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SUBJECT, MODE AND CONTENT IN “WE-INTENTIONS”

abstract

Propositional attitudes compose of three factors: subject, mode and content. With collective propositional attitudes there is dispute as to which of these three factors the collectivity aspect attaches to. For Searle the collectivity aspect comes in with the mode of the propositional attitude – it is a matter of two distinct individuals each having their own collective intention-in-action. I argue that there are ineliminable difficulties with the Searle’s individualistic analysis, and argue instead for the notion of a dual-subject mental state: a propositional attitude that, by its nature, takes two or more subjects.

keywords

Collective intentionality, joint action, John Searle, social ontology

Propositional attitudes (such as beliefs, desires and intentions) are generally thought to compose of three distinct factors: subject, mode and content (Searle 1983). For instance, *Fred believes that the world is round* involves “Fred” (subject), “believes” (mode) and “that the world is round” (content). Although there is no consensus as to how to understand each of these aspects of a propositional attitude, it is generally accepted that they are, to one degree or another, distinct, and can be analysed separately.

With collective intentionality there is some dispute as to which of these three factors the collectivity aspect should be attributed to (Pacherie 2007).

According to Bratman (1993), the collectivity aspect comes in with the *content* of the propositional attitude. According to Gilbert (1989), the collectivity comes in with the *subject* of the propositional attitude. According to one reading¹ of Searle (1990, 1995, 2010) the collectivity aspect comes in with the *mode* of the propositional attitude – it is a matter of two distinct individuals each having their own *collective intention-in-action*.

In this paper, I shall examine Searle’s alternative, and argue that it does not succeed. Searle attempts to limit the collectivity aspect to the mode, but this claim is on the back-foot from the start, given his doctrine that intentions are “causally self-referential”. I shall, however, argue that something related to Searle’s account can be salvaged, although only at the expense of dropping some of the restrictions that Searle places on any account of collective intentionality. In particular, I shall argue that the widespread view that collective intentionality must ultimately be understood as having an individualistic basis is at the root of the difficulties with Searle’s account², and that the problems Searle identifies with a genuinely shared mental are capable of being overcome.

1. Searle’s Restrictions on Collective Intentionality

Searle places a number of prior restrictions on what he regards as an acceptable account of intentionality, and I shall begin by outlining these restrictions and the reasons he provides for them.

1 I say “according to one reading of Searle” because there are a number of ambiguities in his account that I will outline in Section 2. For related concerns about how to read his proposal see Velleman (1997) and Meijers (2003).

2 See Schmid (2009).

The first restriction is that “all intentionality, whether collective or individual, has to exist inside individual’s heads” (Searle 2010, 44). For Searle, this restriction does not mean that all cases of collective intentionality (“we intend”) must be reduced to cases of individual intentionality (“I intend”) – indeed, Searle thinks that collective intentionality cannot be so reduced – but it does mean that any case of collective intentionality (any thought of the form “we intend to *p*”) must be fully explicable in terms of the workings of an individual’s own mind. We can call this the “brain-in-a-vat” restriction: whatever collective intentionality amounts to (i.e., whatever it is for me to think “We intend to *p*”), it must be something that is, theoretically, capable of being achieved by a solipsistic consciousness. The ostensible reasoning behind this commitment is that it avoids the intolerable consequence of appealing to “some Hegelian world spirit, a collective consciousness, or something equally implausible” (Searle 1995, 25). Hence, for Searle, and *contra* Gilbert, collective intentionality does not involve an appeal to a plural subject. A collective intention is a thought that is had by a singular subject.

The second restriction is that “all that I can actually cause is my individual performance” (Searle 1995, 45). If we are cooking dinner together, then I cannot (at least directly) cause your actions, but I can cause mine. My actions are, at best, contributions to a total collective action.

