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The Joint Commitment Account:
Critical Essays on the Philosophy of Sociality of Margaret Gilbert

Edited by Gerhard Preyer and Georg Peter

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peter@protosociology.de

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Contents

Part III
Collective Emotions and Emotional Sharing

Part IV
Plural Subjects, "We", Coordination and Convention

Part V
Promising and Patriotism

Part VI
Replies and Bibliography

On Contemporary Sociology and Philosophy

Social Complexes and Aspects

Donald L. M. Baxter

Abstract

Is a social complex identical to many united people or is it a group entity in addition to the people? For specificity, I will assume that a social complex is a plural subject in Margaret Gilbert's sense. By appeal to my theory of Aspects, according to which there can be qualitative difference without numerical difference, I give an answer that is a middle way between metaphysical individualism and metaphysical holism. This answer will enable answers to two additional metaphysical questions: (i) how can two social complexes have all the same members and (ii) how can there be a social complex of social complexes?

Is a social complex identical to many united people or is it a group entity in addition to the people? I incline to the former because I assume with Ockham that it is ontologically preferable to avoid positing additional entities if possible.[1] For specificity, I will assume that a social complex is a plural subject in Margaret Gilbert's sense (1996, 348).[2] Two or more people form a plural subject when they are jointly committed to acting, believing, feeling, or such, as a body. Thus, I incline to the view that a social complex is identical to the many people united by a joint commitment.[3] Gilbert herself inclines the same way, I think. She writes,

> In some places I have written that a joint commitment is the commitment of 'two or more individuals considered as a unit or whole'. I do not mean to introduce the idea of a new kind of entity, a 'unit' or 'whole'. I could as well have

1 Wikipedia gives this citation for Ockham: 'Sentences of Peter Lombard' (*Quaestiones et decisiones in quattuor libros Sententiarum Petri Lombardi* (ed. Lugd., 1495), i, dist. 27, qu. 2, K), and suggests that the classic formulation of Okham's Razor is found in Johannes Poncius's commentary on John Duns Scotus's *Opus Oxoniense*, book III, dist. 34, q. 1. in John Duns Scotus *Opera Omnia*, vol.15, Ed. Luke Wadding, Louvain (1639), reprinted Paris: Vives, (1894) p.483a. My guess is that a violation of Ockham's principle is what Sheehy has in mind when he attributes "metaphysical spookiness" to views that "[s]ocial groups are entities over which we quantify in the set of our best descriptions and explanations of the social world" (2006, 74).

2 I leave for future work extending the account to the kind of groups emphasized by Epstein "that are grounded by facts unrelated to group members" (2015, 257).

3 Even if they are now "we*" in the special sense Gilbert elucidates (1989, 152, 167–203), "we*" is still plural.

> written 'a joint commitment is the commitment of two or more individuals considered together' which would not carry any such suggestion. (1997, 18)

However, a metaphysical problem pushes in the other direction. Two individuals united can believe something that neither individual believes, while yet the two individuals united are nothing in addition to the two individuals. How can that be? At first blush it seems that the two individuals united both do and do not believe the same thing, which is contradictory. To resolve the apparent contradiction, there is pressure to take there to be a group entity that has the belief in addition to the two individuals that lack it—an entity numerically distinct from each of them.[4]

To resolve the apparent contradiction without the group entity requires distinguishing the people insofar as they are jointly committed, from themselves insofar as they are individuals. That in turn requires distinguishing each person insofar as she is jointly committed along with the others, from herself insofar as she is an individual. I present and motivate my Theory of Aspects to argue that these differences do not require any additional numerically distinct entities.[5] I argue that there can be qualitative complexity without quantitative complexity—that is, qualitative self-differing. Some things have numerically identical but qualitatively differing "aspects." This view may seem to violate Leibniz's Law, but I argue that it does not. Leibniz's Law only concerns individuals, and perhaps pluralities, but is silent about their aspects. They are not in its domain of quantification.

Thus the two people insofar as they are jointly committed have the belief that the two people insofar as they are individuals lack, even though the two insofar as they are jointly committed are identical with the two insofar as they are individuals.

