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**Why Bloomington is not in Virginia: Contrasting the
Social Ontologies of the Ostroms and Buchanan**

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Abstract

This article contrasts the ontological foundations of two major strands of the public choice tradition: the Virginia school, led by James M. Buchanan, and the Bloomington school, represented by Vincent and Elinor Ostrom. While their early collaboration was grounded in a shared ambition to apply economic reasoning to political analysis, the Bloomington school remained long marginalized. Its renewed visibility following Elinor Ostrom's Nobel Prize in 2009 has prompted efforts to reconcile the two schools. This article argues, however, that such reconciliations are only possible at the cost of simplification, which overlooks an ontological divide concerning the nature of collective action and the so-called 'constitutional moment'. Buchanan's framework, centered on exchange among rational individuals and the principle of unanimity, stands in sharp contrast to the Ostroms' institutionalist approach, which emphasizes reciprocity and the formation of "communities of shared understanding" as the foundation of collective action. These ontological differences underpin distinct methodological commitments and ultimately entail important nuances in their practical approaches to public sector governance. In highlighting this contrast, the article also advances the relevance of social ontology as a conceptual lens for the history of economic thought.

Keywords: Constitutional Choice; Ostrom (Elinor); Ostrom (Vincent); Buchanan (James. M); Social Ontology; Rules; Methodological Individualism

Introduction

In 2009, Elinor Ostrom was awarded the Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel for her "analysis of economic governance." This recognition marked a decisive shift in how her contributions to the public choice tradition were regarded. Prior to 2009, she was seldom cited within the field, but "post-Nobel Ostrom" quickly emerged as a pivotal and emblematic figure of the tradition (Johnson, 2022: 88-89). This renewed prominence soon extended beyond Elinor to encompass Vincent Ostrom—her colleague and husband—and, more broadly, the Bloomington school, where they both played leading roles.¹

Indeed, over the past fifteen years, scholars have increasingly revisited the Ostroms' role in the development of public choice theory, often with the explicit aim of bridging the

¹ For the sake of clarity, we will refer to Elinor Ostrom as "Elinor" and to Vincent Ostrom as "Vincent."

Bloomington and Virginia schools.² This effort has given rise to numerous comparative studies (Aligica and Boettke, 2009; Aligica, 2018; Bish, 2018; Herzberg, 2018; Candela, 2021; Duhnea and Martin, 2021; Lewis, 2022; Johnson, 2023; Lewis and Meadowcroft, 2024), typically focused on their main representatives: Vincent and Elinor Ostrom on one side, and James M. Buchanan on the other.³ Two main points of convergence are commonly emphasized in discussions of their work on public sector governance: (1) a shared emphasis on voluntary forms of collective action aimed at promoting decentralized decision-making; and (2) a mutual commitment to federalism as a viable foundation for democratic society.

Building on this observation, Lewis and Meadowcroft (2024) are the first to offer a critical reassessment of this rapprochement. They argue that Vincent “became increasingly critical of Buchanan’s continued reliance on rational choice theory to analyse constitutional decision-making, an issue about which the existing literature has said little” (ibid.: 365). Their analysis centers on the differing conceptions of rationality involved: while Buchanan consistently adhered to standard rational choice theory across all contexts, the Ostroms distanced themselves from it to better capture the behavior of agents engaged in crafting institutional—particularly constitutional—rules. Yet the authors’ overarching aim remains to highlight the “complementarity” between Buchanan’s and the Ostroms’ work, as explicitly stated in their conclusion (ibid.: 383). In other words, despite acknowledging a “fundamental point of divergence” (ibid.: 382) regarding the rationality assumption, Lewis and Meadowcroft endorse the ‘complementary thesis’ that dominates the literature.

However, some points of tension between Buchanan and the Ostroms extend beyond the question of rationality: they diverge in their understanding of institutions, in their methodological commitments, and in their characterization of a public economy. It is therefore hardly surprising, contrary to Lewis and Meadowcroft’s (2024: 365) interpretation, that Elinor ultimately took a firm stance in defense of Vincent, calling for his dissociation from contemporary public choice thought, of which Buchanan (2003) remains the leading figure:

Vincent Ostrom did not approve of the direction in which the public choice movement developed. He railed against the too easy reduction of all decision considerations into a single dimension of utility and reminded public choice scholars of the critical importance of ideas and of the complex and ever-changing patterns of compromise that is public administration. [...] Public choice came to be associated with a deeply skeptical view of government that is hard to square with any appreciation of the potential strengths of government agencies. (McGinnis and E. Ostrom, 2012: 20)

² The *Public Choice Society* was co-founded, among others, by Buchanan and Vincent following a 1963 conference in Virginia dedicated to the study of ‘non-market decision making’. Buchanan served as the first President in 1964, followed by Vincent as the fourth from 1967 to 1969. Although Elinor, then a doctoral student, was not present in 1963, she would later become the eleventh President, serving from 1982 to 1984 (see Mitchell, 1988).

³ Elinor and Vincent Ostrom are often treated as sharing the same philosophical, methodological, and theoretical commitments, given their longstanding intellectual partnership and their joint contribution to the development of the Bloomington school (Aligica and Boettke, 2009; Duhnea and Martin, 2021; Lemke and Tarko, 2021). We adopt this perspective and treat them as a single analytical unit throughout the article.

In this way, we argue that a structural divergence lies at the core of their respective conceptions of collective action, as understood from the perspective of the ‘constitutional moment’. This moment refers to the foundational juncture at which agents reach an initial agreement enabling the resolution of collective problems—of which the rationality assumption is only one aspect. According to us, this divergence explains in part the longstanding marginalization of the Ostroms within the public choice tradition. To substantiate this claim, we extend the comparative investigation into their respective social ontologies initiated—but left incomplete—by Lewis and Meadowcroft (2024).

Interest in the social ontologies of economists has grown considerably in recent years (Lawson, 2015, 2019; Lewis, Moura and Runde, 2020; Slade-Caffarel, 2024; Lewis and Runde, 2024). This perspective is particularly salient in the case of Buchanan and the Ostroms, all three of whom placed significant emphasis on the ontological foundations of their respective approaches (Wagner, 2018; Lewis and Dold, 2020; Lewis, 2021; Lemke and Tarko, 2021). Hall offers the following definition:

‘Ontology’ refers to the character of the world as it actually is. Accordingly, I use the term to refer to the fundamental assumptions scholars make about the nature of the social and political world and especially about the nature of causal relationships within the world. If a methodology consists of techniques for making observations about causal relations, an ontology consists of premises about the deep causal structures of the world from which analysis begins and without which theories about the social world would not make sense. At a fundamental level, it is how we imagine the social world to be. (Hall, 2003: 373-374)

Since all social theories rest on implicit ontological presuppositions, ontological inquiry offers “*clarity and directionality*” (Lawson, 2015: 22-23, author’s emphasis). And in the case of theories “open to a large number of seemingly ill-grounded interpretations,” such inquiry allows one to return to their pre-theoretical foundations rather than focusing solely on their methodological apparatus, normative assumptions, or practical implications (ibid.: 32). Indeed, by uncovering the “nature and/or meanings” of their “substantive claims and contributions” (ibid.: 32), one gains a clearer understanding of their internal coherence, their implications, and the roots of competing interpretations.

