

One's a Crowd? On Greenwood's Delimitation of the Social

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Abstract

In an effort to carve a distinct place for social facts without lapsing into a holistic ontology, John Greenwood has sought to define social phenomena solely in terms of the attitudes held by the actor(s) in question. I argue that his proposal allows for the possibility of a “lone collectivity” that is (1) unpalatable in its own right and (2) incompatible with the claim that sociology is autonomous from psychology. As such, I conclude that the relevant beliefs need to be held by more than one person.

Keywords

social psychology, ontology, individualism, game theory, Durkheim, Gilbert, sociology

Conventional wisdom has it that one is just plain being alone, two is company, and three is a crowd. John Greenwood, however, has advanced philosophical considerations that call into question this seemingly obvious folk tenet. Greenwood seeks to articulate “a tentative answer to a question historically associated with [Émile] Durkheim, namely, what is, or are, the ‘distinctive characteristic(s)’ of social phenomena, or ‘social facts?’” (2003, 93).

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Whereas Durkheim ([1895] 1990, 50-59) originally argued for the reality of social facts mainly by highlighting their causal efficacy and independence from any given individual's will, Greenwood builds on the work of Margaret Gilbert (1992) and suggests that "a belief is a social belief if and only if it is held by an individual because and on condition that other members of a social group are represented as holding that (or another) belief" (Greenwood 2003, 95; see also his 1989). Although Greenwood praises Durkheim for insisting that "many social forms of cognition, emotion and behavior . . . are not social because they are imitated. Rather, they are imitated because they are social" (Greenwood 2003, 98), he is palpably uncomfortable with the circularity at hand. In Greenwood's estimate, "one virtue of Gilbert's work is that it gives such notions analytic respectability" (1991, 223).

What I want to do in this article is unpack an unforeseen ramification of Greenwood's proposal. I try to show that, without a further requirement that the relevant belief(s) be held by more than one individual, Greenwood's criterion opens up counterintuitive possibilities about "lone collectivity" most would deem unacceptable. Accordingly, I conclude that Greenwood cannot hold fast to his belief-based account without relinquishing the autonomy of sociology from (cognitive) psychology and that, as a result, a choice in commitments is called for.

Delimiting the Social

The idea of the "social" is typically defined in contradistinction with the "natural." It may therefore appear as something of an oddity that the philosophical underpinnings of sociology as a discipline originally consisted in highlighting how conventional mores can impinge on individuals with the same (mind-independent) force as brute causal events. Durkheim wrote, "When I perform my duties as a brother, a husband or a citizen and carry out the commitments I have entered into, I fulfil obligations which are defined in law and custom *and which are external to myself and my actions*" ([1895] 1990, 50; emphasis added). Alluding to this feature is both conducive and nonconductive to securing a robust foundation for sociology. It is conducive in that it shows social facts to have a hardcore reality that can be readily experienced by subjects, much in the same manner that the natural sciences expose observers and/or instruments to external happenings to verify that their theories indeed bear on the world. Durkheim rightly observes, "If I attempt to violate the rules of law [these coercive powers] react against me so as to forestall my action" ([1895] 1990, 51). In this sense, someone who doubts the causal efficacy of society as an entity can test its existence by challenging its norms and seeing what ensues.

This would seem to speak in favor of the distinct ontological status of social facts. Underscoring this kinship, however, effectively undermines the idea that such facts are distinct from natural ones. Consider a sheriff's hand as it imposes the law on a criminal. Why should this forceful intervention from without the purview of one's agentic control be regarded as any different from, say, a rolling stone falling on one? After all, the vectors involved in both cases are on a par, *qua* forces with direction. What, then, could license the philosophical claim that physics is somehow ill-equipped to study one of them? The more we play up the causal efficacy of social facts, the more we invite the reductionist retort that they can and ought to be assimilated to the remainder of the more straightforward natural world. Such a perspective hardly motivates the need for a distinct methodology. In a sense, the insistence on factuality succeeds in showing that social facts deserve attention—but not that social facts deserve attention *in their own right*.

