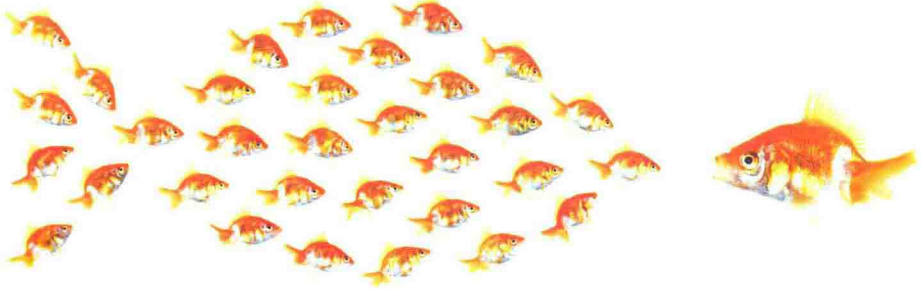# RAIMO TUOMELA

SOCIAL ONTOLOGY
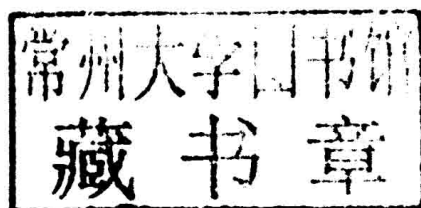
Collective Intentionality and Group Agents

Social Ontology

COLLECTIVE INTENTIONALITY AND GROUP AGENTS

Raimo Tuomela

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SOCIAL ONTOLOGY

To my wife Maj

Preface

THE MAIN TITLE of this book is *Social Ontology*, with a focus on the two topics of *collective intentionality* and *group agency*. These two topics do not cover all that there is to social ontology, which can be broadly understood to cover all kinds of entities and properties that rational study of the social world is taken to need. Understood in this wide sense, social ontology is not only a study of the basic nature of social reality but at least in part a study of what the best-explaining social scientific theories need to appeal to in their postulated ontologies. This book largely focuses on conceptually group-based notions. The theory presented in this book is based on the full we-perspective (the "we-mode") and on collective construction of the social world by means of the collective acceptance by group members.

To say a few words about *collective intentionality* ("aboutness"): a good example of situations involving collective intentionality is given by cooperation. As we know, human beings have the capacity to cooperate in a variety of contexts, including those involving an element of conflict between the participants. Cooperation in its core sense requires collectively intentional attitudes such as joint intentions and shared beliefs, which have the same content and can be taken to be satisfied by the same token state. For instance, watching a flying eagle together, conversing, painting a house together, making an agreement, and forming an organization are examples of phenomena involving collective intentionality. Collectively intentional mental states and actions based on them involve reference to a "we", a social group capable of collective reasoning and action. When the group members jointly intend, believe,

have emotions jointly, and so on, and act on the contents of these mental states, it is from their group's point of view, typically from a "we-perspective", that is, it is "our" group that intends, believes, has emotions, and acts on the contents of these states. (Of course, a group can function only through its members' activities.)

Collective intentionality can be regarded as "the cement of society". This view can be substantiated by reference to three central or "criterial" features of the we-mode framework, namely, *group reason* (a unifying reason for group members to participate in group-based activities), a *collectivity condition* for all members ("necessarily being in the same boat"), and *collective commitment* (basically a product of joint intention and the members' group reason involved). These three elements unite the group members and "cement" them together in all contexts where they function as group members, for example, in the contexts of cooperation and institutional action. They also have a central role in the case of hierarchical groups where authoritative use of power sets limits to people's and groups' activities. Chapter 1 discusses these notions and surveys the contents of the book.

The theory presented in this book assumes that some social groups, including large organized groups, can be viewed as functional *group agents*. This means that we can on functional grounds attribute as-if mental states such as wants, intentions, and beliefs, as well as actions and responsibility to these groups. Such group agents are not intrinsically intentional agents ("persons") comparable to human beings, but they can on functional and epistemic as well as practical grounds be viewed and accepted as extrinsically intentional agents with attributed quasi-mental properties. The group members may engage in group-based reasoning of the following kind: "When functioning as group members, we want X and take this to require that we jointly do Y and hence do it as a group". This kind of reasoning and acting helps to make them a we-mode group that can act as a group—a functional group agent. The group agent view helps to explain group members' behavior and is often useful for theorizing about intergroup phenomena (e.g., cooperation and conflict between large groups like corporations and states).