Therefore, identifying the social ontologies underpinning Buchanan’s and the Ostroms’ work enables us to examine their respective conceptions of the foundations of collective action and, by extension, of a public economy. For Buchanan, the social world comprises rational agents engaging in exchanges across multiple institutional levels with the aim of achieving unanimity. Social order is ultimately grounded in *distinct individual decisions* to establish institutions that *regulate* their interactions (Buchanan and Tullock, 1962; Buchanan, 1975b; Brennan and Buchanan, 1985). In contrast, the Ostroms view the social world as inhabited by boundedly rational agents who share common values and mutual understandings, making agreement possible. Social order ultimately arises from *relations of reciprocity* and *collective deliberation*, through

which institutions are established and become *constitutive* of individual social realities (V. Ostrom, 1984b, 1993, 1997; Kiser and E. Ostrom, 1982; E. Ostrom, 1998, 2005).⁴

On this basis, and by drawing more extensively on Elinor's contributions to the study of institutions than most of the contemporary literature, it becomes possible: (1) to reinterpret the distinct conceptions of methodological individualism developed by each of them; and (2) to highlight important nuances in their practical approaches to public sector governance. While Buchanan emphasizes how to protect individual choice from *government* to strengthen the market order, the Ostroms focus on how individuals can actively participate in the *governance* of their public sector—one that may, but need not, rely exclusively on the market order.

To be clear, we do not claim that their social ontologies and subsequent scientific work are in conflict; such a claim would simply be untrue. Nevertheless, we show that while they share certain similarities, important differences remain. Because these differences appear at a fundamental stage, it needs to be emphasized properly or one counters the risk of simplifying each author's work and results. Even when they appear to align on specific policy positions, such convergence is neither systematic nor sufficient on its own: it must always be interpreted in light of their respective philosophical foundations. This is why the present article aims to reassess the prevailing 'complementary thesis' in the current literature: Bloomington is not in Virginia, and greater caution may be warranted before reconsidering established boundaries.

Beyond this specific contribution, this article advances two broader claims relevant to the history of economic thought. First, it sheds light on different conceptions of the foundations of collective action in economics by focusing on the conditions the authors associate with its very possibility. Second, it demonstrates the value of ontological analysis in articulating the coherence and significance of economic theories, clarifying both their methodological foundations and practical implications.

After identifying the ontological conceptions that Buchanan and the Ostroms share concerning the foundations of collective action (Section 1), we demonstrate how they diverge in their understanding of the core problem of consensus within that context (Section 2). This leads them to develop distinct methodological frameworks. While Buchanan remains committed to strict methodological individualism, the Ostroms progressively move away from it to better account for institutions (Section 3). Building on this, we reinterpret their conceptions of public sector governance within a coherent framework, with a particular focus on democratic governance and federalism, which have received considerable attention in contemporary literature (Section 4). We conclude by summarizing our argument in a comparative table.

1) A Common Ambition: Analyzing the Foundations of Democracy

The Ostroms and Buchanan share a common ambition: to grasp the foundations and mechanisms enabling the establishment of a sustainable democratic society (V. Ostrom, 1997; E.

⁴ Colin-Jaeger et al. (2022) develop a similar line of argument in their comparison of Buchanan's and John Rawls's work.

Ostrom, 1998; Buchanan and Tullock, 1962; Buchanan, 1975b, 2003). We first show how it translates into an ontological framework centered on two main social units, before examining how this framework enables the authors to ground collective action in a Hobbesian contractarian foundation.

a) Two Main Social Units: The Constitutional Level and the Individual

The relationship between the Ostroms and Buchanan is marked by numerous mutual borrowings.⁵ Commentators have highlighted the decisive role played by Buchanan and Tullock's *The Calculus of Consent* (1962) in shaping the Ostroms' appreciation of institutions and constitutional choice (Bish, 2018; Duhnea and Martin, 2021). Similarly, Buchanan (1979) drew on Vincent ([1976] 2012; 1980) when developing his conception of the individual through the notion of the "artifactual man" (Aligica, 2018; Lewis and Meadowcroft, 2024). These crystallize the two fundamental social units underlying their theories of collective action: (1) institutions at the constitutional level; and (2) individuals as primary agents.

First, the Ostroms and Buchanan stress the necessity of incorporating the institutional dimension into collective action, that is, the rules that structure individual decision-making in the face of social dilemmas. As Duhnea and Martin note (2021: 15): "Except under unanimity rules, some collective decisions will run counter to each individual's desires. Buchanan and Tullock solve this problem by distinguishing between decisions at the constitutional level and decisions at the policy level." The fundamental distinction between these two levels of analysis lies in the fact that an individual's choice at the constitutional level concerns *the rules* that will govern a given situation, whereas a choice at the operational level occurs *within* the framework of those rules. If individuals achieve unanimity on the rules at the constitutional level, there is no longer a need to require unanimity for each collective decision made daily among the same individuals, thereby reducing the time and effort needed for collective decision-making. This is the "calculus of consent" involved in establishing a constitution (Buchanan and Tullock, 1962). As Vincent states ([1997] 2012: 85), this contribution shifted the "focus of investigation from the practices of normal politics in collective decision making to practices of extraordinary decision making found at the constitutional level of analysis". In the 1970s, this constituted an entirely "new approach to institutional economics" for them (V. Ostrom, 1975; see Aligica, 2018). This framework also underpins Elinor's now-classical tripartite decomposition in Ostromian analysis: the constitutional level, the collective-choice level, and the operational level (Kiser and E. Ostrom, 1982). This institutional component is thus "the most distinctive analytic move that separates Bloomington and Virginia from other schools of thought" (Duhnea and Martin, 2021: 16).