With the metaphysical problem resolved in this way, I conclude that a social complex is many people insofar as they united by a joint commitment, rather than an additional group entity. The many people insofar as they are united is just many aspects, each of one of the people. So the social complex is identical to the many united people.

Thus my view is a middle way between metaphysical holism and metaphysical individualism in the philosophy of social sciences (see Ruben 1982, 295). It

4 As another example of the phenomenon leading to the apparent contradiction, a social complex can be responsible for something that none of the people are responsible for (Gilbert 2006, 110; see also Björnsson 2011).

5 I'm grateful to Michael Lynch for suggesting that I apply my theory of aspects to discussions of social complexes. Note that this theory has nothing to do with aspect in the lexical sense in which, for instance, stative and non-stative verbs are distinguished.

enables the several people insofar as they are the social complex to genuinely differ from the several people insofar as they are individuals, as in holism. But it posits no entities numerically distinct from the individual people, as in individualism.

This solution will enable answers to two additional metaphysical questions: First, how can two social complexes have all the same members?[6] Second, how can there be a social complex of social complexes?[7] I treat these questions in an addendum. Different social complexes with the same members will be several people insofar as they are united by one joint commitment, and those same people insofar as they are united by another. A social complex of social complexes will be several people insofar as they are united by a joint commitment and several other people insofar as they are united by another joint commitment, insofar as those first and those second are united by yet another joint commitment.

I.

This solution to the metaphysical problem requires careful attention to what Gilbert should be interpreted as meaning by the phrase "as a body" when she talks of plural subjects being jointly committed to believing, etc. as a body. I will not pretend to try to capture what she actually intends.[8] I will propose that

(1) Two persons are jointly committed to believing some proposition as a body.

should be interpreted as

(2) Two persons *insofar as they are a body* are jointly committed to believing that proposition.

Sentence (2) contrasts with (though does not conflict with)

6 See Gilbert 1989, 220–21, and Gilbert 1996, 199, and Epstein 2015, 139.

7 I'm grateful to Kit Fine for asking whether the theory can account for groups of groups at the Boston Social Ontology Conference, 2018.

8 I'm grateful to Margaret Gilbert for comments on this section. To explicate acting as a body, she sometimes talks of emulating a single body that acts (2011, 16) or constituting a single body that acts (2006, 100) and I think the best way to understand these explanations is the way I suggest in the text.

(3) Two persons *insofar as they are individual persons* are *not* jointly committed to believing that proposition.

I will propose secondly that to be a body in Gilbert's sense is to be two or more persons relevantly united, which is to be two or more persons jointly committed. Thus, we get

(2') Two persons *insofar as they are jointly committed* are jointly committed to believing the proposition.

in contrast to (but not in conflict with)

(3') Two persons *insofar as they are individual persons* are *not* jointly committed to believing the proposition.

The root of this contrast between the persons and themselves is a contrast in each person. We can distinguish each person insofar as she is party to the joint commitment from herself insofar as she is not party to it. Two persons insofar as they are jointly committed are the one insofar as she is party to a joint commitment with the other, plus the other insofar as she is party to a joint commitment with the first.

That the relevant sort of unitedness is joint commitment, and that there is a distinction to be made between an individual insofar as he is jointly committed with others, on the one hand, and himself insofar as he is an individual, on the other, are both found in Gilbert. Given Gilbert's characterization of a plural subject, the root concept is being committed jointly: i.e., being committed jointly to act, believe, etc. Gilbert's explanation distinguishes what people are jointly committed to from what they are individually committed to (1996, 349). These joint commitments involve obligations and entitlements that one has *qua* jointly committed person that one does not have *qua* individual (1996, 186).[9] That is, there are obligations one has *qua* among those jointly committed that one does not have *qua* individual. For instance, one can be obligated, *qua* among those jointly committed, not to express a view in variance with the jointly held view. One who does not keep to this obligation may well offend against the others *qua* jointly committed, even any others who might agree with the offending view (1996, 343). Such person would be offended against

9 See Gilbert 2011, 11. See also Raimo Tuomela 2012, 405: "A mental state had as a private person (thus individualistically) is in the I-mode, while a mental state had qua member of a social we-group is in the we-mode."

qua jointly committed, even if he is not offended against *qua* individual and even is secretly glad *qua* individual.