This has certain consequences for Searle, which hark back to his previous work (Searle 1983). Intentions, Searle has argued, are causally self-referential, whereby “the content of the intention makes reference to the very intention of which it is a content” (Searle 2010, 34). That is to say, if I intend to do an action *x*, then that intention is only fulfilled if it is that very intention which causes action *x*. Unlike a desire (which is satisfied so long as the object of the desire is achieved), my intention to deliver a parcel to my friend is not satisfied if that parcel is actually received by my friend by another means. It must be this very intention to deliver the parcel to my friend that causes the delivery, in order for my intention to be satisfied.

Putting this together, it would seem that the content of one’s intention cannot be that *we do something*. Were the content to make reference to what *we* do, then it could only ever be unsatisfied (even if we actually did manage to do that action) because, try as I might, *my* “we-intention” cannot be causally responsible for *your* part of the action, and hence cannot be the

direct cause of the collective action. The very most that I can do is intend to do my part in something that we do.

A *final restriction* is that we “cannot reduce “we intentionality” to “I intentionality” plus something else [for example] mutual beliefs” (Searle 1995, 24). This is for the reason that an appeal to mutual beliefs would result “in a potentially infinite hierarchy of beliefs” (Searle 1995, 24). The idea being objected to here is that a collective intention might be understood to be genuinely collective if we suppose that each participant forms their intention (“I intend to do p ”) with the mutual belief that the other will do so too.

Suppose, for instance, that our aim is to move the sofa (Velleman 1997). It would not be a collective intention if I merely intended to lift my side of the sofa, and you merely intended to lift yours, perhaps each of us periodically lifting up his side in the hope that the other would do so too. Rather, in order to have the collective intention, I must intend to lift my end of the sofa on the condition and mutual understanding that you intend to lift your end.

But then this means that we must first establish a mutual belief that we each intend to do our part before we can form the intention. And it is not clear that we can do this. It would not be enough, for example, for me to believe that you intend to move your side of the sofa, and then for you to have the corresponding belief. This would not be enough, since I don’t regard you as merely lifting your side in blind hope, as this would suggest. Rather, for mutual belief, I must regard you as lifting your side on the grounds that I am intending to lift my side too. So, we would need at least another iteration of belief. Would this be enough? Presumably not, since neither do I regard you as thinking that I am lifting my side in blind hope. Another iteration would be required to capture this, and I think it is clear that once we have started down this road, there would be no end to the iterations³. Thus, an appeal to mutual belief would seem to be less than helpful in spelling out the notion of collective intentionality.

That completes the review of Searle’s restrictions on collective intention, and they leave very little room for manoeuvre. When it comes to spelling out Searle’s account we shall find that any interpretation we attempt to give of what he is saying ends up rubbing against one or another of these restrictions.

3 See Schiffer (1972).

We have outlined what Searle thinks collective intentionality is not. We can now attempt to outline what he thinks it is.

2. Searle and Collective Modes

Searle attempts to provide an analogue of a singular intention in terms of collective intentions. So, whereas the canonical notation for a singular intention is:

Ia B by means of A (this ia causes A, which causes B)⁴

The collective intention analogue is:

Ia collective B by means of A (this ia causes A, which causes B).

But what does “ia collective B” mean here? As it stands, there is nothing in the canonical notation that serves to distinguish “ia collective B” from a standard “ia B”, other than mere labelling. So, how should we understand this notion? Here are three possible interpretations⁵:

(i) That “ia collective B” is to be read as a *distinct mode of intention* that is to be defined in terms of its operating with the distinctive goal of causing one’s own part within a *joint action*.

(ii) That “ia collective B” is a *standard mode of intention* combined with a *presuppositional belief* that someone else is going to play her part in a joint action.

(iii) That “ia collective B” is to be read as a *distinct mode of intention* that is to be defined independently of reference to its content or to its goal.

I want to now argue neither of these options is satisfactory, given Searle’s restrictions.

