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# Collectives and Intentionality

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1. Philosophers have been curiously unpuzzled by the existence of human institutions, and by what John Searle calls the 'metaphysics of ordinary social relations'. Searle induces in his readers a strong sense of the complexity, the precariousness, and the objectivity of the social world. He addresses neglected, deep, important questions with his usual panache and lucidity.

Searle's answers to these questions are situated within a framework developed in earlier work, in philosophy of language and philosophy of mind. His aim is to 'assimilate social reality to our basic ontology of physics, chemistry, and biology' (p. 41). Earlier work has shown what it is, in Searle's view, for conscious, intentional biological beings to be present in reality. The main burden of *The Construction of Social Reality* is to show how culture could be brought into existence by such biological beings. The 'Real World', which is independent of any biological beings, and which has been assumed, is defended in the last three Chapters.

In this discussion, I shall start from a question about one of Searle's building blocks, and proceed by making suggestions about why Searle's answer to it might matter within his overall project. The question concerns collective intentionality, which is a basic, pervasive and crucial notion in his book.

2. Searle thinks that philosophers have failed to understand the social world because they have posed a false dilemma. They have taken states of collective intentionality to be manifestations of parts of a Hegelian world spirit; and Searle thinks that this is 'implausible' (p. 25). Those who are not Hegelians—and here is the other horn of the dilemma—have supposed that only *individual* mental states can be admitted. But, says Searle, when someone's state of mind is expressible using 'we', it can be a state of mind that she shares with others without any world spirit's being required. Nor is it required that anyone should think that another thinks that she (herself) thinks that the other thinks that... 'The intentionality that exists in our individual heads has the [simple] form "we intend".' (p. 26).

The question I want to raise is whether the notion of collective intentionality introduced with 'We intend' commits Searle to a denial of methodological individualism in the sense of Popper. In Popper's account of it, methodological individualism says that "All social phenomena ... should always be understood as resulting from the [mental states] and actions of individuals, and we should never be satisfied by an explanation in terms of so-called 'collectives'."<sup>1</sup>

3. Consider collective action, and its explanation. A bench may get built by us because we all intend to build one; and if we do build a bench, then the explanation of that includes the fact that we all had a "we intention" to build one. No doubt if we all have such an intention, then each one of us has it; so that there can be an explanation of the bits of bench building I go in for, and an explanation of the bits of bench building you go in for. But on Searle's account, each of us has his or her individual intention 'only as a part of' our collective intentionality (p. 26). A full explanation, then, of why each of us did her bit will introduce the fact that it was a bit of something which was *our* building a bench. But if we are satisfied by an explanation of our building a bench from which individual explanations are derivative, but upon which further social explanations might be based, then we seem to flout individualism in Popper's version.

The point here is that once the *fulfilment* of "we-intentions" is in the picture, what collective intentionality introduces are not only contents of individual people's heads (as in Searle's graphic portrayal at p. 26), but things which show up, as it were, in action.<sup>2</sup> That which engages in co-operative behaviour, when its members' each derivatively have an appropriate intention, seems to be something irreducibly social. It seems to be constituted (partly) from people's taking themselves to belong to it—from its members each being able to speak of it using 'we'.

The collectives to which Searle seems now to be committed are of a kind which Popper scoffed at with 'so-called "collectives"'. But they are not of any kind which Popper himself was especially concerned with. (Popper himself glossed 'so-called "collectives"' with 'states, nations, races' (*op. cit.* n. 1).) And they are not of the kind that Searle comes to be concerned with when he notes that social entities, such as city states and married couples (p. 97), the U.S. Senate and the College de France (p. 102) are brought into being as in-

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<sup>1</sup> *The Open Society and its Enemies*, Volume 2, p. 98 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969). Of course a number of different things may be meant by 'methodological individualism': I hope that it will become clear why I should focus on this doctrine of Popper's.

<sup>2</sup> The point is obvious, given that, as Searle once said, 'An intentional object is just an object like any other' (*Intentionality: An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind*, Cambridge University Press, 1982, p. 16). Another way to see the point is to consider that the belief which I and others can express with the words 'we shall build a bench' may be true; and that when it is true, there is a group of people, us, who will build a bench.

stitutional facts are created. Searle in fact devotes no attention to the status of those collectives whose existence would seem to be presupposed specifically to successful collective intending or thinking.