So for example, when two people begin dancing a waltz together, each "intentionally acts in his/her capacity as a constituent of a plural subject with a certain goal, a subject whose other constituent is the other person in question" (1989, 167). The goal is to dance a waltz. Their common knowledge of their mutual, open, and express readiness to act on this goal makes them a plural subject and creates rights and obligations (2006, 100–101). Each person is obligated not simply to walk away, for instance, and the other has a right against such behavior. Each intentionally acts *qua* jointly committed to dancing together, and likewise has the obligations and rights *qua* jointly committed. Further, these (directed) obligations are obligations to the other *qua* jointly committed, and the rights are held against each *qua* jointly committed.

Speaking out against a war that the group is deciding to wage makes clear the contrast between what is true of a person *qua* individual and what is true of a person *qua* jointly committed. As Gilbert writes,

> We have at our disposal avowals of the following form: "Personally, I disapprove of our going to war" or "In my personal opinion, our going to war is a bad thing." Avowals of this sort, in particular, can be argued not to run counter to the joint commitment I am party to. The qualifiers "Personally," "In my personal opinion," and the like appear to put the avowal in a space not covered by that commitment: my personal space, so to speak. I am expressly not speaking qua group member here, but in my own voice. (1996, 380)

Further, the contrast in the individual can be reflected in the group. So for example if an assembly protests a war that their country is embarking on, then that would indicate that "in their capacity as members of this assembly, as opposed to their capacity as members of the society as a whole, or, indeed, their personal capacity, these people oppose the war" (1996, 381).

So, someone *qua* jointly committed can differ from himself *qua* individual in his obligations, reactions, etc. This raises the metaphysical question, what manner of entity is someone *qua* jointly committed? One way to answer the question would be to posit numerically distinct "qua-objects," as Kit Fine (1982) has called them. However, that move would be against the spirit of this inquiry, which is trying to introduce no entities numerically distinct from the people involved in the joint commitments. The question, then, is how can something insofar as it is one way differ from itself insofar as it is another way without there being more than one entity? How can something differ from itself (or some things differ from themselves)? A way to make sense of this "self-differing" is my theory of aspects. I propose to introduce and de-

fend that theory. After that, I will apply it to solve the problem with social complexes.

II.

I will argue that some things have numerically identical but qualitatively differing "aspects." This section will summarize the extended argument in my "Self-Differing, Aspects, and Leibniz's Law" (Baxter 2018).

To begin, let me stipulate that self-differing, if such there be, is best expressed with phrases involving what I will call "Qualifiers," such as 'insofar as' and 'in some respect.'[10] In such cases these phrases are what I will call "Nominal Qualifiers," that is, are parts of noun phrases, such as 'Hume as philosopher.' I will assume that they are semantically significant. This construction will allow contradictories to be predicated of the same thing in a way that Leibniz's Law is silent about. For instance 'Hume as an agent is satisfied on this point, but Hume as a philosopher is not.'[11] The negation in 'Hume as a philosopher is not satisfied', with its restricted scope, can be thought of as an internal negation, as opposed to an external negation such as 'It is not the case that Hume as philosopher is satisfied.' In the former the nominal qualifier is *not* in the scope of the negation, and in the latter it is. I will not argue that in ordinary language these phrases work this way, though I think they often do. I am just stipulating how I am going to use vocabulary.

Consider cases in which someone is torn about what to do or how to feel. A dramatic case is that of Euridepes' Medea who struggles with herself whether to kill her children to punish their father Jason who has abandoned her.

> Ah, Ah! Why do you gaze at me with your eyes, children? Why do you smile your last smile? Oh, what shall I do? My courage has gone, women now that I've seen the shining eyes of the children. I couldn't do it. Goodbye to my former plans! I'll take my children from this land. Why should I, in harming them to give their father pain, make myself suffer twice as much? I cannot. Goodbye plans!
> But what is happening to me? Do I want to make myself ridiculous, letting my enemies go unpunished? I must go through with this. What a coward I am—even to admit soft words into my mind! … I shall not weaken my hand. Ah, Ah! Don't, my heart, don't you do this! Leave them alone, wretched heart, spare the children! Living there with me they will give you joy.

