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# COSMOS + TAXIS

Studies in Emergent Order and Organization

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Studies in Emergent Order and Organization

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# The Opposition Between Individual Autonomy and Social Determinism: A controversy by now settled? Proposals and approaches of social research.

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**Bio-sketch:** Albertina Oliverio is University Professor of Philosophy of Social Sciences at the University of Chieti-Pescara. Her most recent books are *Rischi, paure e ricerca di certezze nella società contemporanea: un punto di vista interdisciplinare* (Rubbettino, 2014) and *Individuo, natura, società. Introduzione alla filosofia delle scienze sociali* (Mondadori, 2015).

**Abstract:** This paper analyses complex methodological individualism within the debate around individual autonomy and social determinism. It is shown how this approach constitutes an alternative both to methodological individualism and methodological collectivism. The paper then poses an open question as to whether this kind of individual/social opposition might be superseded by new trends in social research, looking at natural determinisms instead of individual deliberate action or social pressures.

**Keywords:** individual autonomy, social determinism, subjectivity, focal point, biological-evolutionary explanations

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## I. METHODOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE INDIVIDUAL AUTONOMY VERSUS SOCIAL DETERMINISM DEBATE IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

The problem of the relationship and the possible opposition between individual autonomy and social determinism has always been an epistemological issue central to all the social sciences. It has given rise to explanatory models on the one hand related to 'methodological individualism', and on the other, to 'methodological collectivism', i.e. a liberal social philosophy for which the collective exists only through individual actions and therefore has no autonomy; or alternatively, a Marxist or orthodox structuralism for which the individual exists only as a vehicle of the institutions and structures.

Whilst from an ontological point of view, it is assumed on the basis of methodological individualism that there

are no collective impersonal sets or entities (such as society, the market, the state, the family), but only individuals who constitute these collective phenomena, from a methodological point of view, the individualist explanation always starts from individual actions, which are regarded as the sole causes of collective phenomena. The latter are considered to arise from the aggregation of individual components whose principal feature often consists in an unintentionality whose most effective representation is perhaps the 'self-fulfilling prophecy' (Merton 1936). Methodological individualism safeguards individual autonomy in that, although the actor's behaviour is conditioned by the context in which it takes place, it is considered to be the outcome of the person's preferences, beliefs, and reasons. In other words, individuals actively 'jump' by choosing one course of action rather than another (Gambetta 1987). Among the classical sociologists it was Max Weber who more than any other promoted this methodological approach and who realized that the para-

digm of action, and an adequate theory of rationality, could be applied to all the social sciences and not confined to economics alone (Boudon 1984).

For methodological collectivism, ontological and logical-explanatory priority pertains to the collective rather than to the individual. Thus, a wide tradition of thought has shared the assumption that individual behaviour is entirely determined by the influence of social and collective entities (crowd, society, group, institutions, structures) which in turn transcend it. Gustave Le Bon (1895) explained collective phenomena by hypothesising their 'reification', thus making them autonomous from their individual components. At the same time, he attributed to them the property of reducing and erasing conscience. Precedence was thus given to unconscious and instinctive individual features easily manipulable with mechanisms such as imitation, contagion, and suggestion. In methodological collectivism, therefore, the social phenomenon prevails over individuals, 'pushing' them, dominating and determining their behaviour.

Many areas of social research oscillate between these two explanatory schemes. An example is provided by the explanation of the causes of delinquency. The classics of social research, from the Chicago School onwards, causally linked delinquency to a social matrix by assuming that the individual offender is 'pushed' into such behaviour by a wide range of social determinants: exclusion, increased unemployment and job insecurity, poverty, lack of education, and so on. An economic and social crisis can thus be considered the cause of tensions in certain social groups: for instance, young people, who are first to be affected by situations of this kind (e.g. young people in deprived neighbourhoods who do not have enough work to start a family). In this case, therefore, the underlying hypothesis is that society is violent and creates delinquency. This is the view taken by ecological studies on crime, which seek to identify urban variables (overcrowding, anomie, income level) and their links with high crime rates.