Second, the Ostroms and Buchanan ground their approach to constitutional choice in a revaluation of the individual as the primary subject of institutions, thereby shaping an individualist framework for addressing collective problems. Vincent and Elinor (1971: 205), for

⁵ It is worth noting that they were engaged in affective relationships that lasted until the end of their careers (Aligica, 2018; Johnson, 2023).

example, explicitly state that, in public choice theory, “the individual is the basic unit of analysis.”⁶ This statement, in fact, encompasses two related aspects. First, it marks a departure from certain practices in welfare economics that attempt to substitute individuals’ interests with those of an ill-defined collective (see Johnson, 2005; Wagner, 2018), or in political science that legitimize expert dominance in democratic decision-making processes (see Aligica and Boettke, 2009; Lewis, 2021). Second, this methodological perspective goes further by positioning individuals as the genuine subjects of institutions. Indeed, the Ostroms and Buchanan maintain that institutions are ultimately matters of individual agency. Vincent (1980: 312), for instance, insists that despite their institutionalist approach, “rules are not self-formulating, self-determining, or self-enforcing.” Put differently, one must always prioritize understanding how individuals interact with and shape rules, rather than assuming rules apply mechanically to individuals (Kiser and E. Ostrom, 1982: 179-180). This dimension is precisely captured by Vincent’s (1980) concept of “artifactual man.” While recognizing that individuals are limited and partly shaped by their environment, he nonetheless asserts that they remain chiefly responsible for constructing it: “in Hobbes’s words, human beings are both the ‘matter’ and the ‘artificers’ of organizations. Human beings both design and create organizations as artifacts and themselves form the primary ingredients of organizations. Organizations are, thus, artifacts that contain their own artisans.” (V. Ostrom, 1980: 310; see also, V. Ostrom, [1976] 2012). Buchanan (1979: 106) explicitly draw on this concept to urge economists to consider the “constitutional attitude” in their analysis of public policies (see Lewis and Meadowcroft, 2024). Ultimately, this individualistic approach reflects their attempt to conceptualize institutional processes in light of both individuals’ capacities and limitations in addressing collective problems (E. Ostrom, 1990).

b) Contractarian Foundations of Collective Action

By introducing multiple levels of analysis, Buchanan and the Ostroms shift the unanimity criterion required to resolve collective action problems to the constitutional level. Yet this analytical move raises a crucial question: how is unanimity actually achieved at this constitutional level? This question prompts them to adopt a contractarian approach (V. Ostrom, 1977; Buchanan, 1975a, 1975b).⁷ Through this ‘hypothetical’ framework, they stage the two main social units—individuals and constitutional-level institutions—to account for the foundational moment in which a group of individuals establishes and enforces a set of rules from which social order can emerge, especially a democratic one. Building on Hobbes’s conception of institutions as ‘artifacts’ shaped by the individuals who constitute them, their reasoning thus unfolds within the classical three-stage Hobbesian contractarian framework. While Buchanan also adopts this framework, as the next section will show, we begin by reconstructing it through Vincent’s perspective, which offers greater analytical clarity.

⁶ Buchanan (1984: 13) articulates his ontological commitment similarly, emphasizing that “[t]he basic units are choosing, acting, behaving persons rather than organic units such as parties, provinces, or nations.”

⁷ Although Elinor never articulated this position as explicitly as Vincent or Buchanan—which explains her more limited presence in section 2—her stance ultimately aligns with Vincent’s contractarianism, as will become clear in section 3.

The first stage concerns human beings in the state of nature. In this pre-constitutional situation, “a puzzle or paradox is created: people seek their own good but realize misery instead. An unconstrained pursuit of self-interest yields the misery of war” (V. Ostrom, 1984a: 423). In the second stage, the individual comes to conceptualize—through reason and language—peace as an alternative to war. This is achieved by formulating a set of rules that Hobbes refers to as the “laws of nature”. According to Hobbes, individuals can converge on such rules because humanity is characterized by a “similitude of thoughts and passions” (ibid.: 423). While individuals may differ in the objects of their thoughts and desires, there is an underlying similarity that allows each person to “understand how others think and feel”, and thereby to develop “common elements of understanding and agreement among human beings” (ibid.: 423-424). However, in the absence of enforcement, these laws of nature remain but words: “Covenants without the sword, are but words, and no strength to secure a man at all” (Hobbes in ibid.: 424). This leads to the third and final stage: Hobbes’s solution is for each individual to “surrender his natural rights” to “some human agents” *external* to the contracting parties, agents who are empowered to “exercise the basic prerogatives of rule, including the terror of the sword to bind men to their word” (ibid.: 424).

It is within this Hobbesian contractarian framework that the Ostroms and Buchanan theorize the conditions for collective action. However, they differ in their ontological interpretations of how unanimity at this level can be achieved, revealing a structural divergence in their respective conceptions of social order.

2) Resolving the Constitutional Moment: Diverging Ontological Conceptions

a) *Hobbes: The Contract as a Unanimity of Interests*

Buchanan (1975b, 1976) explicitly adopts the Hobbesian framework, recasting it within an economic model.⁸ He reconstructs the first stage, which he terms “Hobbesian anarchy”, by defining individuals through a utility function and a production function (Buchanan, 1975b: 55).⁹ By incorporating the individuals’ environment, Buchanan then defines an equilibrium situation called the “natural distribution,” corresponding to the state where “neither person has an incentive to modify his behavior privately or independently” (ibid.: 58). Buchanan then proceeds to the second stage of the Hobbesian reasoning, identifying the rules that ensure peace. There are two main types of rules. The first and most fundamental aspect concerns limits on behavior, which, for individuals, correspond to “the mutual acceptance of some disarmament” (ibid.: 59). The second concerns “rights of ownership,” defining individuals’ rights over resources (ibid.: 59). Moving to the third stage, Buchanan acknowledges that the contract itself cannot be effective, since each individual is tempted to defect whenever profitable. Explicitly referencing Hobbes, he states that “[t]his problem may be handled by an agreement by all persons on the

⁸ This allows him to generalize his analysis from the *Calculus of Consent* (1962), which was then based on the assumption of radical uncertainty (Buchanan, 1975b: 70-71).

