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# Micro and Macro Philosophy

## Organicism in Biology and Politics



BRILL

### Short abstract

In ancient Greek philosophy, macrocosm and microcosm provided meaningful interpretations of the relationship between the universal and the particular. In sociology, the word microcosm is still used to identify small groups of individuals. In economics, macroeconomics is the study of the economic system as a whole, whereas microeconomics studies the economic behavior of individuals or small groups. **Strangely, there is no micro or macro philosophy.** Modernity, as it follows the guidelines of efficiency and precision, has difficulties dealing with micro inputs. In modern life, time and space are supposed to be universal and functional. The entire process of modernization can be seen as a macro process depriving social phenomena of its micro aspects.

After World War II, organic aspects were neglected even in biology. Biology decided to work on either genes (micro) or populations (macro). **Most recently, this has changed. Biology witnesses the return of the organic. Biologist Daniel Nicholson says that the twentieth century will be remembered as the century of the gene, and the twenty-first century will be remembered as the century of the organic. The present book attempts to establish this view in philosophy.**

The micro is concrete and individual. The micro is culture, and culture is an organic micro phenomenon always evolving in contact with macro structures. In a neoliberal environment, micro aspects lead an increasingly precarious existence. What role can philosophy play in a world predominantly determined by macro structures? Will it join the generalized universalism (as it used to do most of the time for centuries)? Or will it switch to ethnophilosophy and postmodern fragmentation? Will it simply switch to the micro?

Universalist cosmopolitanism and egocentric culturalism are not the only alternatives. Western philosophy has created a false dichotomy that has repercussions on politics and culture. Our thinking should switch to the organic.

## Microcosm and Macrocosm

In ancient Greek philosophy, macrocosm and microcosm were supposed to provide meaningful interpretations of the relationship between the universal and the particular. In sociology, the word microcosm is still used to identify small groups of individuals whose behavior is typical of a larger social body by which the microcosm is surrounded. In economics, macroeconomics is the study of the economic system as a whole while microeconomics studies the economic behavior of individuals or small groups. In architecture, the micro level of an urban situation is representative of a cultural entity that will be integrated into a more functional, universal structure. In those sciences, the micro/macro relationship could function as an analytic tool and shape the disciplines' theoretical approaches.

Strangely, there is no micro or macro philosophy. Philosophy is inscribed in a modern civilizational structure that finds micro time and micro space inadequate.

There are reasons for this. Modernity, as it follows the guidelines of efficiency and precision, has difficulties dealing with micro inputs. In modern life, time and space are supposed to be universal and functional. The entire process of modernization can be seen as a macro process depriving social phenomena of its micro aspects. The micro is concrete and individual. It is culture.

After World War II, organic aspects were neglected, and this not only in philosophy but also in biology. There has been a preference for *either* micro *or* macro. Biology's epistemological focus "shifted to sub-organismic entities (like genes) on the one hand, and to supra-organismic entities (like populations) on the other. The category connecting them, the organism as a whole, fell between the cracks of biological enquiry" (Nicholson 2014: 347). Cybernetics, information theory, and computer science produced a "genocentric view of life" (348) unable to account for the micro-macro dynamic animating living phenomena. The result was genetic determinism.

At present, biology witnesses the return of the organic. An awareness that "understanding the whole requires studying the whole" (352) leads biologists to the identification of organizing principles. Whereas the twentieth century will be remembered as the century of the gene, the twenty-first century will be remembered as the century of the organic. I attempt to establish this view in philosophy.



The micro introduces concrete cultural contents into macro structures. The lack of a micro-macro dynamics in modernity has become precarious in a neoliberal environment in which the importance of culture is increasingly contested. In education, content-oriented quality is buried under a heap of quantitative studies representative of the macro. During the last fifty years, a neoliberal spirit has introduced “scientific” methods like quality monitoring, quality reporting, and quality measuring. The roots of this development can be located in the scientification of the human sciences that began after World War II. What role can philosophy play in this environment determined by macro structures?

## Micro Philosophies

Anti-globalization movements attempt to deconstruct universalisms by fighting for political decentralization and economic liberalization. They try to produce a renewed sense of local (cultural) truths in the sense of individuality and diversity. Disillusioned by the collapse of the Soviet bloc in the late 1980s, modernists of the second phase (postmodernists) deconstruct values because they see them as paternalistic and imperialistic. They talk about the micro but neglect the macro.

Most philosophy is either universalist (macro) or particularist (micro). After centuries of universalism, scientism, and eurocentrism, micro philosophies flourished after World War II on the European continent. World War II experiences of totalitarianisms made any consideration of totalities suspicious. Postwar poststructuralist and postcolonial philosophers turned away from universal and “totalitarian” structures and concentrated on micro approaches inspired by multiculturalism. They deconstructed wholes in the name of the liberation of the individual and produced an incoherent network of micro phenomena. The result is a philosophically unsatisfying relativism. By celebrating cultural diversity and by challenging the cultural hegemony of traditional Western “majority” groups, those philosophies reiterate the pattern of ethnophilosophy. Beyond creating a certain awareness, this neo-ethnicism merely deconstructs but never attempts to find a micro-macro alternative.

Two examples of micro philosophy are: (1) Deleuze’s and Guattari’s notion of the rhizome synthesizes free development but loses the vision of the whole. The rhizome is composed of infinite processes of variation and expansion without any central point of reference. (2) Foucault becomes the champion of micro philosophy when supporting the Iranian Islamic revolution, seeing in this non-Western movement an upsurge of spirituality.

## Micro-Macro Philosophy

I design an alternative concept of philosophy using the ancient micro/macro distinction. Plato shows in the *Timaeus* that micro and macro are interdependent. The order of the small always reflects the order of the totality and vice versa. Plato’s reflections in the *Timaeus* had very little impact on philosophy. Western philosophy neglected the micro/macro dynamics and found Plato’s Theory of Forms more important. The Theory of Forms describes the world not in terms of a living organism but through abstract concepts regulated by a hierarchical structure. For Western philosophy, this abstract utopianism and elitism became a guideline.

One of the claims of the present research is that the relationship between philosophy and culture needs to be redefined through a micro/macro pattern. Eurocentrism, from which Western philosophy has no doubt always been suffering, will not be traced to an inherent racism or colonialist ambitions in the first place but to Western philosophy's incapacity to enact thought via a micro-macro dynamic.

The most radical suggestion is that philosophy should be transformed into "thought." Within thought (as it is used in "French thought"), micro and macro elements are permitted to interact. I examine different "thought" genres such as "feminist thought" (which is a theoretical examination of the world as determined by a way of life believed to be suitable for women), minority philosophies like gay and lesbian philosophy, and African American philosophy. Those philosophies could from the beginning be understood as "thought" because they are determined by certain cultures. I submit other culturally oriented philosophies like comparative philosophy, ethnophilosophy, and pragmatism to the same scrutiny. Comparative philosophy considers culture but transcends the statements contained in a certain tradition. Pragmatism has a clearly ethno-philosophical input (Rorty writes that "the pragmatist must remain ethnocentric and offer examples"). Pragmatists understand that philosophical vocabulary cannot be derived directly from nature but only from culture.

### Endnote:

Nicholson, Daniel J. 2014. "The Return of the Organism as a Fundamental Explanatory Concept" in *Biology Philosophy Compass* 9/5, 347–359.

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