Of interest in this regard is a well-known study on the members of a gang of drug dealers (Bourgois 2001), which takes a determinist perspective to argue that it is the socio-cultural context which in part creates gangs. But it also hypothesises that this kind of parallel economy is based on rational reasoning: some individuals invent alternative strategies to earn income and thus make a choice to avoid poverty in extremely economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Contrary to a collectivist explanatory methodological framework, other authors maintain that crime is not caused—or not only caused—by economic and social factors. This is the case of those who adopt the approach of an actionist

sociology à la Boudon, which subjects individual action to analysis of the reasons that individuals invoke to justify their behaviour. It is therefore necessary to understand why they choose to become criminals when they know that the costs of such a choice can often be very high (e.g. imprisonment). Delinquency is thus explained as a life choice determined by the immediacy of the reasoning that breaking the law brings more advantages (an affluent lifestyle, beautiful women, drugs, luxury cars, respect in the community) than costs (a mediocre job, routine work, low pay) (Cusson 2006). Obviously, the difference between these two explanatory systems relative to the causes of delinquency has major implications in terms of responsibility: on the one hand, it is society that is mainly responsible for deviant behaviour and the accent should be on the need of changes in social policies; on the other, it is individuals and the accent should be on sanctions.

## II. THE ALTERNATION IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES BETWEEN THE PARADIGM OF THE 'SOVEREIGN' INDIVIDUAL AND THAT OF 'OMNIPOTENT' SOCIAL STRUCTURES

In recent decades, this methodological opposition has generated important sociological debates on the relationship between the individual and society. Many argue that contemporary individualism, with all its facets, has arisen following the loss of influence by institutions and social structures, and at the same time that it has been to the detriment of society. Thus increasingly common are 'sovereign' individuals—monadic individuals closed in on themselves, only meaningful to themselves, narcissistic, the creators of their own identity and their own actions in total autonomy; individuals who enjoy both ever wider margins of choice in everyday life (sentimental, professional, moral) and greater reflexivity also from the critical point of view. If in fact, during the 1960s and 1970s the institutions and structures were attributed almost absolute regulatory power over individuals and could frame them, compel them, and dictate how they acted and thought, as in the case of Foucault's disciplinary institutions or Goffman's total ones. Today, however, it seems that these institutions have responded to these criticisms and rejected passive normative functions to create space for individual initiative and autonomy characterized by the two-fold ideal of self-realization (choice and self-ownership) and individual initiative (capacity to choose and act alone as the more valued style of action). Thus, to resume the example of

delinquency, from the individualist perspective crime is the result of an individualistic lifestyle. The demise of the classic forms of solidarity on the part of families and institutions has induced each individual to see others in instrumental terms. Furthermore, the atomization of society has made individuals more likely to contest prohibitions and authority in general. From this it follows that delinquency is just one choice among others (Roché 2004).

Anthony Giddens (1990) was undoubtedly one of the first to reflect on the fact that the strength of rules, traditions, routines, has weakened in late modernity, and that individuals are increasingly prone to calculate actions, to make choices, and to take decisions that affect their futures. This new sociology of the individual has been accompanied by a large body of literature which uses the term 'reflexivity' to denote the fact that the individual must construct a coherent identity and life-path that were once assigned or imposed. For some authors, this a new form of society which is 'post-traditional' in the sense that, although the 'traditional' elements of industrial or modern society (social classes, roles, integrated family, gender roles, faith in progress) have not disappeared or been replaced by other models, they have lost their strength. This tendency has been radicalized by globalization, the media and cultural movements, and the rise of identity claims which dismantle the traditional concept of society. The society of the individual is one characterized by the 'individualization of life': that is, the decomposition and then abandonment of the ways of life of industrial society in favour of those on whose basis individuals construct, express, and enact their own personal trajectories (Beck 1986). There consequently arise social risks associated with the increased individual autonomy in lifestyles and professional choices.