10 I originally got the term from Bäck 1982.

11 See Hume 2000, section 4, paragraph 21.

> By the avenging furies down in Hades, I swear I'll never leave these children for my enemies to insult and torture! They must certainly die; and since they must, then I who gave birth to them shall kill them.[12]

Insofar as Medea is enraged at the father, she wants to kill the children. Insofar as she loves them, she has no desire to kill them. She is torn. She is in conflict with herself. She differs from herself. Medea's struggle is between two aspects of her: Medea insofar as she is enraged at Jason *versus* Medea insofar as she loves her children.

The alternating speeches should not mislead us into thinking that Medea is whole-heartedly one way then whole-heartedly the other. When we are torn, one side may predominate temporarily but the other side does not vanish.

Such struggles with ourselves are all too common, even if less fevered than Medea's. Who has not been moved opposite ways by love and anger in a custody dispute, or in child-rearing, or in a close relationship? Self-differing is something we all experience.

But is this literal self-differing? Many will say that we merely have opposing desires—ones that cannot both be satisfied. The conflict is between them, not between one and oneself. However, this way to make theoretical sense of the self-differing is not true to the phenomenon.

Desires are not like quarrelsome children in being opponents one is merely related to. To have internal conflict like Medea's is like trying to move in opposite directions. Or it is "to take something to oneself and to cast it off" as Plato puts it. This internal opposition indicates a complexity in oneself, as argued in the *Republic*.[13] Plato's view has been justly influential in pointing out this complexity downplayed by the objection. Nonetheless, it seems to me to be going too far to conclude, as Plato seems to, that internal opposition shows the soul to have numerically distinct parts. That conclusion neglects the unitariness of the soul. It is one oneself who tries to move in opposite directions.

Further, the relevant conflict here is not just desiring to do incompatible things. The conflict is that one has a desire and lacks it. Though Medea insofar as she is enraged at Jason has a desire to kill her children, Medea insofar as she loves her children lacks all desire to do so. It is not that Medea insofar as she loves her children is moved to oppose another desire she has. Insofar as she loves her children she is not moved by the murderous desire at all.

Saying that there is self-differing sounds contradictory. But the use of nominal qualifiers such as 'insofar as' removes explicit contradiction. I am not saying that Medea does and does not want to spare her children. Nor am I saying that

12 Excerpted and translated in Annas 2001, 111–12.

13 Plato 1974, 435c–441c, especially 437b.

Medea in one respect wants to spare her children and in no respect wants to spare her children. Either of those would be contradictory. I am saying that Medea insofar as she loves her children wants to spare them, but Medea insofar as she is enraged at their father does not want to spare them. The negation is internal, that is, has short-scope relative to the nominal qualifier and so there is no contradiction.

But aren't I violating Leibniz's Law—the principle that for any *x* and *y*, if they are numerically identical then all the same things are true of them? After all, I am suggesting that the nominally qualified phrases refer to aspects, where aspects qualitatively differ but are numerically identical.

However, consider the domain of quantification for Leibniz's Law. It is a principle concerning single things. The quantifier is a singular quantifier. Does it hold of pluralities, that is, what you would quantify over with a plural quantifier? Maybe, but the original principle is silent about that. I suggest that the original principle is silent about aspects as well. And the non-contradictory internal negation in claims about self-differing suggests that Leibniz's Law does not apply to aspects.

I have been calling this discernibility of identicals, "self-differing." But it is more accurately the qualitative differing of something in one respect from itself in another, i.e. the qualitative differing of numerically identical aspects.

III.

I've argued that something in one respect can differ qualitatively from itself in another respect, that is, something can have differing aspects. Given this result, there is no need to posit that a plural subject is an additional thing. To see why, let me review the reason why a plural subject appears to be an additional thing, then why that appearance can be rejected.