With regards to (i) the suggestion is that the content of the intention is merely to play *one’s own part* in the joint action. However, this raises a

4 For more on this notation see Searle (Searle 2010, 50-51). Ia = Intention-in-action.

5 Searle’s initial remark on how to interpret the canonical notation is: “I have a collective intention-in-action B, in which I do my part by performing my singular act A, and the content of the intention is that, in that context, this intention-in-action causes it to be the case, as A moves, that the car moves, which, in that context, causes it to be the case that B, the engine starts” (Searle 2010, 52). I’m not sure how to square this with his remarks two paragraphs before that “each has to assume that the others also have an intention-in-action which has the same goal, the same ‘collective B[...]’” (Searle 2010, 53). The former remark seems to put the weight of collectivity on the “collective intention-in-action”, the latter seems to put it on having the same goal: “collective B”. Further remarks, emphasising presuppositional beliefs, suggest another interpretation altogether.

difficulty. For, it puts all the weight of the analysis onto the joint, collective *action*. For, it would seem, what distinguishes a collective intention from a standard, singular intention is merely the fact that the goal is to perform one’s part within the context of a collective action. The question of collectivity, in this case, just cascade’s all the way through the canonical notation, to the world itself, where the action takes place.

But this is problematic. As Searle’s own examples attest, the notion of a collective action is dependent on the notion of a collective intention. It is no good identifying a collective intention in terms of its role within the context of joint action since “the same type of bodily movements could on one occasion be a set of individual acts, on another occasion they could constitute a collective action” (Searle 1990, 402).

The difficulty here, is that the exact same set of bodily movements – e.g., heaving a car up the hill – could in one context just be my individual action, and in another be part of a joint action. As Searle says, commenting on a parallel example, “Externally observed, the two cases are indistinguishable, but they are clearly internally different”. And, presumably, the internal difference is a difference in intention. Hence, one needs an independent specification of a collective intention in order to ground the notion of a joint action. It would, clearly, be circular to attempt to do this by means of claiming that a collective intention is that kind of intention whose causally self-referential satisfaction conditions are the performance of one’s part within the context of a joint action. The notion of collectivity in this case remains unanalysed, because it hinges on the concept of a joint action, in which one plays one’s own part.

This is perhaps just as well, for, in fact, it is difficult to see how this interpretation actually would manage to remove collectivity from the content of the intention after all. For, so long as we understand “ia collective B” as referring to a collective set of actions (i.e., “collective-B”), then Searle’s canonical notation could only be elliptical for:

Ia collective-B by means of A (this ia causes A, which causes collective-B)⁶.

6 That this is indeed a consequence of the first strategy is clearer when we consider what Searle calls “the constitutive-by-way-of-relation” (see Searle 2010, 51). A constitutive by-way-of-relation is an intention in which one’s immediate actions constitute rather than cause the intended result. For instance, my pulling a trigger (B) causes the gun to shoot (A), while my raising my hand (B) constitutes my voting (A). With regards to collective intentions involving the “constitutive by-way-of-relation”, Searle offers the following: “ia collective B by way of singular A (this ia causes: A piano plays, constitutes B duet is performed)” (Searle 20120, 54). But that strikes me as wrong. My playing the piano does not constitute a duet, regardless of the context. Surely a duet can only be constituted by both actions.

So, how might we provide an independent definition of a collective intention, without thereby falling foul of the restriction that the collectivity cannot be part of the content? Interpretation (ii) would place the elusive notion of collectivity outside the content of the intention, by understanding collective intentions as a matter of the combination of an intention to do one’s part in a joint action, in conjunction with a presuppositional belief that someone else intended to do their part in the same collective action. Here is how Searle understands the presupposition for the case at hand:

Bel (my partner in the collective also has intentions-in-action of the form (ia collective B by means of singular A (this ia causes: A clutch releases, causes: B engine starts))) (Searle 2010, 53).