4. Why should it matter to Searle whether collective intentionality commits one to collectives? Well, there is a claim in ontology at the foundation of Searle's project—the claim that the world consists entirely of particles organized into systems (p. 6). But if Searle accepts that there are collectives, then it looks as though his construction of social reality does not rely, ontologically speaking, just on particles locally organized into systems.

There is also a fundamental metaphysical claim in Searle's book. This now is the claim that the intrinsic features of reality are either features independent of any mental states or are themselves mental states. In Searle's world view, mental states can happily be thought of as intrinsic features of reality, because they are higher-level features of brains, and brains are among the systems of particles. The assimilation of social reality to the basic ontology can then be achieved, because, on Searle's account of things, mental states can be efficacious in a way which is typical of higher-level system features: that is how status functions are imposed on physical things, creating institutional facts. But can the assimilation be achieved equally well, if there are on the scene (not only those higher level features which are the individual mental states of biological beings, but also) the higher level features whose presence, I have suggested, may require collectives? Was not the idea of imposing status functions meant to make such features intelligible, rather than to presuppose them?

Searle will say (I think) that it can be seen that there could be nothing problematic for him about the collectives imported by the phenomenon of collective intentionality, when it is recognized that such collectives are present even where there are no human institutions. He appeals to the 'selectional advantage of cooperative behaviour' (p. 38) in order to encourage the idea that the biological world is already a *social* world. Given this idea, when collectives with shared intentions are introduced, there is nothing already in the picture of the institutional sort—of the sort which his constructionist story is meant to supply.<sup>3</sup>

But this response may not allay all doubts. The doubts one has here need not relate to the presence of social facts in the ("merely") biological (non-cultural) world,<sup>4</sup> but may relate to how collective intentionality could get a

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<sup>3</sup> Although it would certainly have been a worse title (because it lacks any resonance, which the actual title has, with Searle's opposition to social constructionism), 'The Construction of *Institutional Reality*' gives a more accurate description of the contents of Searle's book in Searle's own terms.

<sup>4</sup> Some will think that Searle moves too quickly in taking the selectional advantage of cooperative behaviour automatically to lend biological credence to groups participating in such behaviour (and thus, in turn, in Searle's book, to collective intentionality among, say,

foothold there, given the reliance of Searle's fundamental metaphysical claim on the individualism of his conception of Intentionality.<sup>5</sup> Must not collectives come before all mental states, in order that they can be represented by individual brains, giving rise to "we"-intentions? Yet it seems as if collectives could not come before all mental states—not if the crucial element in their intentionality is a 'sense of doing ... something together', if "We consciousness" ... cannot be reduced to individual intentionality' (p. 24).

5. Searle's main concern in *The Construction of Social Reality* is to show us that no element of magic is involved in making institutional facts out of brute ones. He sees no problem where I do—no problem about placing the facts of collective intentionality among the brute facts. But if this placing can seem magical, then questions about the role of collective intentionality in language will come to be especially pressing. Language is the first institution, for Searle, a pre-condition of all the others; our use of language, rather than any distinctive form of thinking or of sociability, is what distinguishes us from non-human animals. What role does collective intentionality play in language, then?

In Searle's account of language and meaning, a layer of conventions is built upon intentions to represent. Collective intentionality is presumably at work here, explaining how conventions can take hold without language users' being required to have elaborate higher-order thoughts about one another's intentions. Again in Searle's account, there are communicative intentions. And such intentions surely play a part in the construction of institutional reality, since the success of declarative, status imposing speech acts is *communica-*

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hyenas). In order to be selected, it may be said, group behaviour requires not just advantageousness to members of participating groups, but enhanced prospects for the (genes of the) individuals that make them up, who may co-exist with non-co-operators. But Searle might have moved more slowly here (as is evident at his p. 144). And I mean to express no disagreement about the relations between the biological and the social except insofar as I disagree about intentionality.