Thus appears the 'liquid modernity' theorized by Zygmunt Bauman (2000). While 'first' and 'solid' modernity developed certainties and social forms aspiring to greater solidity compared with that furnished by traditional societies, 'liquid' modernity weakens the last remaining institutions, traditions, norms and social representations. It engenders a society in which all the previous fundamentals, certainties, and forms of higher authority break down; a society characterized by permanent change, the impossibility of self-projection, and the fragility of both social and affective ties. The individuals of this liquid modern world live amid constant uncertainty because they belong to a society in ceaseless movement. They are characterized by a precarious identity which mainly affects the most disadvantaged, now increasingly abandoned and, paradoxically, subject to new forms

of social dominance: for instance those of consumption and fashion which, as in a vicious circle, fuel a process of massification and social imitation that sometimes prevails over individualization.

However, some authors have emphasised that the assertion of the individual does not entail the cancellation of social norms and that, in this society, social rules do not signify compulsion. Society becomes something that directs individuals as a frame of reference, rather than being something which constrains them (Ehrenberg 2005). In short, individuals find the source of all their actions within themselves, but they always act and think within an instituted system, a social context in which there are rules of every kind. Likewise, the rule of individual autonomy is always made with reference to ideas that derive from society (Descombes 2003).

This alternation in the social sciences between the paradigm of the 'sovereign' individual and that of 'omnipotent' social structures perhaps entails that it is not a question of choosing between the individual and society, because the two co-exist, with the associated paradox that the individual is fully social and society is the outcome of individual actions. Consequently, the institutions still play a role in the society of individuals. Perhaps a sort of 'cognitive holism' closed to some ideas of Mary Douglas well represents these concepts (Douglas and Wildavsky 1982). Societies are collectives bound together by shared frames of thought conveyed by the institutions. An institution is memory, information which enables all to exercise their rationality as individuals. Knowledge is established collectively, used rationally by individuals, and then shattered by the complexity of social phenomena.

### III. TOWARDS A COMPLEX METHODOLOGICAL INDIVIDUALISM?

It is therefore perhaps necessary to change the methodological perspective to account for this apparently paradoxical coexistence of individualism and collectivism. In this regard, one of the most interesting theses is that of Jean-Pierre Dupuy, who argues within the philosophy of mind that the 'individual subject no longer has a monopoly upon certain attributes of subjectivity' (Dupuy 2011) and that there exist 'quasi-subjects' or collective entities capable of exhibiting at least some of the attributes once thought to be exclusive to 'real' entities, namely individuals: in particular, the existence of mental states (Dupuy 1994). Complex methodological individualism, which stems from the tradition of the 'invisible

hand' and political economy from Ferguson to Hayek and which is in part similar to analytical sociology approaches (Hedström and Swedberg 1998; Coleman 1990), defines this theoretical schema. The idea is that people act and make society or social reality, i.e. that interactions produce collective phenomena that are much more complex than the actions which have produced them, spontaneous complex orders of Hayekian type which do not spring from design, will or conscience, but rather from individual disordered and separate actions which act synergetically to coordinate themselves and automatically generate something that cannot be reduced to them and whose properties are not found in any of the individuals or elements in question (Laurent 1994). Social reality is autonomous in the sense that it obeys its own laws independently of the efforts of people even though they have produced it. Thus, according to Dupuy, it seems possible of imagining the irreducibility of social reality with respect to individuals without, however, making it a substance or a subject (Dupuy 1992b). The whole results from the composition of the parts, but these simultaneously depend on the whole (Dupuy 1988).

Posing the question of the collective subject—i.e. whether it has the same attributes as individual subjects, if it can learn, know and remember—is to leave the framework of the methodological individualism that assumes that the collective can never be treated as a subject. This is a position midway between methodological individualism and methodological collectivism. The former is considered a 'reductionism' which reduces social reality to the effects of the interaction among individuals, ignoring the leap in complexity entailed by the transition from the individual to the collective. The latter is focused exclusively on 'the whole' to the detriment of individuals and of the reciprocal tie between the individual and collective levels (Dupuy 2004). Dupuy stresses that this process is not holistic: individuals are not subject to the social whole; and the fact that this surpasses and escapes them, not only does not deprive them of their freedom but is a necessary condition for their freedom. Individual freedom consists precisely in what individuals do of what social reality makes of them. It is thanks to what social reality gives them that individuals can set ends for themselves and achieve them. There is therefore no hierarchical relationship between the individual and the social whole, but rather a circular causality, a circular and recursive pattern of reciprocal definition (Dupuy 1992b). The formal being that ensues is thus different in nature and has unpredictable properties. It can therefore be said that a collective entity can learn, know, remember, analyse a situation, take decisions,