The group agent approach, I argue, is especially useful with respect to large, typically hierarchical groups (e.g., corporations and states), cases in which theorizing about individuals and their interrelations is impractical. In the specific analyses of various group notions in the book the starting point often is a hierarchical group with "internally" or "externally" authorized leaders.

Comparing the weakly collectivistic we-mode group view with the individualistic (or "I-mode") idea, according to which people act as private persons and as autonomous and primary actors, I show not only that they are conceptually different but also that there are empirically testable functional differences between we-mode and I-mode groups concerning, for example, acting in collective dilemma situations

where individual and collective rationality are in conflict. Indeed, the present book provides precise new results based on a "team game-theoretic" approach. Some experimental testing concerning the we-mode and I-mode approaches has been performed, and the results indicate that there indeed are collective action dilemmas in which people engage in we-mode reasoning and acting.

The present book widens the framework of my previous book, *The Philosophy of Sociality* (2007a), to encompass cases allowing the use of power by external authorities. This significantly extends the scope of the theory, as it now can deal with groups governed by external authorities and with we-mode concepts that are analogously based on external power.

This book discusses a variety of related topics, including situations where the people in effect constitute a group and share collectively intentional states that depend on the group's main goals, interests, values, beliefs, norms, and so on, as well as act together as group members. In addition, some topics new to the social ontology and collective intentionality literature are analyzed. These include group solidarity, group reasons, and we-reasoning, as well as institutionality based either on routine, typically nonintentional activities or on intentional collective construction. As said, the book also provides conceptual tools for the study of various intergroup phenomena. The book presents a systematic, analytically argued theory that is broadly naturalistic and "science-friendly". The upshot is that the group-based collective intentionality framework (the we-mode framework) is needed to complement the individualistic, I-mode framework that is commonly endorsed in the social sciences and philosophy.

Acknowledgments

Finally, I wish to thank the philosophy editor Peter Ohlin for support. In addition editorial assistant Emily Sacharin deserves my thanks for quick and highly efficient help in practical problems related to the completion of the manuscript. The referees for Oxford University Press are to be thanked for their critical comments on my manuscript. I have presented some of the materials in the book in international workshops and conferences, and I wish to express my gratitude to commentators.

Some paragraphs and sections in the book are based on my recently published papers. I thank the publishers for the appropriate copyright permissions to use some passages from the following papers published elsewhere:

SOCIAL ONTOLOGY

Contents

1

Introduction

I.I.

Humans are social beings and adapted to living in groups, indeed, to functioning in several different groups during their lives. Anthropologists have provided evidence that for at least two million years the Homo family has lived in groups and has become genetically adapted to group living, plainly to survive and be able to reproduce and raise offspring. Both common-sense evidence and psychological experiments indicate that humans have the need and the consequent desire to belong to groups and enjoy the order and well-being afforded by group living, and the underlying motive for this need and desire might simply be the conscious or unconscious need to survive.[1] This need, involving as an obvious consequence also the need to be recognized and respected by others, motivates people to seek institutional and other collectively satisfactory solutions to collective action dilemmas, viz., dilemmas where individual and collective interests are in conflict. Indeed, it seems warranted to say on evolutionary and psychological grounds that group sociality is an inherent aspect of humanness and hence that it is intrinsically valuable for humans to belong to groups.