This interpretation, however, has its own difficulties. Searle claims that “In collective intentionality I have to presuppose that others are cooperating with me, but the fact of their cooperation is not part of the propositional content of my part of the collective intentionality; rather, it is specified in the form of the collective intentionality, outside the bracket” (Searle 2010, 53).

The suggestion seems to be to purge the content of the intention of all mention of collectivity. Thus,

Ia collective B by means of singular A (this ia causes: A car moves, causes B engine starts)

is in fact shorthand for a standard singular intention:

Ia B by means of A (this ia causes: A car moves, causes B engine starts)⁷

With an accompanying belief (amended from Searle’s initial claim, in the light of the above) of the form:

Bel (X has (ia B by means of A (this ia causes: A clutch releases, causes B engine starts)))⁸.

⁷ Note that we have to remove the initial reference to collectivity (before the brackets) to avoid including a reference to collectivity within the brackets, due to the causal self-referential nature of intentions.

⁸ Presumably, the austerity that we have now imposed on the intention should also be transposed to one’s beliefs about the other’s intentions, hence this correction of Searle’s presuppositional belief.

This would appear to be one way of purging the account of any appeal to collectivity in the content. But the upshot is a complex, but nevertheless, very impoverished account. For, at first glance, there is nothing in the account which joins the two protagonists together, other than their presuppositions. But since their presuppositions must eschew any mention of collectivity – for, here, the presuppositions *are* the collectivity – the account provided does not even establish that the two actors are in the same country, never mind that they are intending to pull their weight on the same car in unison.

One initial way around this would be to say, with Searle, that “I have to believe (or assume or presuppose) that others are cooperating with me” (Searle 2010, 53). But surely the analysis can’t just rest there, for cooperation is exactly what we want to explain!

This leads us to (iii). The suggestion here is that the collective aspect is solely a matter of having a particular kind of intention (a “collective-intention-in-action”). To disambiguate from previous interpretations, we can talk of “collective-ia B” rather than “collective ia B” (the distinction is in the hyphen).

However, the first thing to note is that Searle’s insistence that there be no mention of collectivity in the content has to go. If we understand collectivity as a particular mode of intention, then that mode is going to be part of the content, because it, like other intentions, is causally self-referential:

Collective-ia B by means of A (this collective-ia causes: A car moves, causes B engine starts).

Further, since many collective actions are by their nature collective, then, once again (for at least some such actions) there needs to be a further collectivity reference:

Collective-ia to collective-B by means of A (this collective-ia causes: A car moves, causes collective-B engine starts).

That collectivity is mentioned in the content is now not nearly so pernicious. What was causing the problem in Searle’s analysis was the difficulty of squaring (i) the idea that intentions are causally self-referential, with (ii) the idea that all intentions must ultimately be attributed to the individual who holds them. As a consequence of these twin commitments, the causally

self-referential nature of intentions meant that the content of the intention must, in the relevant respect, tightly mirror the mode of the intention. And since the mode of the intention is individualistic, then the content must be likewise. But, if we appeal to a *robust* notion of a collective intention (one which is defined *independently* of the content, presuppositions or the resulting actions) we need have no qualms about introducing the notion of collectivity into the content – for it refers back to the mode of the intention: the collective mode, collective-ia. Providing that we can get an independent grip on this collective intentional mode, then we can allow the content of the intention to mirror the collectivity of the mode.

But what is a collective mode of intention? What would a form of an intention that was a “collective-intention-in-action” be like?

When it comes to modes, Searle has one “rough” way of distinguishing them. That is their “direction of fit”. Of the “directions of fit” that Searle recognises, the world-to-mind would be applicable. But this doesn’t serve to distinguish a collective-ia from a standard, singular ia. The way to make the desired for distinction, I shall now argue, is by introducing a kind of “direction of fit” that Searle does not recognise.