⁹ Agreeing with Boettke (1987: 11) in considering *Limits of Liberty* (1975b) as Buchanan’s most accomplished work in this domain, we take it as our point of reference.

purchase of the services of some external enforcing agent or institution” (ibid.: 67). Buchanan makes explicit the necessity of conceiving this agent as *external* to the contracting parties. This gives rise to what Buchanan terms the “protective state,” whose “single responsibility” is “enforcing agreed-on rights and claims along with contracts which involve voluntarily negotiated exchanges of such claims” (ibid.: 68).¹⁰

However, as Vincent Ostrom shows, within this Hobbesian conception of the constitutional moment, the prerogatives of sovereignty reside exclusively in the hands of a single agent (V. Ostrom, 1984a: 424). And, by definition, “those who exercise sovereign prerogatives can do no injustice, nor commit a wrong under law” (ibid.). While clearly at odds with the democratic aspirations of the authors, this conception also neglects the interpretive complexities embedded within the rules. One possible solution lies in the establishment of a constitution that ensures authority is formally “allocated and distributed in a complex structure of authority relationships” (V. Ostrom, 1984a: 427-428). This is precisely what Buchanan (1975b, 1995a, 1995b) and Vincent (1976, 1984a, 1991) uncover in their respective analyses of American federalism. However, any formal system of “rules of law” ultimately relies on rules, and therefore on “words” (V. Ostrom, 1984a). Therefore, if remaining within the strict Hobbesian framework, the only viable solution would be to establish multiple government entities, each possessing equal capacity to *physically constrain* the others—thus replicating the state of nature. Otherwise, the threat that an individual may defect by using the “instrumentalities of government [...] to exploit others,” disregarding the unanimity that gave birth to it, remains forever insurmountable (V. Ostrom, 1984a: 430-431). Hence, the prospect of achieving a democratic social order based on unanimous agreement of interests appears highly fragile, if not inherently compromised.¹¹

b) Hume: The Contract as Shared Values

Unlike Buchanan, Vincent locates the solution in the second stage of the Hobbesian reasoning: Hobbes did not sufficiently pursue the “normative inquiry” each individual undertakes to establish the rules that guarantee “peace as an alternative to war” (V. Ostrom, 1984b: 255). Turning to Hume instead¹², he argues that individuals share more than a mere “similitude of thoughts and passions” and are capable of genuine “sympathy” within reciprocal relationships:

Hume sees the capacity to conceptualize and distinguish ways of ordering human relationships as grounded in an emotional quality in which human beings experience a sentiment of sympathy or fellow feeling in relation to the conduct and experience of others.

¹⁰ He acknowledges that in the “presence of jointly shared collective or public goods and services,” it may be necessary to define rules governing collective decision-making regarding their provision and financing (Buchanan, 1975b: 70), giving rise to a “productive state”. However, in his view, the “protective state” holds ontological primacy over its “productive” dimension.

¹¹ It is worth noting that the unanimity of interests found by Buchanan is tempered by the likely necessity, within the very framework of his model, for individuals to engage in pre-contractual exchanges to compensate for an otherwise highly unequal natural distribution. Absent such exchanges, agreement on ownership rights appears unlikely (Buchanan, 1975b: 63–64).

¹² Even though Vincent elaborates his thought more fully in his 1997 book, we primarily draw on the 1984a and 1984b versions of his account of the constitutional moment, which, in our view, offer the most articulate early formulations. Moreover, although Vincent (1991, 1993, 1997, [1997] 2012) at times appears to conflate Hume, Smith, and Tocqueville, we argue that only Hume links sympathy to the use of covenantal language among individuals, which forms the proper rational foundation for Vincent’s contribution (see V. Ostrom, 1997: 96, 132).

This emotional quality enables individuals to project themselves into the situations of others and to share to some degree the emotional experiences of others. (ibid.: 256)

Combined with the use of reason and language, which enable individuals to generalize, this faculty of sympathy grants individuals the capacity “to make associations, to weigh those associations with reference to a complex structure of internal indicators or feelings, and to develop common standards” (V. Ostrom, 1984b: 257). This way, language always expresses a generalized sentiment of sympathy, that is values shared among individuals (ibid.: 261). Yet if the rules agreed upon by the contracting parties remain merely “words”—that is, linguistic constructs—then “value terms are at the core of rule-ordered relationships,” which in turn lie “at the core of political order and social relationships.” (V. Ostrom, 1984a: 434). Put differently, a common language has the capacity to “partition behavioral space by moral criteria” (V. Ostrom, 1984a: 423), and to provide the contracting parties with “knowable grounds for establishing measures that can both be used as criteria of choice and standards for evaluating human actions” (V. Ostrom, 1984a: 432). Language carries within it the possibility of a “shared understanding” concerning the “value terms” of a community of interlocutors (V. Ostrom, 1984b: 261). And it is precisely this initial “shared understanding” that enables individuals, interacting reciprocally, to reach the fundamental first consensus necessary for establishing and accepting the rules of the contract (V. Ostrom, 1984a: 432). The problem inherent in the formal separation of powers is thus resolved through individuals’ commitment to the values that underpin the contract.

Buchanan occasionally considers Hume and his theoretical apparatus as a potential solution for addressing the problem of unanimity outlined above. In a review of Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice*, he writes: “David Hume’s stricture that reason must be, and should be, slave to the passions can be helpful here. Precisely because we recognize ourselves to be ordinary men, no different at base from others of our species, we can cultivate an attitude of mutual tolerance and respect for one another” (Buchanan, 1972: 126). However, he immediately adds: “But more than this is required. [...] *Rules for social order, as observed, will reflect the struggle among interests, and will rarely, if ever, qualify as ‘just’ in accordance with any idealized criteria*” (ibid.: 126–127, emphasis added). Thus, although he acknowledges the Ostromian solution of the constitutional moment, he explicitly rejects it.

c) *Ontological Divergence: Individual Decisions vs. Collective Deliberation*

Buchanan and Vincent therefore do not share the same ontological stance regarding the constitutional moment. While Lewis and Meadowcroft (2024) advance a similar argument, their analysis is too narrowly focused on the divergent “model of man” each employs. We argue, in contrast, that the divergence lies in their conceptions of the individual, *and* of the institutional rules, *and* the relationships between these two elements within the constitutional moment—in other words, their social ontologies.

In Buchanan’s framework, the establishment of an institution at the constitutional level is conceived as a contract that ‘negatively’ constrains the actions of distinct rational individuals

(Buchanan, 1975b, 1987; Brennan and Buchanan, 1985). This conception is deeply rooted in standard rational choice theory, since it is only through maximizing calculus that each individual is expected to find greater benefit in contracting and cooperating than in defecting (Buchanan, 1975b: 59). Yet, it also reflects a particular understanding of institutions. Buchanan primarily views rules as constraints imposed on individuals that ‘deprive’ them of certain freedoms:

The issue is one of defining limits, and anarchy works only to the extent that limits among persons are either implicitly accepted by all or are imposed and enforced by some authority. In the absence of ‘natural’ boundaries among individuals in the activities that they may undertake, there arises the need for a definitional structure, an imputation among persons, even if this structure, in and of itself, is arbitrary (Buchanan, 1975b: 9).