While all humans can be taken to have this social need and desire, not all of them adjust themselves to the created social order, obeying social rules and norms (especially fairness norms). This uncooperative behavior may be due to their selfish desires

to gain something for themselves while exploiting others or perhaps due to their desires to distinguish themselves and be different from others. Yet orderly group life on a local, as well as on a global, level is a must in the current world of increasing dependence between people and peoples. Indeed—despite some free-riding, noncooperation, conflicts, and aggressive action—human groups tend to succeed in maintaining social order. This seems to be due not so much to acting out of prosocial motivation (and sometimes selfish underlying motives) as to acting on group-based motivation and commitments, i.e., to the authoritative reasons that membership in social groups gives for action that promotes the group's interests. Human individuals are thus often disposed to think in terms of "we", of their group, and to act in a solidary way for the benefit of the group or to further the group's interests, where the group's views and attitudes give them a reason to do so.[2]

The mainly psychological and evolutionary facts and assumptions outlined above give rise to the question of what would be the most adequate conceptual and explanatory framework for characterizing human sociality. The right social scientific framework must obviously accord an important role to social groups, but the central problem here is whether its descriptions of group behavior can on some level be reduced to descriptions of individual intentional behavior. The direction in which this book points is that the latter kind of description is not instrumentally feasible, and probably cannot be carried out either for more general theoretical reasons. The ultimate social scientific framework must allow individuals to make reference to social groups—conjectured to be individualistically irreducible—in the contents of their mental states. This view has by now been accepted by most contemporary philosophers writing on collective intentionality. Nevertheless, we may go even further and accord to social groups a functional and intentional existence as social systems in a sense to be elucidated below. Hence it can be claimed that the social world cannot be adequately explained and rationally understood without postulating groups as intentional agents.[3]

This is why the key theory of this book takes thinking and acting as a group member in terms of "we-thinking" (in my terminology, the *we-mode*) as its starting point and contrasts this with thinking and acting individualistically, as a private person (the *I-mode*). With respect to the resulting "I-mode/we-mode" alternatives, this book focuses on the role of the conceptually group-based we-mode way of thinking and acting, and hence I often use the shorter term "we-mode approach" for the theory of this book. The we-mode approach is based on the intuitive idea that, conceptually, the primary acting agent in central group contexts is the group viewed as an intentional agent, while the individual members of the group are the primary ontological agents acting as representatives for the group. The members' social identity is centrally constituted by his group (or groups).

Accordingly, a group organized for action is regarded as an agent from a conceptual and justificatory point of view, although in the causal realm it exists only as a functional social system capable of producing uniform action through its members' intentional action.[4] A group agent in the sense of this book is not an *intrinsically* intentional agent with raw feels and qualia, as contrasted with ordinary embodied human agents. The functional and intentional existence of the group is *extrinsic* and basically derives from the joint attitudes, dispositions, and actions of its members, and from the irreducible reference to the group that these attitudes and actions involve and that is here assumed to make groups conceptually irreducible to the members' individual properties and relationships not based on the group (see chapter 3). Thus agents functioning as proper group members may be assumed conceptually to entify the group by their group-invoking actions and attitudes. This weakly collectivistic conception of groups as intentional agents contrasts with the intentionality of intrinsically intentional group agents on the one hand and with group agents merely instrumentally and/or epistemically conceived on the other hand.

I.2.

The theory developed in this book may be contrasted with earlier, historical views of group agency and collective minds. As old myths and tales indicate, these ideas have been spoken about in various senses for several thousands of years.[5]

There is some ancient Greek and Roman discussion in the history and philosophy of law and, more generally, in political philosophy and theory. This discussion has continued through medieval times up to now—or in any case till the early decades of the past century. Groups as corporate agents in a judicial sense were acknowledged by ancient Roman law, where the terms *universitas, corporatio,* and *collegium* referred to "group persons" (intentional group agents) who were capable of entering into agreements involving the making of promises and their fulfillment, and included the idea of corporate responsibility.[6] A corporate group in this sense was contrasted with *societas,* a collective based on interaction between individuals who were less tightly connected and did not form an intentional group agent called a "group person" (where the term "person" or *persona* refers to theatrical mask).[7] A *corporatio* thus was understood as a *persona* and as a group agent capable of action and of making promises and fulfilling them. Groups as persons have been discussed (e.g., by Catholic theologians) from the Middle Ages until the present day. In addition, Locke and Hobbes are theoreticians who entertained some idea of the group person in the English-speaking world, while in the German community idealism was an influential doctrine in philosophy from the eighteenth century on. Thus, Hegel has become well known for his idea of the collective spirit, the Absolute. Another

similar example is provided by Otto von Gierke. According to him, the state is a person, "a human organism with a unified collective life distinct from the life of its members".[8] My own functional view of group agents is quite different and does not accept the idealistic ontological view.

