harry Maylie and Mr Brownlow make highly individualistic choices that shape the narrative of the novel, challenge the established code of social relations and finally restores Oliver Twist to his rightful place in the society of nineteenth century England.

Keywords: Methodological Individualism, *Oliver Twist*, Charles Dickens, 1834 Poor Law Reforms, Laissez-faire, Benthamite Utilitarianism

Introduction

In a crucial scene in *Oliver Twist* (1838), the criminal genius Fagin attempts to train his new recruit Noah Claypole alias Mr Bolter. Fagin tells him that contrary to the opinions of certain conjurers, it is number one that is the most important number and not number three. Mr Bolter, who was endowed with the quality of selfishness in generous measures happily assents and states “Number one for ever”. However, Fagin makes it clear to Claypole that what he intended as number one is not the isolationist selfishness central to Claypole’s character but a kind of pragmatic self-centered behavior that realizes that if one member in a criminal gang wishes to avoid the gallows, he or she should look after the welfare of everyone else in the criminal gang (Dickens 320). During his conversation with Noah, Fagin demonstrates an unparalleled knowledge of the workings of criminal gangs where stringent loyalty towards each other is the first and foremost rule. In his speech, Fagin persuasively argues that within his tightly knit criminal gang, the interest of one is the interest of everyone. Each

member of his gang depends upon everyone else in order not only to ensure their livelihood but also to keep themselves safely away from the gallows. Fagin's portrayal of the criminal gangs in nineteenth century England is aligned with the core principle of Methodological Individualism which is that individual actions form the chief cause of social structures, movements and social changes. According to Fagin, it takes only one member to cause the destruction of his whole criminal gang and his criminal gang is not a superstructure that can exist beyond the actions of its individual members.

Fagin's familiar instructions to Noah Claypole on the true identity of "number one" rests on Hobbesian assumptions about human nature extensively employed in Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, where the entire economic system depends on the unfettered exercise of self-interest, interpreted as a psychological as well as an economic law. As an extension of this assumption, Benthamite utilitarians insisted that a rational calculation of self-interest could be made; Noah, disguised as Morris Bolter, finds Fagin's careful logic wholly persuasive. (Patten 211)

The Doctrine of Methodological Individualism

Methodological Individualism is a social science doctrine advocated by the Austrian-born British philosopher Karl Popper. According to Methodological Individualism, social processes and historical changes should be primarily explained or stated in terms of the beliefs, desires, and actions of particular individuals. Methodological Individualism precludes explanations that appeal to social factors that cannot, in turn, be individualistically explained. Through this paper, I will be attempting to analyze the major characters in this novel in the light of methodological individualism while firmly placing this novel within the historical context of nineteenth century England.

According to the Israeli academic Joseph Agassi, Institutionalistic Individualism (another term for Methodological Individualism used by Agassi) is the significant contribution of Karl Popper to Social Sciences, and this doctrine is aptly suited for describing social changes and institutional reforms within a society. According to Agassi, Holism and Psychologicistic Individualism were the traditional modes of analysis regarding the relationship between society and its constituent individuals. In order to define Methodological Individualism, it is, therefore, necessary to define Holism and Psychologicistic Individualism and elaborate on how Methodological Individualism differs from both. According to the Holistic view, a society exists above and beyond the actions and desires of its constituent individuals. Therefore according to Holism, a society is super-individual. According to Agassi, this viewpoint has a metaphysical aspect that limits its effectiveness and goes against the practical realities of individual actions and social change. On the other hand, according to Psychologicistic Individualism, society is the sum total or even by-product of the actions of various individuals. The problem with this viewpoint is that it ignores how individual actions and desires themselves are shaped by various social rules, regulations, or even the presence of various social organizations (Agassi 244).

Agassi argues that traditionally the conflict between proponents of Holism and Psychologicistic Individualism hinders on the unspoken but tacitly agreed upon premise that 'wholes (such as society) if they exist has aims and interests that can be separate from the aims and interests of its citizens (Agassi 245). This premise, according to Agassi, constitutes the metaphysical aspect of Holism. Whereas according to the proponents of Psychologicistic Individualism, there is no society as such but only a collection of individuals (Agassi 245). So, any claims about society are mere shorthand assertions about groups of individuals. Psychologicistic Individualism, therefore, denies the very existence of 'wholes' as a distinct category. According to Agassi, Methodological Individualism here offers a necessary corrective to the discussion on society and individuals. According to Methodological Individualism propounded by Popper, 'wholes' do exist, but they do not have distinct aims and interests that are separate from the aims and interests of its citizens. A society or an institution can have an aim only when people give it an aim or act according to what they consider as its interests. As Bertrand Russell said, "institutions mould character and character transforms institutions. Reform in both must march hand in hand" (qtd in Agassi 267).