This leads Greenwood to conclude that “externality and causal influence . . . are not properties that distinguish social phenomena from non-social phenomena,” since these traits are shared by “Golgi bodies, hydrochloric acids, ball bearings, and electromagnetic fields” (2003, 94). Unlike Durkheim, who had hoped that highlighting a kinship with efficient causation would result in a transfer of ontological legitimacy to social phenomena, Greenwood glosses this affinity as a conflation that obscures more than it reveals. From an exegetic standpoint, Greenwood (2004, 74-76) thinks that, despite his rhetoric to the contrary, Durkheim was not really committed to the autonomy of sociology with respect to psychology (I do not engage with this heterodox reading). Distancing himself from a holistic ontology that would countenance “supra-individuals ‘over and above’ the individuals who compose them,” Greenwood (2003, 95) thus turns to the less contentious notion of *belief* to articulate a more focused definition of the social.

Following Margaret Gilbert (1992), Greenwood (1989; 2003) suggests that it is both necessary and sufficient that a belief be regarded by its holder (rightly or wrongly) as shared by other members of some group to count as a *social* belief. This introduces a new level of sophistication in the categorization of social kinds. Specifically, it now requires that a researcher inquire into the metacognitive states of the individuals composing a given group. Not only must an agent have a certain belief, but she must also have at least one further belief about that belief. It is at this second-order level, Greenwood argues, that we encounter the essential “mark” of the social. In the final analysis, then, the ontological site of sociality is the (individual) psyche, thus sparing Greenwood from holism.

Unlike Gilbert and other theorists of joint action, Greenwood is not trying to provide an explanation of coordinated behavior within groups. While

Greenwood's account can certainly be extended to include some cooperative (as well as some competitive) behavior, this is not the primary focus of his account, which is to explicate the social orientation of many beliefs, attitudes, and behavior to the represented beliefs, attitudes, and behavior of members of social groups. For Greenwood, the critical distinction is between beliefs or attitudes held *socially*—beliefs or attitudes held because and on condition that members of social groups are represented as holding these beliefs or attitudes—and beliefs or attitudes held *individually*, for reasons or causes independent of whether any members of social groups are represented as holding these beliefs or attitudes. Thus, using Greenwood's example, a Catholic's belief that abortion is wrong is a social belief if it is held because and on condition that other Catholics are represented as holding this belief. In contrast, a Catholic's belief that abortion is wrong is an individual belief if it is held for reasons or causes independent of whether any other Catholics or members of any other group are represented as holding this belief (if, for example, the individual has accepted rational arguments or evidence for this belief or has unthinkingly acquired it as a child). Absent this orientation toward others, Greenwood contends that the beliefs or attitudes shared by a population of individuals (or even by a social group) are not social beliefs.

An Unacceptable Consequence

A couple of methodological consequences follow from Greenwood's criterion—some good, some not so good. First, social groups are not to be carved by discerning patterns that emerge from aggregate behavior (e.g., Pettit 2009). Rather, the practice of reason giving becomes paramount: for one to properly delimit the social, there has to be a working assumption that, in principle, a person could adduce some rationale for doing/thinking what she does/think. Minimally, the narrative envisaged must be intelligible enough to convey something along the lines that "I do/think this *because they* do/think it *too*"—the specific placeholders being filled according to circumstance. As Greenwood remarks, this perspective has the benefit of disburdening one from commitment to any substantive content(s): "On this account, social beliefs and attitudes are not restricted in any way by their contents or objects: they can have any content whatsoever, so long as the belief or attitude is held socially" (2003, 96-97). Occult posits are also nicely avoided, being supplanted by a far less controversial appeal to individual mental states, which now assume the entire explanatory burden. In a sense, the actors alone become the guarantors of the social realm, tracing its outline on account of their second-order beliefs and attitudes.