and act. The notion of collective consciousness or that of collective memory can be analysed with this approach. In fact, one of the properties of the collective is a form of consciousness/memory distributed in a system of actors, embodied by rules or moral imperatives, and impossible for any individual brain to recapitulate. For example, it is not necessary that all the members of a nation remember the historical events of a particular era for this to produce ethical imperatives relative to the future. And yet this consciousness/memory involves something more than the partial consciousness/memories of individuals: a collective ethic, a national spirit, which is qualitatively different from its individual components.

In short, according to Dupuy, the concept of 'subjectivity' is deconstructed. This comes about if it is realized that a complex network of interactions among simple entities can exhibit significant properties and that this network can be conceived at both a micro and macro level. At the macro level, the attributes of subjectivity are not the monopoly of individual subjects because they can be also produced by collective entities. At the micro level, attributes of subjectivity are not attributes of individual subjects because they are emergent effects of 'subject-less processes'.

In this regard, Dupuy (1992a) introduces the idea of a complex 'self-transcendence' of social reality. This consists in the coexistence of two seemingly paradoxical propositions: on the one hand, that there are individuals who make, or rather 'enact', collective phenomena (a proposition inspired by individualism without lapsing into reductionist atomism); on the other, that collective phenomena are (infinitely) more complex than the individuals who have produced them and obey only their own laws in a complex process of self-organization. This makes it possible to defend the autonomy of social reality and its non-reducibility to psychology while remaining faithful to the golden rule of methodological individualism, i.e. do not transform collective phenomena into subjects (Dupuy 1992b).

This epistemological approach proposed by Dupuy raises a theoretical problem which relates to the considerations of many authors with respect to the overlap between a society characterized by increasing individualization (the contemporary individual freed from the traditional bonds of subordination) and the equally strong presence of new forms of social domination which sometimes seems to suggest that people evade the control of society. Hence, while on the one hand people are the constructors of their own society because they are free from the predetermined and external social reality, on the other hand the autonomy of the self-transcendent social whole means that the social outcome

autonomizes itself from its generating principle. This is a reciprocal co-definition that Dupuy links to René Girard's concept of 'mimesis' (Girard 1972). According to Girard, human desires are always dictated by the interaction with others, but their convergence on the same objects, desires, and interests causes rivalry because it is impossible for everyone to obtain the same thing. It is thus possible to account for the emergence of a polarization of human desires, without any pre-existing structure and through an intrinsically social process. The value of things is read in the desires of others. It is because an individual believes that another individual desires something that s/he will want it for him/herself. But in the same way, the desire of the other individual will be strengthened by the desire of the first individual. This mechanism leads to selection of the desire for something as the 'focal point' of the desires of these individuals and explains *a posteriori* the beliefs of all. This interpretation of the concept of 'focal point' therefore pivots on the idea of imitation. It is well known that the concept of focal point is to be found in certain games in which one of the existing Nash equilibria can emerge as a focal point if the anticipations of the players converge on it (Kreps 1990; Schelling 1960). According to this hypothesis, the players spontaneously converge on a particular equilibrium when all agents think that this is the most evident among the possible equilibria of the game. Focal points can therefore determine the equilibrium actually played. According to some studies, this convergence results from the fact that in a situation where the payments of all the players situated in certain equilibrium are higher than the payments that they receive at another point of equilibrium, the former equilibrium will naturally be chosen. According to other authors, however, one should consider a perhaps more convincing hypothesis, at least from a sociological point of view, to explain this convergence. This brings us back to Dupuy's reflections on social imitation. These studies maintain that the selection of the focal points and the spontaneous convergence of the players' anticipations on a unique balance are facilitated by social norms and socio-cultural characteristics that may constitute a kind of 'situated rationality' of the players because, depending on the context and interactions with others, the existence of certain conventions is one reason why agents choose some actions rather than others and interpret identical situations similarly (Walliser 2000). For example, the ban on riding a motorbike without a helmet generally leads in the medium term to a decrease in the number of individuals who do not wear helmets. This is due to a range of social mechanisms, among which imitation indubitably has a central role. After some

