

Institutions, Emotions, and Group Agents: Contributions to Social Ontology

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by Anton Killin

Institutions, Emotions, and Group Agents is the second volume in the new Springer book series 'Studies in the Philosophy of Sociality.' The book collects twenty-one papers on aspects of social ontology, dividing into three parts, 'Intentionality and Institutions,' 'Shared Emotions and Recognition,' and 'Collective Reasons and Group Agency.' In addition to these papers, the editors offer an extensive introductory chapter outlining the aims and scope of the project, and each individual contribution in turn.

Social ontologists study the construction, constituents, and organisation of the social sphere. As this volume makes clear, contemporary philosophical study of social ontology is an interdisciplinary game, thriving with the contributions of metaphysicians, social and political philosophers, ethicists, sociologists, legal theorists, economists, psychologists, linguists, and other social scientists. One aim of the book is to demonstrate the breadth of contemporary social ontology, which it does admirably; another is to act as a catalyst in spurring future research, and indeed many questions raised remain open for future research to tackle.

The first part of the book, 'Intentionality and Institutions,' focuses on issues surrounding *fact construction*. According to social ontologists, some facts are "socially constructed" — facts about *registered cars*, for instance. The work of philosopher John Searle plays a big part in the discussion here. Rather crudely, according to Searle (2010), for an object to have some socially-determined status is for it to have been legitimately "declared" thus-and-so; my car is registered just in case the appropriate institution approves my application, effectively declaring it registered. So understanding the roles of institutions and collective intentionality is crucial to a theory of social facts.¹

Searle's work is the springboard for a number of contributions here. Barry Smith's 'Document acts,' Filip Bueken's 'Searlean reflections on sacred mountains,' Brian Epstein's 'Social objects without intentions,' Jennifer Hudin's 'The logical form of totalitarianism' all challenge aspects of Searle's work. Epstein, for example, argues that Searle's account is too coarse-grained. Epstein distinguishes "anchors" from "grounds": anchoring is a

process that determines an object's social status, and if object *X* counts as status *Y* in some context *C* (cf. Searle 1995), the process of collective intention or recognition that makes that the case *anchors* the *ground* of *Y*. One upshot of this is that, on Epstein's view, Searle's account overemphasises the role of intentions in the construction of social facts.

The second part, 'Shared Emotions and Recognition,' comprises papers dealing with issues concerning shared affectivity: the nature of empathy, the roles of collective emotions, the individuation of affective attitudes, and so on. In a number of contributions the notions of "plural subject" (e.g. Gilbert 2006) and "we-intentions" (Searle 1990; Tuomela and Miller 1988) are explored and refined. Emanuele Caminada's 'Joining the background: habitual sentiments behind we-intentionality' focuses on Gerda Walther's (1923) phenomenological conception of we-intentions, while Titus Stahl's 'The conditions of collectivity: joint commitment and the shared norms of membership' takes Gilbert's notion of plural subject as a starting point and maintains that shared principles of membership are crucial to understanding how individual commitments become joint commitments. Mikko Salmela's 'The functions of collective emotions in social groups' examines a number of empirically-oriented theories of emotions (aggregative, ritualistic, intergroup), Gilbert's notion of plural subject, and the phenomenological account espoused by Hans Bernhard Schmid (2009), finding them all wanting. Salmela proffers a theory that emphasizes degrees of collectivity, placing it along a continuum.

Arto Laitinen's 'Collective intentionality and recognition from others' makes a number of important points against the received view that matters of collective intentionality are for members of the collective to decide. Laitinen distinguishes between notions of 'recognition' in order to elucidate how individuals external to a group can in part determine the collective goals, beliefs and statuses of the group. Not all groups require outside recognition: a secret society of stamp collectors, for example, doesn't require such recognition. So, Laitinen distinguishes independent from externally dependent groups (and acknowledges the possibility of intermediate cases). Secret societies of stamp collectors are independent groups; they do not require recognition from outsiders. In line with the received view, the members of a secret society of stamp collectors determine matters of collective intentionality: 'The members collectively accept or recognize status functions, goals, and beliefs *for the group*' (213; see also Tuomela 2007). Laitinen draws attention to the ubiquity of *externally dependent* groups—ones that do not fit this paradigm:

whose existence depends on recognition: nothing is a group of *that kind* without it being duly recognized from outside. For example, nothing is an independent sovereign state without recognition from other states. Nothing is a business corporation, a registered association, or a married couple without being recognized by some relevant authority... affirmation *from outside* is needed. (220)

The distinction matters for Laitinen because, on his view, recognition is required for groups to acquire deontic status; while 'unrecognized' individual persons might have rights and obligations simply in virtue of being persons, 'acquiring institutional rights is a matter of being recognized' (222). It also matters with respect to the 'realm of concern' (see Tuomela 2007) of the group. The *independent* secret society of stamp collectors is free to decide on their ethos and matters of interest. Yet a subcommittee set up to attend to specific tasks, determined before any members are even admitted, might have no normative input regarding the group's realm of concern; its formal matters of interest are externally set. So not only theories of collective intentionality and social ontology, but normative theories might have to take into account the distinction between independent and externally dependent groups: different criteria for apportioning praise and blame may be relevant in the different cases.