From an epistemological standpoint, this raises the question of how best to individuate the relevant second-order mental states. Is it simply a matter of recording prompted introspective reports, or should we introduce different (say, behavioral) criteria capable of rendering a verdict even where no such reports are available? If we adopt the latter approach and if, moreover, introspective narratives are available, how are we to adjudicate conflicting evidence (Føllesdal 1982, 310)? The tension between first- and third-person perspectives is of course not unique to the philosophy of the social sciences, and one should not expect a satisfactory account to solve the more persistent problems of Western epistemology. Still, there is a long-standing tradition of antipsychologism in sociology and philosophy that gives short shrift to data acquired by means of first-person introspection. Kirk Ludwig, for example, has recently argued that a satisfactory account of “joint intentional action does not require any special attention to mutual beliefs, or any robust belief requirement at all” (2007, 387). Despite sharing Ludwig’s general distrust of holistic explanations, Greenwood advocates the exact opposite. Indeed, Greenwood is committed to defining a set of specific criteria that a social agent’s beliefs must meet. Hence, while Ludwig is prompted by the semantics of action sentences to maintain that “it is not required that members of a group even believe that others will play their parts in a joint action” (387), Greenwood thinks that belief in joint action has an important—indeed *defining*—role to play in delimiting the social. The question becomes, then, whether Greenwood’s reliance on personal beliefs to define sociality compels him to mend this rift between sociology and psychology.

In a way, a shift away from purely behavioral/functional description is already present in Greenwood’s choice of terminology, insofar as the notion of “belief” is beholden to a cognitivist paradigm (Greenwood 1999). The centrality of the first-person vantage in Greenwood’s definition of the social becomes manifest when we consider his controversial contention that, despite involving a victim, an ordinary act of rape does *not* count as social, since the rapist presumably does not engage in that action “because and on condition that other members of a social group are represented as engaging in such behaviors in similar circumstances” (2003, 98-99). If, however, the attitude and motive of the actor suddenly change, then so does the status of the act. Pursuant with this idea, Greenwood suggests that “an interpersonal act of aggression or rape is also a social behavior when it is an instance of ‘gang warfare’ or ‘gang rape’” (99).

Yet, if the true determinant of the event’s classification as “social” is a belief and the collective aspect of gang rape is merely an incidental outgrowth of this psychological state, then the act of a rapist who would confess that he

acted the way he did because he was once identified as a rapist in a psychiatric test (e.g., “That’s what we rapists do”) would suddenly qualify as “social” in the sense promoted by Greenwood—and this, *without there being any actual confederates* (at the scene or anywhere else on the planet). I think this is unacceptable/incoherent.

Greenwood writes that “social forms of cognition, emotion, and behavior do not entail the existence of social groups, although as a matter of fact they are generally causally tied to them” (2003, 102). I admit that I have a hard time making sense of this claim. If “as a matter of fact” siblings are causally tied to one another, does not the existence of one “entail” the existence of the other? Greenwood of course qualifies the causal link by saying that social forms of cognition are “generally” tied to the actual existence of social groups. I am concerned with whether the cases that escape this supposed trend make any sense.

Since Greenwood maintains that beliefs, attitudes, and actions can be engaged in socially as well as individually (as defined above), he believes that social psychology forms an integral component of both psychology and sociology and indeed serves as an essential bridge between psychology and sociology (Greenwood 2004). So his distinction between socially versus individually engaged beliefs and attitudes is orthogonal to the distinction between doing things in the absence or presence of other persons (essentially the difference between social psychology and “crowd psychology”). If we construe the presence of persons in a narrow way as immediate proximity, I do not dispute that they can be dispensed with. After all, it is untendentious that social beliefs can exist without fellow believers literally surrounding one (e.g., solitary genuflection in an empty place of worship). My concern is whether Greenwood’s account can survive if, contrary to the “general” tendency, no causal ties whatsoever obtain such that no fellow believer was *ever* present elsewhere. It seems to me that, under such circumstances, it would be confused to label the relevant belief “social.” Hence, I argue that causal ties between agents do not “generally” accompany social beliefs; rather, they *must* accompany such beliefs.