It is important to mention that the term ‘Methodological Individualism’ is sometimes used ambiguously in social sciences. Academics such as Kenneth J Arrow and Geoff Hodgson, in their respective scholarly articles titled “Methodological Individualism and Social Knowledge” and “Behind Methodological Individualism,” considers Methodological Individualism as a form of knowledge that completely ignores the influence of social institutions. However, according to Agassi, such a way of looking at human actions is Psychologistic Individualism, and it should be necessarily separated from the ‘Methodological Individualism’ of Karl Popper. In his scholarly article titled “The Case for Methodological Individualism,” Jon Elster effectively illustrates the doctrine as defined by Karl Popper and Joseph Agassi.

This issue is related to the conflict over methodological Individualism, rejected by many Marxists who wrongly link it with Individualism in the ethical or political sense. By methodological Individualism, I mean the doctrine that all social phenomena (their structure and their change) are, in principle, explicable only in terms of individuals – their properties, goals, and beliefs. This doctrine is not incompatible with any of the following true statements. (a) Individuals often have goals that involve the welfare of other individuals. (b) They often have beliefs about supra-individual entities that are not reducible to beliefs about individuals. “The capitalists fear the working class” cannot be reduced to the feelings of capitalists concerning individual workers. By contrast, “The capitalists’ profit is threatened by the working class” can be reduced to a complex statement about the consequences of the actions taken by individual workers.¹ (c) Many properties of individuals, such as “powerful,” are irreducibly relational, so that accurate description of one individual may require reference to other individuals. (Elster 453)

Socio-Historical Context and Situational Logic in *Oliver Twist*

As the academic and scholar Susan Zlotnick mentions in her Research Paper titled “The Law’s a Bachelor”: “*Oliver Twist*,” Bastardy, and the New Poor Law,” the social world of the novel is founded on the workhouse system of the nineteenth century England and the infamous 1834 poor law reforms. The 1834 poor law reforms stipulated that life in workhouses of England should be made “less eligible” than life outside it. These poor law reforms were founded on the doctrine of Malthusian economics that, feared an explosion in the population of poor people in England. The chief tenet of the infamous poor law reforms was that life in the workhouses should be ‘less eligible’ than life outside of it (Zlotnick 131).

With reference to the narrative of *Oliver Twist*, one particular change caused by 1834 new poor laws assumes special significance. According to the older poor laws in England, an unwed and impoverished mother of an illegitimate child could point out the father of the child to Parish authorities, who in turn could sue the father for child support. The new poor laws of 1834, fearing a population explosion of illegitimate children, shifted the responsibility of illegitimate children to the unwed mother alone. The critics of the 1834 poor laws sarcastically described these laws as the ‘philanderer’s charter’ as the laws absolved men of all responsibility and placed the whole burden on the mothers of illegitimate children (Zlotnick 131). *Oliver Twist* offers a direct criticism of the 1834 poor laws as the narrative in the novel portrays Oliver’s mother, Agnes Fleming, as an innocent maiden seduced by an upper-class libertine named Edward. The entire narrative in the novel is about the search for Oliver’s parentage and restoring his patrimony and rightful place in the English society of the nineteenth century.

The social and economic context of *Oliver Twist* lends itself to an effective analysis of this novel within the framework of Methodological individualism. The 1834 poor laws and the economic inequalities in nineteenth-century England act as the social institutions that influence the individual characters in Dickens’s novel. As Joseph Agassi argues, Methodological Individualism differentiates itself from Psychologistic Individualism by acknowledging the influence of social structures on members of society while asserting that these same social structures are not super-individual. Hence within the context of this novel, the unfair social situations of nineteenth-century England are

acknowledged as potent influences on the characters of this novel, but these same social structures are not portrayed as immutable and unchangeable superstructures beyond the influence of individual members of the society.

According to Agassi, the behavior of individuals in accordance with the influence of social structures or institutions can be described as 'situational logic' (Agassi 264). Situational logic transcends the limitations of Methodological Holism and Psychologistic Individualism by recognizing that the very existence of specific social structures influences individuals to mould their behaviors accordingly. Agassi argues that situational logic was employed by all serious social thinkers long before Karl Popper. Karl Popper's importance is that he was the first one to formulate the principle clearly and bring it into academic parlance (Agassi 264).