time, a larger number of motorcyclists are likely to find this ban compatible with their own preferences or desires. The measure may have provoked a rather negative reaction when first implemented, but it then became popular, not because of the consequences, which were not imagined, but because it changed the preferences and desires of the population. Individuals and collectives are therefore co-constructed: the preferences of individuals develop along the path that those individuals follow (and are not imposed externally), social reality is contained in each individual and does not precede relations among them (Chavalarias 2006).

#### IV. AND IF THE METHODOLOGICAL DEBATE AROUND INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE IS NOW POINTLESS? A LOOK AT NEW TRENDS OF SOCIAL EXPLANATION IN LIGHT OF NATURAL SCIENCES

In conclusion to this paper focusing upon complex methodological individualism as an alternative methodological perspective accounting for the apparently paradoxical co-existence of individualism and collectivism, we think it could perhaps be interesting to ask a question which opens a new area of discussion for a future paper: do not the relatively recent and increasingly close forms of 'naturalization' of social sciences (i.e. evolutionary psychology and, more recently, social neurosciences) suggest that this methodological debate around individual and collective is to some extent superfluous and outdated? This is equivalent to asking whether the individualist and collectivist explanatory models (and, therefore, also the complex methodological individualism one) have not been made obsolete by new ones that marginalize, restrict, if not annul, the role of both individual and social components.

Today increasingly frequent are studies that seek to identify the biological bases of intelligence, certain personality traits, and a range of social behaviours. As a matter of fact, despite the perplexities and criticisms, there are some areas in which it seems that consideration of the biological foundations of human behaviour is an opportunity for research which the social sciences should not miss. In this regard, one witnesses today an explosion of studies that emphasise the importance of emotions in social life and which investigate the natural origins of behaviours such as cooperation, empathy, altruism, and morality. The tendency to study individual behaviours and social phenomena in relational terms—that is, by taking into account the close ties of trust, reciprocity and solidarity that hold human beings together—seems



to be reinforced by a similar process ongoing in the natural sciences, where a predominantly individualistic view of evolution has given way to an interpretative approach centred on phenomena of altruism, cooperation, symbiosis and co-evolution.

Consider the case of the emotions, for example. Both evolutionary psychology research and neuroscientific studies in this area increasingly reject the old normative theories of choice and rationality tied to the logic of individual action's analysis and economic calculus (see Neumann and Morgenstern 1944), and they devise new ones based on evolutionary principles which take account of the fact that the human brain is the result of natural selection. A normative-economic conception of rationality is being superseded by an evolutionary rationality because the emotions can be conceived as resulting from evolution and as able to guide humans towards decisions that have benefits in terms of survival (among others, see LeDoux 1988). Anger, for example, can motivate punishment of those who breach particular norms, thereby promoting, among other things, the maintenance of order and social cohesion. Disgust causes offence and moralism. It thus fosters choices that prompt, for example, avoidance of both diseases and those who do not respect the rules. An interesting body of literature highlights that fear has certainly played an important role in evolutionary terms when one considers the dangers faced by the ancestors of humans in prehistoric times. On this view, therefore, the spread of behaviours and choices—like the cooperative ones adopted even when they may entail an individual cost and yield no personal advantage—are important in evolutionary terms because, in diverse forms, they have ensured the survival of the human race. The attention is therefore much more focused upon the analysis of biological and evolutionary mechanisms instead of the study of deliberate individual action processes or social entities. It is evident that this kind of explanations marginalizes individual and collective methodological debate even when revised as a complex methodological individualism à la Dupuy.