Rules are indeed conceptualized purely in ‘negative’ terms and social order is ontologically grounded in *rational decisions of individuals* to establish and to abide by them. The contract, therefore, is merely an exchange between individuals and possesses no intrinsic moral quality: “In its most general terms, the contractarian paradigm for politics is the exchange paradigm [...]. So long as the source of value is exclusively located in individuals and there is no differentiation among persons, the whole enterprise of politics can be viewed only as a complex many-person system of exchanges or contracts.” (Brennan and Buchanan, 1985: 25).

In contrast, for the Ostroms, institutions are grounded in values that emerge from reciprocal *relationships* among individuals who share a *common language* (V. Ostrom, 1984a, 1984b, 1997; Kiser and E. Ostrom, 1982; E. Ostrom, 1998; 2010). Vincent started to openly criticize public choice theory in 1993, pointing out that “an epistemic element—the place of common knowledge and communities of shared understanding in decision situations—is neglected” (V. Ostrom, 1993: 170). Although this critique was not initially aimed at Buchanan, from 1997 onwards Vincent increasingly directed it toward him, explicitly addressing his use of rational choice theory at the constitutional level (Lewis and Meadowcroft, 2024: 375). However, the form of consensus envisioned by Vincent extends beyond this aspect and also rests on the ‘positive’ dimension of rules. While rules also serve to ‘negatively’ delimit individual action, they primarily structure individuals’ understanding of the social environment, as the language through which they think is also the one they share through reciprocal relationships. This is why the Ostroms draw on John Searle’s theses regarding rules as *constitutive* of social reality (see Lewis, 2021; Miroiu and Dumitru, 2021; Lewis and Runde, 2024), as Elinor explicitly explains:

Those of us schooled in the tradition of John R. Commons (1968), John Searle (1969, 2002), and Vincent Ostrom (1980, 1997) recognize that the social world differs significantly from the biophysical world. [...] The social world simply does not exist without humans using language to constitute it and relate to each other and to relevant physical objects. (E. Ostrom, 2006: 6)

From the Ostromian perspective, institutional rules possess a distinct ontological status: they are irreducible to the individuals themselves because they emerge from *collective deliberation* built on their *reciprocal relationships*. And it is not particularly relevant to distinguish between a ‘protective state’ and a ‘productive’ one, since each institution necessarily *constitutes* and *produces* the social environment of the individuals.

In addressing this issue, Buchanan progressively develops a conceptual framework rooted in moral considerations and individual meta-preferences—that is, higher-order preferences concerning sets of everyday preferences (Brennan and Buchanan, 1985; Buchanan, 1994). This approach was welcomed by Vincent ([1997] 2012: 97), who saw it as an attempt to “go beyond models of man as *Homo economicus*.” However, several tensions underlie this effort.¹³ Most notably, individuals remain the sole allocators of value, independent of any distinctly social considerations (Lewis and Dold, 2020; Dold and Petersen, 2023). Ontologically, then, there is no fundamental shift: the individual, guided by his meta-preferences, behaves as if engaged in a “trade-off between ‘public good’ and ‘private good’ in the choice calculus”, as “any person who maximizes utility” (Brennan and Buchanan, 1985: 147). Furthermore, this work remains too embryonic to be considered the core of his social theory (Lewis and Meadowcroft, 2024). This, for us, reflects the inherent limitation of his ontological framework.

Thus, the Ostroms and Buchanan hold divergent ontological understandings of the constitutional moment underpinning collective action. This, in turn, leads to distinct methodological commitments to individualism and the role of institutions in their work.

3) Distinct Methodological Commitments: Individualism and Institutionalism

Two core elements of their methodological frameworks diverge as a result of this ontological difference: (1) the relationship between methodological individualism and rationality; and (2) the status of institutions as a distinct level of analysis.

a) *Methodological Individualism and the Assumption of ‘Behavioral Symmetry’*

Over time, the Ostroms and Buchanan developed diverging interpretations regarding methodological individualism. Buchanan closely associates methodological individualism with the assumption of maximizing rationality. The second sentence of Mueller’s widely cited 1976 survey, which includes “special thanks” to Buchanan for his “detailed comments on two earlier drafts”, states: “The basic behavioral postulate of public choice, as for economics, is that man is an egoistic, rational, utility maximizer” (395). In contrast to the Ostroms (V. Ostrom and E. Ostrom, 1971), Buchanan (1990, 2003) contends that the three main elements forming the “hard core” of public choice are “methodological individualism”, “rational choice”, and “politics-as-exchange”. The rationality assumption is thus “concomitant” with methodological individualism (Buchanan, 1990: 14).¹⁴

Actually, this position stems from his commitment to the “behavioral symmetry” hypothesis, which lies at the heart of his theoretical framework and reflects his social ontology

¹³ In a compelling analysis, Gaus (2018: 3) shows that “Buchanan’s Hobbesian model of the origins of moral order [...] pretty clearly fails as a rational construct” for sustaining “a large-scale political and economic order”. See also Dold and Petersen (2023) who share this assessment.

¹⁴ Buchanan defines rationality as follows: “the modern economist assumes as working hypotheses that the average individual is able to rank or to order all alternative combinations of goods and services that may be placed before him and that this ranking is transitive. Behavior of the individual is said to be ‘rational’ when the individual chooses ‘more’ rather than ‘less’ and when he is consistent in his choices.” (Buchanan and Tullock, 1962: 33).

(Thomas, 2019; Lewis and Dold, 2020). Buchanan insists that it is not coherent to assume that an individual who behaves rationally in the private sphere would act fundamentally differently in the public sphere: “the average individual acts on the basis of the same over-all value scale when he participates in market activity and political activity” (Buchanan and Tullock 1962: 19). Any observed differences, then, arise from “the structures of these two institutional settings rather than from any switch in the motives of persons as they move between institutional roles” (Buchanan, 1987: 245–246). As Brennan (2008: 476) states, this behavioral symmetry hypothesis “came to have something of a flagship status” for the public choice tradition.

On the other hand, while the Ostroms initially appear to share a similar stance on methodological individualism, they soon clarify their position, particularly in response to major critiques from political science. In the 1970s, they indeed identify four main notions underlying methodological individualism: 1) self-interest; 2) rationality; 3) maximizing strategies; and 4) information about the situation (V. Ostrom and E. Ostrom, 1971: 205).¹⁵ Vincent (1975: 846) even appears to associate methodological individualism with the hypothesis of “behavioral symmetry.” However, in 1976, Vincent ([1976] 2012) publishes his first analysis of Hume’s political philosophy. And, in 1977, he faces a sharp critique from Robert T. Golembiewski (1977), which sparks the ‘Golembiewski vs. Ostrom debate’ within political science circles (Adams, 1979). One of Golembiewski’s (1977: 1492) main criticisms is that “neither Ostrom nor public choice theory provides an acceptable place for values”. For him, it is closely tied to their assumption of methodological individualism, that is a “model of men which seeks to explain public policies in terms of individual rational decisions” (ibid.: 1493-1494). Vincent then explicitly asserts, for one of the first times, that his model of man departs from the rational utility-maximizing agent *since the problem posed by the constitutional moment is rooted in the shared values of a community* (V. Ostrom, 1977: 1517).