<sup>5</sup> Searle himself seems to appreciate a doubt of this kind when he says that 'the only tricky feature of assimilating collective animal behaviour into a general theory of intentionality derives from the fact that in any complex form of behaviour ... each animal's individual contribution to the collective behaviour will have a different intentional content from the collective intentionality' (p. 38). Searle proceeds to consider *human* cases in which co-operative *institutional* behaviour requires different action from the several participants, and he then remarks that 'institutional facts, it will turn out, are a special sub-class of social facts'. But one feature of complex forms of behaviour that might have struck the reader as tricky now appear to have been overlooked. Someone who was prepared to credit each member of a pack of hyenas with an intention (expressible by English speakers, though not by hyenas) *Let us kill that lion* might want to know how the various individual intentions which lead to the lion's death are arrived at. It does not help to say (as Searle had said at p. 25) that the individual intentions are only a part of the collective intention; what is tricky then is understanding the genesis of the parts. (And whereas selectionist thinking could help in understanding co-operative animal behaviour, it does not seem to help at this point: cp. n. 4.)

tive success. Does collective intentionality then play any special part in communication?

Searle gave a wonderful account of an ‘some extraordinary properties of human communication’ nearly thirty years ago, in *Speech Acts*.<sup>6</sup> ‘On the hearer’s side, he said, ‘understanding the speaker’s utterance is closely connected with recognizing his intentions’; the close connection is such that a speaker’s being taken as doing what she intends is enough for her automatic illocutionary success. “We”-intentions *per se* don’t have a place here. But one naturally supposes that the way of thinking which goes with “we”-intentions has a place: How could there be the easy swapping of thoughts for which Searle’s account provides, unless speaker and hearer can each think of the other as “one of us”?; how, that is, unless there is what Searle terms “We consciousness”?

Searle once speculated that ‘perhaps only humans have the peculiar but also biologically based form of Intentionality we associate with language and meaning’ (*op. cit.* n. 2, p. 160). If the only peculiar form is the form which Searle now says we have in common with non-human animals—the collective intentionality of his new book—then Searle has now given up on that speculation. But if communicative intentions required their own form of intentionality, allowing for the meeting of minds that *Speech Acts* made so easy, then there would indeed be a form of Intentionality for us to ‘associate [specifically] with language and meaning’. For my own part, I find it an immensely attractive idea that “We consciousness” in Searle’s sense is involved at ground level in communication. But I fear that my finding it so goes hand in hand with my finding it implausible that collective intentionality could be just another higher order property of individual brains.<sup>7</sup>

6. The question I raised initially, about collectives, was posed as a question in ontology. But it is not that I am concerned (any more than I think that Searle is) about the answers to ontological questions as such. The point of raising this question has been to introduce one kind of a doubt about a piece

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<sup>6</sup> *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. 47.

<sup>7</sup> Suppose that it is plausible to associate a special form of Intentionality with the kind of communication that concerned Searle in the passage in *Speech Acts* from which I quoted. That form would enter at a very late stage if it were introduced into Searle’s overall story. The reason is that representing intentions, which do all the work in securing the derived intentionality of symbols, are prior to communicative intentions on Searle’s account (*op. cit.* n. 2, pp. 165–66). For my part, I have always found Searle’s belief in the priority of representing intentions strange. (I find it hard to imagine a being who has the purpose of attaching a representational significance to words it comes out with, but who lacks any communicative instinct.) Still, if one thought that there was a peculiarly human kind of collective intentionality, and that it had to enter at an early stage, then one would tell a very different story from Searle’s. Indeed someone who accepted these things would be unlikely to find it as obvious as Searle does that animals without language participate in Intentionality in the first place.

of his construction. Let me re-phrase the question: Are there groups whose identity conditions rely upon the particular way of thinking in which a person thinks of herself and some others when she uses the 'we' of Searle's 'we intend'? To answer *Yes* is no more to believe in a Spirit hovering over the world than to say that 'I' refers is to believe in Souls. But perhaps, nonetheless, to answer *Yes* would be to move a little towards a more Hegelian position with which Searle would be profoundly unsympathetic.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Thanks to Miranda Fricker for comments on a draft.