It is possible that a plural subject believe something that none of its members believe. Gilbert gives the example of a poetry group discussing the last line of Philip Larkin's "Churchgoing." Suppose everyone in the group has acceded for various reasons to one forceful person's insistence that the last line is moving, even though personally each regards it as bathetic or jarring. Suppose that forceful person changes her mind or was not sincere. Nonetheless, the opinion that the last line is moving carried the day and is the belief of the poetry group. The result would be that the plural subject believes something that none of its members believes (1996, 201–202).

Apparently, then, there is a believer that the last line of the poem is moving, even though none of the people believe that. So there is something in addition to the people. The additional being is a social complex. So apparently a social complex is something in addition to the people that make it up.

However, with the theory of Aspects, this reason can be removed. Take the example of the poem. There is a believer that the last line of the poem is moving, even though none of the people believe that. The believer is a social complex. It does not follow, however, that there is something in addition to the people. The believer is the people insofar as they are jointly committed to enjoy and evaluate poems. That is to say, the people insofar as they are jointly committed to enjoy and evaluate poems believe that the last line of the Larkin poem is moving. However, the people insofar as they are individuals do not so believe. With an appeal to aspects, there can be a difference without more entities. For there to be this difference between the people in one respect and themselves in another, there has to be a difference in each between the person insofar as s/he is jointly committed with the rest and him or herself insofar as s/he is an individual. Such difference between an individual in one respect and him or herself in another, without any multiplication of entities, is precisely what the theory of Aspects is designed to capture. So given that theory, a social complex is many united individual persons insofar as they are united and not an additional entity.

One might protest that the theory certainly posits additional entities. There is the aspect of the many individuals—them insofar as they are in a joint commitment. Further an aspect of many individuals is many aspects one of each individual. Aren't all these aspects additional entities?

Strictly speaking, no, they are not additional entities. Each aspect is identical with one of the individuals. There are no additional entities numerically distinct from the several individuals.

IV.

The main point has been made. This addendum will be more complicated and can easily be passed over.

On the account here a social complex is the individuals that are its members insofar as they are in a joint commitment. An aspect of many individuals is many aspects, each of one of the individuals and each from a different individual. That is, the social complex is member 1 insofar as he is jointly commit-

ted with the others and member 2 insofar as she is jointly committed with the others, and so on.[14] In other words, the social complex is these many aspects. An individual is a member of the social complex just in case it has one of these aspects. Since each aspect is numerically identical with a member, the social complex is nothing numerically distinct from the members.

This account explains how two differing social complexes can be made up of all the same individuals. One social complex is the individuals insofar as they are in one joint commitment, and the other social complex is the individuals insofar as they are in another joint commitment. Thus the social complexes, though they differ qualitatively, are two only speaking loosely. Each of the social complexes is numerically identical with all the same individuals. That the numerically identical can qualitatively differ is the essence of the theory of Aspects.

This account also allows an account of a social complex of social complexes by appeal to sub-aspects, that is, by appeal to aspects of aspects. A social complex of social complexes would be many social complexes insofar as they are in a joint commitment. Thus, a social complex of social complexes would be many aspects, one of each of the groups. An aspect of a social complex is many aspects, each of one of the individuals. So a social complex of social complexes would be many aspects, each of which is of an aspect of one of the individuals. That is, a social complex of social complexes is many sub-aspects of the individuals.

Take for example a league of sports teams. Let's say that a team is some players insofar as they are jointly committed to winning games, and a league is several teams insofar as they are jointly committed to participate in a championship game. To make it easy, let's suppose there are two teams of two players each: the Letters and Numerals. The Letters are A insofar as he is jointly committed with B to winning games and B insofar as he is jointly committed with A to winning games. The Numerals are 1 insofar as she is jointly committed with 2 to winning games and 2 insofar as she is jointly committed with 1 to winning games. The League is the Letters insofar as they are jointly committed with the Numerals to participating in a championship game and the Numerals insofar as they are jointly committed to participating in a championship game.