This new ontological emphasis on values leads him to revise his understanding of methodological individualism. We know that Buchanan explicitly views methodological individualism as a guarantee to “avoid making interpersonal comparisons among separate individuals” (Buchanan and Tullock, 1962: 15). However, to analyze reciprocal relationships, Vincent grounds it precisely in the very possibility of making interpersonal comparisons: “Methodological individualism cannot provide a coherent epistemological basis for inquiry in public choice if interpersonal comparisons cannot be made” (V. Ostrom, 1984b: 261). Evidently, in this revised understanding of methodological individualism, the hypothesis of “behavioral symmetry” no longer holds. Elinor is particularly clear on this point as early as 1982, criticizing the excessive use of the “narrowly defined model of the individual used in neoclassical economics as ‘the’ definition of a rational individual” across all institutional contexts (Kiser and E. Ostrom, 1982: 215-216; see also E. Ostrom, 2005). Unlike Buchanan, the Ostroms therefore separate methodological individualism from the notion of maximizing rationality.

¹⁵ They define rationality as “the ability to rank all known alternatives available to the individual in a transitive manner” (V. Ostrom and E. Ostrom, 1971: 205).

b) *Institutions as Levels of Analysis: Ostroms' Departure from Strict Individualism*

The second point of tension between Buchanan's and the Ostroms' methodological frameworks—stemming from their ontological divergences—concerns their approach to levels of analysis, and consequently, the role they attribute to institutions. In a draft of her article with Kiser, Elinor critiques Mueller's (1976) survey on public choice:

The micro-institutionalist approach to political theory, exemplified in work of Vincent and Elinor Ostrom and their colleagues, differs significantly in focus from the economic approach surveyed by Mueller by conscientiously investigating incentive structures of alternative institutional arrangements more fully than is done in economic literature. The term 'institution', but for one or two exceptions, is notably absent from Mueller's survey, although according to a political science perspective that is precisely the substance of public choice analysis or present-day political economy. (Kiser and E. Ostrom, 1979: 8)

The relative absence of institutions in Buchanan's work, and more broadly in the Virginia School, stems from their underlying ontology. The strictly 'negative' dimension of rules associated with the concept of "politics-as-exchange" necessarily leads Buchanan (1987; 1990) to adopt a strict methodological individualism. Institutions are thus understood solely as mechanisms that reflect contractual unanimity to ensure the application of the Pareto criterion within collective decision-making (Buchanan and Tullock, 1962; Brennan and Buchanan, 1985; Buchanan, 2003; see Johnson, 2005). Consequently, institutions are not seen as autonomous entities deserving analysis in their own right.

These divergences regarding the role of institutions become evident when Vincent (1987a) wrote an article honoring Buchanan, then the 1986 Nobel Laureate in Economics. Some of Buchanan's supporters subsequently criticized him for not sufficiently emphasizing the "self-serving behavioral tendencies" of public decision-makers in Buchanan's work (Somit, 1987: 847). Vincent (1987b: 848, emphasis added) responded by stating:

Hamilton and Madison went further in elaborating a logic for the constitution of liberty than Buchanan achieved in *The Limits of Liberty* (1975b). Recognizing that politicians serve their own interests should not be difficult. We see evidence of it every day. Rulers have exploited the ruled throughout human history. The great trick is how to devise a constitutional order where politicians are obliged to serve others as well as serve themselves. *This is why the study of politics must be more than the study of behavior.*¹⁶

From a more practical perspective, Elinor's institutionalist methodology builds directly on the ontology outlined above. For instance, in a 2004 article entitled "The Quest for Meaning in Public Choice," the Ostroms connect all their work, demonstrating the coherence between Vincent's philosophical foundation and Elinor's institutional research (E. Ostrom and V. Ostrom, 2004: 126). And, as early as 1982, when she first detailed the foundations of her *Institutional Analysis & Development* (IAD) framework, she explicitly draws on Vincent's work: "Institutional arrangements are thus complex composites of rules, all of which exist in a language

¹⁶ Similarly, following a 1984 Presidential Address to the *Public Choice Society* in which she called for treating institutions as a distinct object of study (E. Ostrom, 1986), Elinor reveals that "several colleagues strongly criticized me for introducing so much complexity. They asked, 'Why are you driven to do something so unnecessary?'" (E. Ostrom, 2005: 175).

shared by some community of individuals rather than as the physical parts of some external environment. As language-based phenomena, institutional rules do not impinge directly on the world (V. Ostrom, 1980)” (Kiser and Ostrom, 1982: 179; see Lemke and Tarko, 2021). By focusing on the institutions within which agents operate, the IAD aims to help social scientists “in identifying the appropriate level of analysis relevant to addressing a particular puzzle and learning an appropriate language” for conducting their research (E. Ostrom, 2005: 12). Moreover, to study rule-based situations, Elinor develops a detailed classification system and a formal syntax to differentiate institutional statements (E. Ostrom, 2005).

This particular focus on institutions explains why, over time, the Ostroms became increasingly reluctant to characterize their methodological approach as individualist. For example, Elinor states that although she was “raised on methodological individualism and the mantra ‘the individual is *the* basic unit of analysis’” (E. Ostrom, 2004: 44, author’s emphasis), she “now realize[s] that there is no single basic unit. All organised life is nested in higher levels of organisation and contains lower level units of organisation” (ibid.: 41; see Lewis, 2021; Cervesato, 2025). As a result, various terms have been proposed to characterize their approach. Vincent proposed “methodological communalism” and “Tocquevillian analytics.” (McGinnis, 2005: 170). Aligica and Boettke (2009: 109), for their part, speak of “institutional individualism.” Hence, this reflects well Vincent’s ([1997] 2012: 93) critique of Buchanan for “giving a narrow construction to methodological individualism”.

Thus, the differing ontologies of Buchanan and the Ostroms lead them to develop distinct methodological perspectives about individualism and institutionalism. Ultimately, this ontological analysis enables a reinterpretation of their views on public sector governance.

4) Practical Implications for Public Sector Governance: Against Government or For Governance?