The work of Christian List and Philip Pettit (e.g. 2011, 2004) comes to the fore in the third part, 'Collective Reasons and Group Agency', on the role and nature of group agents. For one, in 'The SANE approach to real collective responsibility', Sara Rachel Chant finds List and Pettit's theory inadequate with respect to apportioning responsibility to groups over and above the individual members. Chant outlines a game theoretic framework for understanding 'real collective responsibility,' responsibility ascribed to the group but not to any individual members of the group. She argues that, to the extent that a scenario resembles a 'stable,' 'accessible' Nash equilibrium, there is real collective responsibility. A toy example is the classic two-person Prisoner's Dilemma Nash equilibrium, a situation in which neither individual is better off by choosing a different action/strategy, no matter what the other individual is doing, yet *the group* comprising the two individuals *would* be better off. The idea is that, just as responsibility for harm done by an individual can be mitigated or even eliminated when that individual's harm-inducing action was *coerced*, certain scenarios involving groups excuse, at least in part, the individual members of the group but not the collective. The two players of a classic Prisoner's Dilemma game may not be blameworthy *qua* individuals for choosing an objectionable Nash

equilibrium: by taking into account each of the player's expectations/predictions of the other's favoured action/strategy, we can see that their hands were forced. On Chant's view, the players are collectively, but not individually, responsible for the outcome—at least, as far as the situation mitigates individual responsibility. However, this raises an important set of further questions. For instance, what is the point of holding the collective responsible? (Can the collective be sanctioned without sanctioning the individuals?) Could this persuade the collective to do better next time it finds itself in a classic Prisoner's Dilemma? (It seems not, since the hands of the individuals remain forced.) So although Chant proffers this intriguing framework, more needs to be done to unpack, elucidate, and apply her theory. Public goods games are obviously trickier cases. The extent to which individuals' responsibilities could be mitigated in cases such as poverty or global warming (given that joint action is required in these cases, but the actions of individuals are inconsequential) may be very controversial. For example, some theorists (e.g. Caney 2010) hold that affluent individuals acquire additional obligations in virtue of their wealth; insofar as this is right, it is not only the nature of the 'stable,' 'accessible' Nash equilibrium that mitigates the responsibility of individuals—other factors might be relevant such as the distribution of wealth within the group.

András Szigeti provides an alternative view in 'Are individualist accounts of collective responsibility morally deficient?', explicitly challenging the statement that 'The responsibility of enactors may leave a deficit in the accounting books' (Pettit 2007, 194). According to Szigeti, either an act of harm is the result of culpable wrongdoing, in which case the culpable *individuals* are to be held responsible, or harm is not the result of culpable wrongdoing, in which case no one is responsible. If Szigeti is right, then *contra* Chant, there is no need to posit 'real collective responsibility' above and beyond individual responsibility.

Finally, I will consider Vuko Andric's 'Can groups be autonomous rational agents? A challenge to the List-Pettit theory', which attempts to show by way of analogy that List and Pettit's realism about group agents is problematic. Andric's idea is that List and Pettit's theory entails that the mereological sum of an agent (call him Paul) and his Ferrari qualifies as an *autonomous* rational agent, an 'instrument-user-unit.' Andric argues that the absurdity of this outcome is reason enough to dismiss List and Pettit's theory. In my view, more must be said to make the analogy convincing. The only *agent* involved in the Paul-and-his-Ferrari-unit is Paul. Group agents, on the other hand, comprise more than one agent. So even if Andric is right that the considerations that List and Pettit offer in order for group agents to count as autonomous rational agents would also make instrument-user-units

autonomous rational agents, why think that the same rules apply for instrument-user-units (such as the Paul-and-his-Ferrari-unit, comprising only one individual agent: Paul) as they do for group agents (that comprise many individual agents)? If the same rules do not apply, and it is not obvious that they should, then List and Pettit's theory does not entail that instrument-user-units are autonomous agents. I suspect that Andric needs to better motivate his argument in order to get it off the ground.²

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Endnotes

¹ Non-intentional processes play a role too. The equilibrium price in a given market is not intended or "declared", but presumably is a social fact.

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