Thus the League is A insofar as he is jointly committed with B to winning

14 Note that the 'and's here are being used as nominal conjunctions to compose a plural term and are not being used as sentence connectives. When I say that a social complex is an aspect of member 1 and an aspect of member 2, and so on, I mean the 'is' literally as a plural identity. 'Social complex' is grammatically singular but refers to several aspects taken together, each of a distinct individual.

games, insofar as he in his joint commitment with B is jointly committed with the Numerals to participate in a championship game; and B insofar as he is jointly committed with A to winning games, insofar as he in his joint commitment with A is jointly committed with the Numerals to participate in a championship game; and 1 insofar as she is jointly committed with 2 to winning games, insofar as she in her joint commitment with 2 is jointly committed with the Letters to participate in a championship game; and 2 insofar as she is jointly committed with 1 to winning games, insofar as she in her joint commitment with 1 is jointly committed with the Letters to participate in a championship game.

To avoid further taxing the patience of the reader, I will not replace all occurrences of team names in the above paragraph with references to aspects of individuals but will only do so for the first occurrence. The League is A insofar as he is jointly committed with B to winning games, insofar as he in his joint commitment with B is jointly committed with 1 insofar as she is jointly committed with 2 to winning games and 2 insofar as she is jointly committed with 1 to winning games, to participate in a championship game; etc.

Thus, in addition to helping explain how a social complex can have a belief that none of its members have, the theory of Aspects can help explain how it could be that differing social complexes have all the same members and how it could be that there are social complexes of social complexes. No numerically additional group entities are required. [15]

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Contributors

Donald L. M. Baxter, Professor of Philosophy, Department of Philosophy, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT, United States of America.

Eliezer Ben-Rafael, Professor Emeritus, Department of Sociology. Tel-Aviv University, Tel Aviv, Israel.

Alban Bouvier, Institute Jean Nicod, Ecole Normale Supérieure, Paris cedex, France.

Antonella Carassa, Professor, Faculty of Communication Science, University Lugano, Lugano, Switzerland.

Marco Colombetti, Professor, Department of Electronics, Information, and Bioengineering, Politecnico di Milano, Milano, Italy.

Margaret Gilbert, Melden Chair in Moral Philosophy and Distinguished Professor of Philosophy, University of California, Irvine, United States of America.

Rebecca Gutwald, Dr., Promotionskolleg, Hochschule für Philosophie, München, Germany.

Jeffrey Helmreich, Assistant Professor of Philosophy and Law Director, Center for Legal Philosophy, University of California, Irvine, CA, United States of America.

Marija Jankovic, Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy, Davidson College, Davidson, North Carolina, United States of America.

Felipe León, Dr. (Postdoc), Centre for Subjectivity Research – Department of Media, Cognition and Communication, University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark.

Ludger Jansen, PD Dr., Institute of Philosophy, Rostock University, Rostock, Germany.

Georg Peter Dr., ProtoSociology, Institute of Sociology, Goethe University – Campus West, Theodor W. Adorno Platz 6, Frankfurt am Main, Germany.

Gerhard Preyer, Professor of Sociology, Institute of Sociology, Goethe University – Campus West, Theodor W. Adorno Platz 6, Frankfurt am Main, Germany.

Maura Priest, Assistant Professor of Philosophy, Arizona State University, Tempe, United States of America.

Mikko Salmela, Senior Researcher, Adjunct Professor, Center for Philosophy of Social Sciences (TINT), Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland.

Frederick F. Schmitt, Department of Philosophy, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana, United States of America.

Thomas Smith Dr., Lecturer in Philosophy and Director of Postgraduate Taught Programmes in Philosophy, Department of Philosophy, School of Social Sciences, Humanities Bridgeford Street, Room 2.41, The University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester, Great Britain.

Joona Taipale, Senior Lecture, Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy, University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä, Finland.

Dan Zahavi, Professor of Philosophy, Dr. phil. PhD, Director of Center for Subjectivity Research (CFS), University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark.

Niina Zuber, Lehrstuhl für Philosophie und politische Theorie, Ludwig-Maximilian-Universität München, Germany.

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Margaret Gilbert, Storrs (USA)

The journal Protosociology has become an important forum for discussion in the philosophy of social science and of sociality and, more broadly, for theoretical discussion in social science. It is especially interesting and important that such new fields as social metaphysics and social epistemology as well as research related to collective intentionality and its applications have acquired a prominent place in the agenda of Protosociology.

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