I shall repeat that institutions can be explained as inter-personal means of co-ordination, as attitudes which are accepted conventionally or by agreement. Not that an agreement was signed by those who have the attitude, but the attitude is maintained by one largely because it is maintained by many, and yet everyone is always at liberty to reconsider his attitude and change it. This idea leaves room for the rational principle of institutional reform. It accords with the classical individualistic idea that social phenomena are but the interactions between individuals. Yet it does not accord with the classical individualistic-psychologistic idea that this 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 267)

Through his novel, Charles Dickens presents the workhouse system in nineteenth-century England as an example of stringent utilitarianism devoid of humanitarian concerns. As Robert L Patten notes in his seminal essay titled "Capitalism and Compassion in *Oliver Twist*," the eponymous character is considered by the workhouse administrators and parish authorities merely as a means to an end, the end being their personal benefit.

Everyone who wants Oliver wants him for their own personal gain and not for his sake. To the parish surgeon, who attends by contract, Oliver's birth is the occasion for a fee. To Mrs. Mann, Oliver, as long as he remains alive, is a source of income. To the beadle, he is an object on which to exercise "parochial" authority, as well as Bumble's invention in names. To the Board of Guardians, he is a responsibility to be educated and taught a useful trade, such as oakum picking. All their collective efforts are towards getting their charges employed or otherwise off the parish rolls; to this end, Bumble even transports dying paupers to other parishes, to save the funeral expenses. (Patten 208)

All the characters in *Oliver Twist* ranging from the Jewish criminal overlord Fagin and murderous Bill Sikes to the angelic Rose Maylie and the benevolent patriarch Mr. Brownlow, function within the social world of nineteenth-century England that was defined by extreme income inequalities and an inhuman workhouse system for the poor that in turn enabled robbery and crime in the lower classes and corruption in the higher classes of the society. The characters in *Oliver Twist* make their choices and frame their identities within this social order. However, their unique personality traits drive this novel's plot forward and make it one of the classics of nineteenth-century English literature. Here lies the 'situational logic' in *Oliver Twist*.

When it comes to the individuality of characters that determine the plot of this novel, Mr. Bumble, the former Beadle and later Master of the workhouse, and the elderly gentleman Mr. Brownlow offer a notable contrast. On outward appearance, both individuals are respected members of English society, far removed from the criminal underbelly of nineteenth-century England populated by the likes of Fagin and Bill Sikes. Both are in a position to extend guidance and compassion toward the unfortunate members of society. Mr. Bumble in his capacity as Beadle and Mr. Brownlow in his capacity as a wealthy and affluent member of English society.

However, what distinguishes both of these characters is their mental makeup and the choices they make in life. The corruption, greed, and fake piety of Mr. Bumble played a significant role in the

sufferings of Oliver Twist at the workhouse. Later, Mr. Bumble furthered the damage by poisoning the ears of Mr. Brownlow by describing Oliver as an ungrateful, villainous child. Dickens uses the term ‘philosopher’ to refer to characters such as Mr Bumble. For Dickens, the term philosopher does not refer to a wise and reasonable man or woman but to a coldly calculative individual whose personal morality is devious and whose motives are purely based on personal gain. Dickens portrays the characters of Mr. Bumble, Mrs. Mann, and the members of the Poor Law Board as representatives of the laissez-faire economic system as well as the Benthamite and Malthusian capitalistic principles (Patten 210). However, through his skill in characterization, Dickens elevates Mr. Bumble from merely being the caricature of a heartless bureaucrat to a character who, despite all his severe deficiencies in moral character, is still human. At the end of the novel, in response to the pronouncement of Mr. Brownlow that English law considers the husband to be responsible for the actions of the wife, Mr. Bumble, with reference to his own marital life, sarcastically remarks that “Law must be a Bachelor” (Zlotnick 131).

Mr. Brownlow’s role in this novel’s plot is starkly different. His belief in the inherent goodness of Oliver is rewarded at the end of the novel, and he plays a significant role in the final redemption of Oliver Twist. If Mr. Bumble exhibits the traits of apathy towards human suffering and greed for personal gain, Mr. Brownlow is the kind old man who harbors a belief in inherent human goodness despite certain incidents in his own life that betrayed his trust in the goodness of human character. If the apathy of Mr. Bumble is founded in the cold, calculative reasoning of utilitarian philosophy, the kindness of Mr. Brownlow is rooted in a natural instinct of compassion which Dickens considered to be the second nature of human beings (Patten 209). The fate of Mr. Brownlow and Mr. Bumble at the end of the novel, as portrayed by Dickens, is also indicative of the destiny marked for them as a result of their mental makeup and the choices they made in life. Mr. Bumble ends up as a mere inmate at the workhouse he once commanded, and Mr. Brownlow gains an obedient and eager pupil and adopted son in the form of Oliver Twist (Dickens 401).