The idea of a collective (or group) mind has been employed to account for the kind of mental unity that has been seen in a nation, an army, or in a culture. The term *esprit de corps* (group spirit) has been used in this context. Typically it is not only the mental unity of certain kinds of collectives or groups that is involved here but also the reflective self-consciousness of a group. For instance, "We, the French people, are the bravest in the world" could express this kind of self-consciousness in a group, involving its "group spirit" and "we-feeling". In addition, sociologists, social psychologists, and philosophers of sociality have discussed group minds and group agents at least since the mid-nineteenth century.[9]

In the contemporary landscape, our defense of the relative autonomy of group agents contrasts with the strict individualism that is characteristic of much current social scientific theorizing influenced by rational choice theory. The weak conceptual and epistemic collectivism of this book may accordingly be seen as defending a common-sense alternative that lies somewhere between the extreme group-centeredness of German idealism and the conceptually impoverished framework of rational choice theory as we now have it.

1.3.

The theory of this book is based on a science-friendly philosophical naturalism, and is accordingly committed to the idea that major claims of the theory are at least indirectly and partially empirically testable. I accordingly prefer to treat individualism and collectivism not as ideologies but as competing approaches to the explanation of social phenomena, reformulated for my purposes under the guise of the I-mode/we-mode distinction. The primary way in which the I-mode and the we-mode may be compared is in terms of their consequences. The we-mode will be shown to have objectively real dispositional features, which generate action predictions different from those the I-mode account entails. Neither the I-mode nor the we-mode is conceptually or explanatorily reducible to the other, nor constructible from concepts pertaining to the other. However, I will argue that neither individualism nor collectivism is capable of expressing the whole truth, so to speak: both individualistic (I-mode) and collectivistic (especially, we-mode) concepts and mental states are needed to explain, for example, social action and social institutions. Hence individualism needs to be supplemented by irreducible we-mode states and attitudes in order to fulfill the social scientific task of describing and explaining the social world

as accurately and defensibly as possible. Ontologically the theory of this book takes individuals ultimately to be the only action-initiating "motors" in the social world, even if social groups objectively exist as (often irreducible) social systems.

As for specific ontological claims about the nature of we-mode mental states, the claims that I will make are mostly tentative, because one cannot a priori give adequate answers to ontological questions (such as whether people do indeed have we-mode mental states with specific neural bases). While such questions are to be answered a posteriori by scientific means, performing correct experiments and correctly gathering and interpreting the data obviously depend on an adequate conceptual framework for formulating the right questions and making the conclusions understandable and testable. The goal of this book is in part to make relevant conceptual clarifications and explications to this effect, compatibly with the best current scientific research.

2. THE I-MODE AND THE WE-MODE

This book presents an analytic and conceptual theory of how the social world is constructed. The theory presents the basic building blocks of society with an emphasis on group-based notions. My account is accordingly based on a group-level description of the social world, which in many cases can be conceptualized in terms of the we-mode approach on the member level. The we-mode framework forms an indispensable conceptual framework for the study of social life. It consists of interconnected concepts that, according to the arguments of this book, are not in general reducible to I-mode concepts. Much of our social life consists in living in a group context where people often are guided "from above" by authorities (despite people's attempts to reform society by locally democratizing it). An adequate description and explanation of social life accordingly requires that we-mode thinking and acting covering large and hierarchical groups be included in one's theorizing about the social world. The intuitive idea here is that the central agent often is a group, a "we" (expressing the speaker's or thinker's self-identification with a group). On the member level we have its members' we-thinking and we-acting, that is, thinking and acting together as a "we" to promote the interests of "us". The primary conceptual and justificatory direction in the we-mode is "top-down", from group level to member level, whereas in the I-mode the primary conceptual and justificatory as well as ontological direction is "bottom-up", from member level to group level. Thus an individual may act in a group context either in the we-mode or in the I-mode (including acting for the group in the "pro-group" I-mode), although some we-mode thinking and action is functionally needed for the stability and robustness of group life (see below for arguments). Note that a person can have a we-mode attitude with a certain content but fail to have the same attitude in the I-mode.[10]