As each develops a distinct social ontology and methodology, nuances exist concerning their respective conceptions of a public economy, especially with regard to democratic decision-making and federalism. In this regard, Johnson (2022: 23, author’s emphasis) notes that while Elinor focuses primarily on the study of “*governance*,” public choice is more concerned with the study of “*government*.” Although she does not elaborate further, we contend that this distinction captures the practical implications of the respective ontologies of the Ostroms and Buchanan.

a) Democratic Conceptions of the Public Sector: Constitutional vs. Participatory

First, Buchanan and the Ostroms rely on distinct conceptions of democratic order to sustain collective decision-making: whereas Buchanan (1987, 2003, 2005) advocates a model of constitutional democracy, the Ostroms (V. Ostrom, 1997; E. Ostrom, 1998, 2010; E. Ostrom and V. Ostrom, 2004) support a vision of participatory democracy.

By conceptualizing the constitutional moment primarily as an exchange between rational individuals, Buchanan introduces a separation between these now-governed individuals and the

“external enforcing agent,” whose sole role is to *enforce* the rules that have been agreed upon (Buchanan, 1975b: 67). Comparing Buchanan to Vincent, Herzberg (2018: 474) notes: “Buchanan’s constitutional decision process was assumed to be separate from the narrower day-to-day democratic interests of citizens.” His work therefore centers less on how individuals actively participate in concrete collective action than on what their choices are and on whether they are respected or exploited by the external enforcing agent. The relationship between the individual and governmental units is thus reduced to determining the appropriate boundaries to protect individual choice. This frames individuals as more passive than active within the democratic process, since all agency is effectively confined to choosing the right rules at a given constitutional moment. This is what enables Buchanan to propose his own constitutions in “the face of a Leviathan government” (Brennan and Buchanan, 1980), without needing to account for deliberative processes.

Ultimately, Buchanan (2005) offers a clear articulation of this conception of collective decision-making within a classical liberal order, conceived primarily as an “extended market order” (60). Public sector governance is conceptualized through a model of “constitutional democracy”: a democracy constrained by strict constitutional limits, aimed solely at providing market institutions and protecting individual choice from political interference (ibid.: 52-61). In this way, Buchanan claims that “the ‘constitutional’ qualifier is as important, if not more so, than the noun ‘democracy.’” (ibid.: 69).

In contrast, for the Ostroms, if ontologically it suffices to share a common language to participate in a community’s collective action, then every individual is already engaged in it. As Herzberg (2018: 473) states: “The key to success for Ostrom was the extent to which the rule system maintained the link to self-governing communities.” This idea is made explicit in Ostroms’ concept of “co-production,” which describes the relationship between citizens and public decision-makers regarding the production of collective goods: “public services—like some private services—depend critically upon service users to function as essential co-producers” (V. Ostrom and E. Ostrom, 1977: 29). This theme, together with that of “public entrepreneurship,” is central to their work in characterizing the ever-present citizen participation in the production of a public economy (V. Ostrom and E. Ostrom, 1977; E. Ostrom, 2010; see Aligica and Boettke, 2009). Moreover, Elinor’s study of the commons (1990: 27) is conceived as a contribution to the “development of an empirically valid theory of self-organization and self-governance.” Hence, what matters for them is less the limitation of government action than the possibility for citizens to actively participate within the relevant governance unit (E. Ostrom, 1993; V. Ostrom, 1997).

Ultimately, this explains why, in her 1997 Presidential Address to the *American Political Science Association*, Elinor declares that while postulating maximizing rationality as in Buchanan’s work may help analyze the “vulnerability of institutions [...] to manipulation by calculating, amoral participants”, it cannot provide a *positive* solution to collective action problems (E. Ostrom, 1998: 15–18). She claims that only the development of “reciprocity, reputation, and trust” among community members can enable institutions to be effective in the first place (E. Ostrom, 1998: 3). This is why she calls to “develop second-generation models of

boundedly rational and moral behavior” (E. Ostrom, 1998: 16-17). She was indeed concerned about contemporary American education, which seemed increasingly to produce “cynical citizens with little trust in one another, much less in their governments” (E. Ostrom, 1998: 18). As she warns, “[g]iven the central role of trust in solving social dilemmas”, this trend could “be creating the very conditions that undermine our own democratic ways of life.”

It is worth noting that in 2005, Buchanan acknowledges the necessity of an ethics of reciprocity to ground a political liberal order, involving “mutual respect, tolerance and the eschewing of resort to opportunistic advantage” (43). However, this ethics is primarily the one on which the market order relies, as he explicitly states (*ibid.*: 42). It is only insofar as politics is “conceptualized as a process of exchange” that this “ethics of reciprocation” becomes relevant for public sector (*ibid.*: 37). Thus, this conceptualization of ethics remains distinctly individualistic, relying primarily on Kant’s categorical imperative (*ibid.*: 14-16), and contrasts with the Ostroms’ Humean foundations of reciprocity grounded in the shared values of a community.

b) Federal Conceptions of the Public Sector: Competitive vs. Polycentric

Second, although the Ostroms and Buchanan envision a federal system for public sector governance, they justify it for different reasons: whereas Buchanan (1995a, 1995b) advocate a “competitive federalism” modeled on the market order, the Ostroms (V. Ostrom et al, 1961; V. Ostrom, 1991; E. Ostrom, 2010; McGinnis and E. Ostrom, 2012) support polycentricity as a basis for democratic governance.

On the one hand, the Ostroms draw a crucial distinction between the “provision” of public goods and their “production” (V. Ostrom and E. Ostrom, 1977). Provision refers to the process that organizes the collective consumption of goods, while production refers to the productive process that meets the demand generated by provision. The Ostroms further differentiate these two aspects by referring to them respectively as “collective consumption units” and “production units” (V. Ostrom and E. Ostrom, 1977: 19–20). Accordingly, public economies can be represented as a complex web of relationships between various consumption and production units—whether governmental, private, or associative. More precisely, the Ostroms refer to a public economy as “polycentric” to characterize its multitude of formally independent decision units that nevertheless interact through well-defined processes of cooperation, competition, and conflict management, and whose functions may overlap across the same territories and jurisdictions (V. Ostrom et al., 1961; see Aligica and Boettke, 2009; Candela, 2021; Tarko, 2021). This can give rise to a system exhibiting “characteristics of a quasi-market relationship” (V. Ostrom and E. Ostrom, 1977: 37), and fostering such dynamics can improve the overall efficiency of a public economy. However, its central feature lies in the role assigned to the collective consumption units that structure it (*ibid.*: 26). Indeed, two main reasons explain the Ostroms’ commitment to polycentricity (Lewis, 2021: 632). First, it enables bolstering institutional fit through citizens’ democratic participation within the relevant collective decision-making units (V. Ostrom and E. Ostrom, 1977: 26). As we saw, the “struggle to understand”

one another in deliberating and solving collective problems at the relevant scale is a necessary condition for democratic governance (V. Ostrom, 1991: 66-68; E. Ostrom, 1998). Second, since complex collective problems rely primarily on deliberative processes that can fail, the Ostroms advocate the need to experiment with rules to identify those that can facilitate concrete institutional solutions (Lewis, 2021: 632). In this regard, a polycentric structure proves advantageous because it allows the separate units to conduct independent experimentation and, through the institutional linkages that integrate them into a cohesive system, to learn and adapt collectively more efficiently (E. Ostrom, 2005: 281-286).