Fagin is the most colorful character in this novel and someone whose actions and choices shape the novel’s plot more than any other character. Fagin is simultaneously a victim of the social order of nineteenth-century England as well as a God-like figure who exerts unparalleled influence and control over the criminal gang, of which he is a leader and mentor. Even in his seemingly cowardly and submissive behavior towards the fellow criminal Bill Sikes, he retains calmness, self-composure, and cold-blooded calculative nature. Traits that are alien to the hot-headed and violent Bill Sikes. There is a particular scene in this novel where after an unpleasant conversation with Bill Sikes, Fagin calmly thinks about stroking the embers of hatred in the mind of Nancy against Sikes, leading her to poison Bill Sikes physically. Through this, Fagin hopes to achieve two objectives. To get rid of the abusive, violent, and unreliable Bill Sikes forever and to doubly strengthen the loyalty of Nancy towards him (Dickens 333).

Many academic papers have already been written on elements of antisemitism and stereotyping inherent in the character of Fagin, whom the novelist portrays as a wily and miserly Jew. Susan Meyer notes in her scholarly essay titled “Antisemitism and Social Critique in Dickens’s “*Oliver Twist*.” *Victorian Literature and Culture* “ that Dickens was aware of the charges of antisemitism against his work and made efforts to lessen the antisemitism in his works. In the 1867 edition of *Oliver Twist*, Dickens substituted the name Fagin instead of referring to the villain as ‘Jew’ as occurred in the earlier drafts of the novel. Dickens also introduced the character of a kindly Jew, Riah, in his novel *Our Mutual Friend*, published in 1864 (Meyer 240).

Even though, on a surface level, Fagin’s criminal gang and the lives of respected members of society, such as Mr. Bumble, are diametrically opposed to each other, their outlook on life is remarkably similar. An unfettered exercise of self-interest coupled with an utter lack of natural human compassion characterizes the lives of both Fagin and Mr. Bumble. Just as Mr. Bumble and the members of the Poor Law Board try to impress upon poor Oliver regarding their essential good

nature in raising Oliver, Fagin later tries to impress upon Oliver that if it was not for his help, Oliver would have died of hunger in the streets. According to Charles Dickens, the philosophy of Laissez Faire economics and Benthamite Utilitarianism persuasively influenced criminals such as Fagin and Bill Sikes as well as someone like Mr. Bumble. The characteristic trait of unfettered self-interest also comes within the territory of Methodological Individualism. Within the narrative world of this novel, the selfishness of Mr. Bumble and Fagin played an important role in creating the inhuman conditions in the workhouse and also in forming the tightly knit criminal gang of Fagin and Bill Sikes. If Mr Bumble and Mr Brownlow differed in their character despite similarity in their social status, Fagin and Mr Bumble share the similar characteristic traits of cunning and hypocrisy despite diametrically opposite social status of the two characters

However, despite his cold and calculative nature or because of that, Fagin has a strange charisma and pervasive influence over his pupils, such as Charley Bates and the Artful Dodger, and also over Bill Sikes, even though the latter often pretends to be under no one's influence. After Fagin recaptured Oliver while the latter had gone out on an errand to deliver some books for Mr. Brownlow, Dodger explained to Oliver that he and Charley Bates deserted Oliver in their first expedition together as a result of consideration for Mr. Fagin as police knew that Dodger and Charley worked for Fagin. However, despite all the villainy of Fagin, it was at his residence that Oliver truly felt welcome in his life for the first time. The essential individuality and idiosyncrasy of Fagin and his criminal gang are also closely co-related to the slang they use in their everyday communication. The famous reviewer Richard Ford who critiqued Dickens's novel in *Quarterly Review* in 1839, however, marveled at the author's ability to write a believable criminal speech for characters like Fagin, who represented the criminal underbelly of London (Michael 41).

If Mr. Bumble and Mr. Brownlow were two individuals of similar social status having different mental makeups leading to different destinies, Rose Maylie and Nancy were two women of wildly different social status united by their common desire to lead Oliver to a good life. Rose Maylie was the adopted daughter of Mrs. Maylie (and sister of Oliver's mother, as revealed at the end of the novel), and she had always lived an affluent life under the loving care of Mrs. Maylie.