Of course, the transitive chain causally uniting fellow believers does not have to be as blunt as standing in the very room. The dominoes can trace a complex path, and one could even relax the causal requirement so that discourse can act as an efficacious conveyor. Going back to the previous example, one could argue, following Popper (1957, 14-16) and Hacking (1986), that a person simply would never entertain a thought to the effect that he is “a rapist” without the concept being minimally coined and/or held by someone *else* at some time. The very self-identification linking an individual to an

explicit personality type seems to ensure the existence of other like-minded people, since “human beings are agents who act according to descriptions and therefore their courses of action and nature depend on the available descriptions” (Martínez 2009, 217). I think this is basically right. If so, then the intersubjective provenance of the relevant concepts/categorizations would need to be written into the theory. As things stand, no such story is offered by Greenwood (despite the fact that his philosophy may well have the resources to say something informative in this regard; see Greenwood 1994, 39-40). Hence, his extant account of the social allows for the troublesome possibility of “lone gang rape” I have just sketched.

One could reply on Greenwood’s behalf that the possibility that some individuals can orient their beliefs to the *represented* beliefs and behavior of members of a social group without there being any members of that group is a simple consequence of the fact that an individual can misrepresent the beliefs that a population shares. No doubt this is rare, but there would seem to be real-life examples, which Greenwood cites: the Bennington students who oriented their attitudes to what they falsely believed were those of the (very secretive) elite group at the college and rookie members of combat groups who oriented their attitudes to what they falsely believed were the macho attitudes of the members of elite combat groups. However, none of these cases gainsay my basic criticism, insofar as the use of the plural and the existence of the poorly emulated targets (at some place, at some time) shows that, while students and soldiers can err in their attempt to conform to their peers, such errors are parasitic on the factual existence of other like-minded persons (otherwise, their conduct would not count as erroneous). If Greenwood’s contribution consists merely in factoring the fallibility of mind reading into the mix, then it borders on the trivial and can be appropriated by any party in the holism/individualism debate.

On the Need for Real Others

Social facts are seemingly paradoxical in being at once real yet dependent on human minds for their very existence (Jarvie 1972, 152-154; Searle 1997). Greenwood’s criterion adds an interesting twist to this (already puzzling) situation, since on his view it is ultimately the manner in which one holds a belief that determines whether the belief in question qualifies as social. Now, Greenwood recognizes that “these characterizations might appear to be objectionably circular, since social forms of cognition, emotion and behavior are characterized by reference to social groups, and social groups are themselves characterized in terms of shared social forms of cognition, emotion and

behavior” (2003, 101). In an effort to disentangle himself from this accusation, Greenwood adopts a deflationary stance and quotes Georg Simmel to the effect that “the consciousness of constituting with the others a unity is actually all there is to that unity” (1959, 338; see Guala 2010).

This appeal misses the mark, though. It is invoked to show that bootstrapping is all there is to social phenomena, such that identifying the presence of (on this view, benign) circular reasoning cannot be held as a reproach against such phenomena. Fair enough. But to the extent that belief in unity indeed constitutes unity, Greenwood is no longer entitled to hold that “it is strictly immaterial whether members of the represented population do in fact hold or engage in the relevant form of cognition, emotion or behavior” (2003, 102). There is no doubt that a given member of a social group can severely misrepresent the actual reasons underwriting the cohesion of that group. An individual may think, for example, that others are like her in coming for the coffee and doughnuts, when in fact they have come to mourn the deceased. Given this discrepancy in the beliefs held, are they a group of moochers—or mourners? A tenable account of the social must attend to this nontrivial misalignment in commitments, since it has the power to cash out in concrete situations. If the moocher’s motivations were somehow revealed at the funeral, who would be ousted as inappropriate? One may stand by one’s convictions in the face of adversity and dissent. However, on pain of self-contradiction, an exposed pariah cannot declare to all in attendance that it is *they* who are wrong in their motives whilst holding fast to her erstwhile belief that she is engaging in a collective activity.

Since reason holding is made explicit in reason giving (Brandom 1998), I argue that public disclosure of one’s second-order beliefs for doing such and such must survive some sort of extrapersonal approval or recognition for a social belief to truly deserve the label. Simmel’s line about the constitution of unity might thus be more profitably read in a “contractualist” key. Not incidentally, Gilbert’s nonholistic construal of the social, which Greenwood draws much inspiration and theoretical guidance from, originally sprang from a study of David Lewis’s (1969) work on *convention*, which Lewis conceived as “practices established within coordination problem situations” (Gilbert 1981, 41).