This kind of approach seems to favour the 'naturalization' of social research, in the sense of privileging biological-deterministic explanations rather than psycho-social ones. Within social sciences, a heated debate has arisen around these new trends in social research. It is in fact widely criticised both by those who believe that it relegates the individual, with his/her autonomy and rationality, to a marginal role, and by those who believe instead that it underestimates the influence on the individual of certain social processes and factors, primarily norms and

interactions. At the same time, it is widely believed that it is important to 'open' the social sciences to an evolutionary-biological explanatory model of human and social behaviours since it constitutes an undoubtedly important alternative both to the rationalist perspective based on methodological individualism and collectivist social determinism. However, this once again raises the question of whether both individual autonomy and social determinism are being definitively superseded by this new explanatory perspective. The debate is open, and the problem of the origin of morality should make us understand why. Philosophers designate as a 'moral agent' an individual who is not content to obey his/her emotions but is able to analyse and decide in regard to his/her behaviour what is good and what is bad. Morality, in fact, does not rely simply on feelings or emotions, but rather on rules of behaviour that societies or individuals create. This is why the rules and boundaries of morality vary according to the society and the period. While in ancient times the moral community was limited to kin, clan, and allies that spoke the same language, over time it has extended first on national bases and then on universal ones. In substance, according to many scholars nature has created the emotional roots of moral attitudes (empathy, attachment, love, trust, hate, disgust, distrust, etc.). But, at the same time, it is widely assumed that the cognitive tendency to deliberate on the emotions then made it possible to act as a moral agent with respect to social contexts. Which explanatory direction should social research privilege with regard to such a theme or similar ones...? This question opens a new field of debate.



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# Editorial Information

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## AIMS AND SCOPE

COSMOS+TAXIS takes its name and inspiration from the Greek terms that F. A. Hayek famously invoked to connote the distinction between spontaneous orders and consciously planned orders.

COSMOS+TAXIS publishes papers on complexity broadly conceived in a manner that is accessible to a general multidisciplinary audience with particular emphasis on political economy and philosophy.

COSMOS+TAXIS publishes a wide range of content: refereed articles, unrefereed though moderated discussion articles, literature surveys and reviews.

COSMOS+TAXIS invites submissions on a wide range of topics concerned with the dilemma of upholding ethical norms while also being mindful of unintended consequences.

COSMOS+TAXIS is ecumenical in approaches to, and not committed to, any particular school of thought and is certainly not a talking shop for ideologues of any stripe.

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## SUBMISSIONS

COSMOS+TAXIS only accepts digital submissions:  
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Submitting an article to COSMOS+TAXIS implies that it is not under consideration (and has not been accepted) for publication elsewhere. COSMOS+TAXIS will endeavor to complete the refereeing process in a timely manner (i.e. a publication decision will be made available within three months).

Papers should be double-spaced, in 12 point font, Times New Roman. Accepted papers are usually about 6,000-8,000 words long. However, we are willing to consider manuscripts as long as 12,000 words (and even more under very special circumstances). All self-identifying marks should be removed from the article itself to facilitate blind review. In addition to the article itself, an abstract should be submitted as a separate file (also devoid of author-identifying information). Submissions should be made in Word doc format.

1. Submissions should be in English, on consecutively numbered pages. American, Canadian and UK spellings and punctuation are acceptable as long as they adhere consistently to one or the other pattern.
2. Citations should be made in author-date format. A reference list of all works cited should be placed at the end of the article.

The reference style is as follows:

Author, A. B. (2013). Title. *Journal*, 1(1): 1-10.

Author, C. D., Author, B., and Author, C. C. (2013). Article Title. in *Title*. City: Publisher, pp. 1-10.

Author, J. E. and Author, B. (Eds.) *Title*. City: Publisher, pp. 1-10.

Author, E. F. (2008). *Title*. Place: Publisher.

3. All notes should be as end notes.
4. No mathematical formulae in main text (but acceptable in notes or as an appendix).

Please consult the latest issue of COSMOS+TAXIS to see a fully detailed example of the Journal's elements of style.

## CONTACTS

COSMOS+TAXIS welcomes proposals for guest edited themed issues and suggestions for book reviews. Please contact the Editor-in-Chief to make a proposal:  
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All business issues and typesetting are done under the auspices of The University of British Columbia. Inquiries should be addressed to the Managing Editor: leslie.marsh@ubc.ca

<http://cosmosandtaxi.org>

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