Rose Maylie and Mrs. Maylie play a pivotal role in this novel by lovingly caring for Oliver after he lands wounded at their doorstep after a robbery enterprise under the leadership of Bill Sikes. Later they, along with Mr. Brownlow, help establish Oliver Twist's identity and punish those who wronged him earlier. Nancy, by contrast, was a member of the criminal gang of Fagin and she was instrumental in capturing Oliver when he was out on an errand for Mr. Brownlow and later delivering Oliver up to Fagin. However, the sufferings of Oliver under Fagin change her mind, and she disregarding the danger to her own life, tells about the plot of Monks (half-brother of Oliver) and Fagin to trap Oliver forever in a life of crime to Rose Maylie and Mr Brownlow. This results in Fagin getting convicted by the court and finally receiving the death sentence for his life of crime. The death of Fagin consequently leads to the dismantlement of his entire criminal gang. Thus the titular character of this novel transforms from a poor orphan boy to an allegorical figure who exposes the corruption of Mr Bumble and destroys the criminal empire of Fagin (Lankford 20).

In contrast to the other characters in this novel, it is indeed difficult to discern the 'situational logic' in the actions of Oliver Twist as he remains morally pure even under the most trying circumstances. The distinguished Milton Scholar Edward Le Comte describes the character of Oliver Twist as someone who cannot be polluted by the moral and physical filth surrounding his existence.. His character neither has the worldly experience of someone like Mr. Losborne, the cunning of someone like Fagin, or the shades of grey of a character like Nancy. However, unlike the opinion of certain critics, his evident piety and faith in God is not an unexplainable phenomenon but can be attributed to the prayers that were forced upon him during his childhood in the workhouse. Hence, Oliver, as a character, indeed gets shaped by his experiences and the influence of society. For example, Oliver, who had only experienced workhouse administrators' inhuman and coldly calculative behavior, is

startled when he hears the board of Governors speak to him (Patten 208). Dickens also portrays through the novel that the child Oliver is more aware of the dark underbelly of London society than Mr. Brownlow, a kind and elderly character in this novel. However, Oliver does not play an active role in influencing the society around him or driving the plot of this novel forward other than in his capacity as a symbol of innocence that prompts others to take action. Similarly, Monks, the half-brother of *Oliver Twist*, is a character that is merely a personification of intense self-absorption, cold and calculative vengeance, as well as a kind of toxic Epicureanism. Even more, than all the other characters, it is Harry Maylie who best exemplifies the power of individual actions and choices to challenge social customs, and therefore he best exemplifies the doctrine of Methodological Individualism in this novel.

Harry Maylie is the son of Mrs. Maylie and, by birth, belonged to the upper echelons of English society during the nineteenth century. As a result of his birth and personal talents, a glorious career in National politics awaited him, and many of his relatives were waiting for him to take up his spot in the National politics of England. However, Harry found to his dismay that the glorious career that awaited him also hindered his long-cherished love for Rose Maylie. Rose feared that the dishonor of her birth would stain his status and make her an object of scorn among his illustrious friends in the metropolis. Mrs. Maylie also acknowledges that Rose's fears are genuine, and the alliance between Harry and Rose is problematic due to the pervasive influence of social prejudices in nineteenth-century England. After long deliberation, Harry Maylie renounced his worldly aspirations and took up the post of a humble pastor in a village church so that he could banish all the fears from the mind of Rose and his mother and ask for Rose's hand in marriage once again. Harry Maylie tells Rose that by taking up the position of the pastor of a rural church, he had essentially negated all the impediments in the form of future power and prestige that stood in the way of his marriage to Rose (Dickens 390). The novel ends with the marriage of Harry and Rose and Oliver getting adopted by Mr. Brownlow.

Conclusion

Through my paper, I have demonstrated that many of the characters in *Oliver Twist* have a distinct individuality shaped by their societal factors but never entirely constrained by them. The societal factors that motivate them are the direct influence of Malthusian and Benthamite capitalistic/utilitarian principles in the case of characters such as Mr. Bumble, Mrs. Mann, and the members of the Poor Law Board, the indirect repercussions of the Malthusian and Benthamite system in the case of characters such as Fagin and Bill Sikes as well as the influence of the doctrine of humanitarianism and idealism of Charles Dickens as exemplified in the characters of Mr. Brownlow, Mrs. Maylie, Rose Maylie, and Harry Maylie. This demonstrates the 'situational logic' of these characters. It is precisely the 'situational logic' of these characters, which in turn illustrates the doctrine of Methodological Individualism, that drives the plot of this novel. Similar to his other great works such as *Great Expectations* (1860), *A Christmas Carol* (1843), and *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), the strength of *Oliver Twist* lies in its acknowledgment of social structures and prejudices as potent influences on a person's character and fate but never treating these social structures or prejudices as insurmountable obstacles. That is essentially the core principle of Methodological Individualism as well.

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