Consider the prisoner’s dilemma. In this scenario, the game-theoretic reasoning of a given player is typically expressed by a belief that “I will do this *because she* will do this”—the symmetry in the players’ situations binding their beliefs like interlocking rings. Margaret Gilbert exploited this structure precisely because it does not require one to countenance some third supraindividual agency. Such a scenario nevertheless requires that, at minimum, “two

or more agents are involved” (Gilbert 1990, 1), even if one of the players is being fed misinformation by another party. A similar clause does not figure anywhere in Greenwood’s proposal. Accordingly, his delimitation of the social allows for the whole dynamic to unfold where only a single agent is involved. Short of introducing appropriate qualifications, I submit that this is an unacceptable consequence. Referentially opaque belief in joint action (i.e., the kind one is never wrong about) is too permissive and must be indexed to some *factual* measure of joint action, on pain of letting infallible first-person mental states possibly mark out noncollective “collective” phenomena.

With an additional coordination or “triangulation” (Davidson 2001) criterion in place, if at least one other person comes to the funeral for coffee and doughnuts, they will form a deviant social group—but a *social* group nonetheless (the case of religious genuflection happens to meet this demand). If, however, we do not require at least one other person to partake in the relevant belief(s), we will be methodologically bound to study whatever delusions Robinson Crusoe might entertain, simply on account of his mistaken surmise that that would be the “English” thing to do. Such a first-person belief is certainly psychological fair game; but it hardly seems germane to sociological inquiry.

Conclusion

Expanding on Gilbert’s notion of “plural subjecthood” (1992, 408), John Greenwood writes that members of bona fide social groups “conceive of their joint actions as ‘our’ action” and that “aggregates of individuals are constituted as social collectives by this very special conception by members of their relationships and interpersonal commitments” (1991, 222-23). On this view, it is a personal conception—not an impersonal fact or pattern—that distinguishes haphazard human collectives from those that answer to a truly “social” rationale. The case of the “lone social actor,” however, brings to the fore an unattractive consequence of letting so much hang on second-order mental states.

One could of course bite the bullet and accept that such cases fall within the ambit of sociology. The issue, then, is whether it is consistent for Greenwood to hold that (1) what makes something “social” is *nothing but* a person’s beliefs and (2) the social sciences are autonomous from (and irreducible to) psychology. Greenwood’s demand that one represent others as doing or believing such and such is the cornerstone of his proposal, and it is hard to see what would remain were one to discard it. Still, since he wants to retain (2), I have argued that (1) needs to be either discarded or qualified.

To be sure, if one is to be nondogmatic in the search for reflective equilibrium, relinquishing the claim of disciplinary autonomy expressed in thesis (2) has to be a live option. Greenwood would not necessarily be closed to this, since he has voiced suspicions that “there may be good grounds for abandoning some of these disciplinary divisions and talking instead about human science or the science of persons” (1991, 225). While such an ecumenical spirit may be dominant at present (Marchionni 2008), one must not lose sight of the fact that blurring a boundary has repercussions for both fields adjacent to that boundary. What I recommend, then, is a hybrid first- and third-person delimitation of the social—adding externalism that spills outside the first-person vantage so as to ensure that Greenwood’s interpretation does not collapse Gilbert’s promising game-theoretic insight into an implausible psychologism.

I might note in closing that this amendment makes no concession to holism: requiring a minimum of two individuals to hold a belief is still an individualist move, insofar as asking for “more of the same” does not commit one to countenancing something “more” ontologically (it is perfectly okay, for instance, for a materialist to complain that she needs a certain quantity of matter to satisfactorily account for a given phenomenon). Those persons need to be related in some causal way for their belief(s) to be truly shared, and although I have opted not to pursue any positive alternative, I suspect that tracking the availability of a given categorization (or “meme”) might do the trick. In any event, if my diagnosis is correct and “one” is in fact being “alone,” Greenwood might revise his assessment that “social sciences such as sociology and social psychology have suffered as scientific disciplines precisely because . . . many have tended to follow Durkheim’s illustrative example of a crowd” (1991, 222).

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