On the other hand, Buchanan strongly supports federalism as a means to foster a competitive system of public governance (1975b, 1995a, 1995b). Duhnea and Martin (2021: 18) rightly note that, since Buchanan's vision is based on the conception of government as "a revenue-maximizing monopolistic Leviathan", federalism appears advantageous insofar as it allows "to restrain taxing power by decentralizing authority in multiple units." In fact, Buchanan draws a distinction between two components of the public sector. First, as we saw, a constitutionally limited central government is required to perform the minimal and protective state functions across the national territory (Buchanan, 1995a: 19-21). Second, "separate producing units", namely state and provincial governments, must oversee the productive functions of the public sector, being "forced to compete, one with another, in their offers of publicly provided services" (ibid.: 21). Ultimately, the entire argument hinges on a market analogy centered on the exit option guaranteed by the central government—that is, on a model of "competitive federalism" (ibid.: 21).¹⁷ According to this view, the primary advantage of federalism lies in its capacity to constrain both central and state-provincial governments through the "threat" of individual exit (ibid.). In other words, while the Ostroms focus on how citizens can actively engage within governance units, Buchanan centers his argument on the possibility of exiting them.

Failing to recognize these nuances can lead to oversimplifications, as illustrated by the exchange between Richard E. Wagner and Roberta Herzberg at the 2005 Mercatus Center conference in honor of Vincent and Elinor. Wagner (2005: 184), a former student of Buchanan, interprets the Ostroms' concept of polycentricity as stemming from a "cameralist" orientation, in which government units must primarily "act economically in the same manner as other participants in society", thereby replicating the market order. His interpretation, in fact, closely aligns with Buchanan's conception of federalism. Yet, Herzberg (2005) challenges this understanding of polycentricity. For her (ibid.: 193–194), polycentricity, with its multiple levels of government, primarily enables citizens to "act as the coordinators of service delivery and the check on concentration of power." She further observes that "even in the case of privatization, sovereignty or the power of coercion must be transferred to the private entities", since "the problem of abuse of power by government does not go away simply by transferring it to another single agent" (ibid.). In contrast, polycentricity chiefly allows for the formation of communities

¹⁷ Buchanan (1995b: 261-262) occasionally justifies federalism on the possibility for citizens to raise their « voice » more effectively. However, he clearly regards this as secondary, since from a positive standpoint the exit option alone is sufficient to replicate market activity (ibid.).

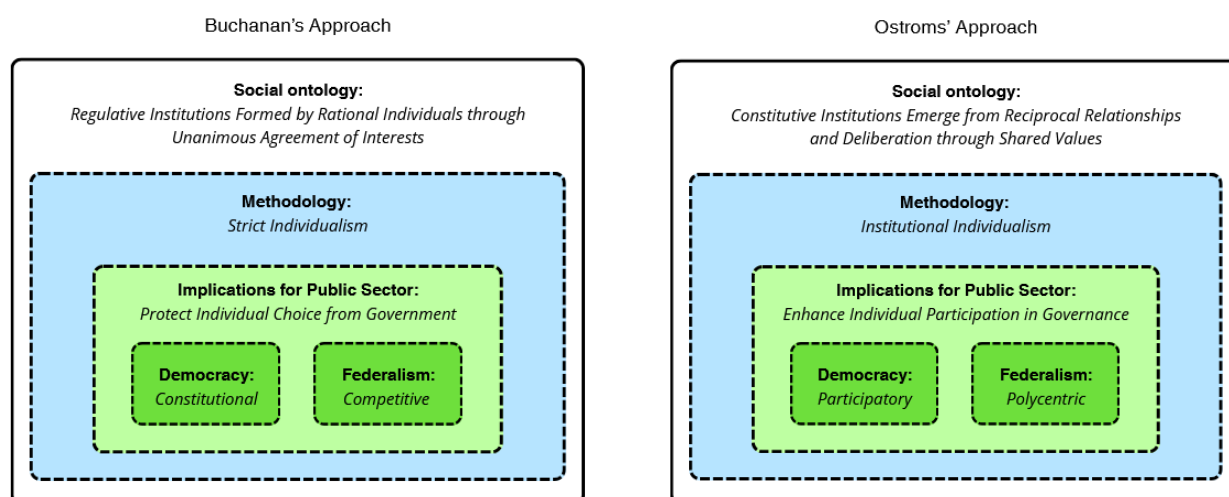
“that make the problem of reaching social consensus much easier.” It is a system designed first to determine “the authority and coercive capability of government at the lowest possible level” so that citizens can build a “social consensus” through their active management of the public good. Hence, this exchange highlights the nuanced distinctions that shape Buchanan’s and the Ostroms’ respective conceptions of public sector governance.

Conclusion

On the one hand, the Ostroms advocate democratic governance and polycentricity to promote active citizen participation through deliberation and problem-solving at appropriate scales. On the other hand, Buchanan supports constitutional democracy and competitive federalism as a means to replicate market dynamics, relying on the exit option where individuals can unilaterally choose the rules they prefer in relation to comparatively weaker governing units.

As illustrated in the schematic representation below, these conceptions of public sector governance must be situated within distinct, comprehensive ontological foundations of collective action. Viewing society as primarily composed of rational individuals who enter into contracts to regulate themselves, Buchanan thereby logically adopts strict methodological individualism and formulates rules to protect individual choice from government interference. Conversely, the Ostroms conceptualize society as primarily composed of communities of individuals sharing values that shape institutions which, in turn, constitutes society itself. This entails placing greater emphasis on institutions—explaining their late-career skepticism toward methodological individualism—and highlighting how individuals can engage in institutional governance.

Comparative Synthesis of Buchanan's and the Ostroms' Foundations of Collective Action



Consequently, while their works may exhibit some complementarity, conflating the two risks producing reductive and distorted readings of these rich contributions to political economy. Once again, Bloomington is not in Virginia—and perhaps that is just as well.

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