3. **Collective Propositional Attitudes** We can agree with Searle that the weight of the analysis is to be taken by a specific mode of collective intentionality. But, in doing so, we shall also be required to recognise both (i) that that mode is necessarily one that requires (at least) two subjects, and (ii) that, to the extent that we follow Searle in regarding all intentions as causally self-referential, then the content will also be required to make reference to this collectivity.

The position that I shall argue for here is that of a *dual-subject* mental state: a psychological mode that, by its nature, takes two or more subjects. To take the example of joint visual attention, this involves the capacity to *see with* another person a particular state of affairs in the environment – it is a matter of <X and Y jointly seeing that *p*>, as opposed to <X seeing that *p*, Y seeing that *p*, X seeing that Y sees that *p*, Y seeing that X sees that *p* ... etc>.

There is a way of spelling out such a state in Searle-style terms. Searle recognises two major forms of directions of fit. A mind-to-world direction of fit (↓) and a world-to-mind direction of fit (↑). In the case of joint attention, we might characterise it as a psychological mode with the (↓↔↓) direction of fit. The suggestion here is that it is a mental state which involves two

subjects and whose satisfaction conditions are determined not just by the propositional content of the state, but also by the fact that it is a content that is only satisfied – indeed, only ever established – when one’s own perceptual state is aligned with the perceptual state of the other via causal interaction between the two subjects⁹.

Corresponding to joint attention, we could also have a dual-subject “collective intention”. Again, we can symbolise this notion in terms of a direction of fit, in this case: ($\uparrow \leftrightarrow \uparrow$). Here, it is the goal that each individual has that is shared, and under the partial causal control of the other. To illustrate, Searle imagines the following case:

Imagine that a group of people are sitting on the grass in various places in a park. Imagine that it suddenly starts to rain and they all get up and run to a common, centrally located shelter. Each person has the intention expressed by the sentence “I am running to the shelter”. But for each person, we may suppose that his or her intentions is entirely independent of the intentions and behavior of others [...]. Now imagine a case [...] of an outdoor ballet where the choreography calls for the entire corps de ballet to converge on a common point. We can imagine that the external bodily movements are indistinguishable in the two cases; the people running to the shelter make the same types of bodily movements as the ballet dancers. Externally observed, the two cases are indistinguishable, but they are clearly internally different (Searle, 1990, 402-403).

The difference between the two cases here, I would argue, is that in the latter case the establishment and maintenance of the joint intention-in-action is dependent on the reciprocal causal control that each dancers’ bodily movement has on the others. If any of the dancers movements were to slip out of this causal loop (say, one of them were to slip and fall, thus breaking the causal connection), then all the dancers’ intentions have been thwarted, and the joint intention-in-action breaks down. In the former case, by contrast, if one of the runners were to slip and fall, then this would not amount to the thwarting of the others’ intentions – *their* intention to get out of the rain would be still alive.

The intentions that the dancers have, I would argue, are genuinely joint. It is

⁹ Whether one regards the perceptual alignment between the two participants (which establishes and constitutes the collective mode) as figuring in the content of the state, will depend on whether one agrees with Searle that perceptions are, like intentions, “causally self-referential”. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing for a clarification on this point.

not the case, as I think Searle ultimately wants to claim, that each individual has her own intention that “we shall perform this dance”. Rather, each individual is participating in – and constituting – a single, shared intention *to perform this dance*, where the dance in question is a collective one.

This allows us to understand the canonical notation as follows:

Ia-collective to collective-B by means of singular A and singular C (this collective-ia causes singular A and singular C, causes collective-B).

To explain this notation by means of a previous example: *we* (you and I) have the intention of together getting the car to move, by means of your releasing the clutch, and my pushing the car, such that this very shared intention causes me to push the car and you to release the clutch, which then causes it to be the case that we have moved the car.

This account means that we must reject Searle’s worry that by positing a dual-subject mental state we are “committed to the idea there exists some Hegelian world spirit, a collective consciousness, or something equally implausible” (Searle 1995, 25). There is no such commitment involved. The claim being made here is not the absurd one that there is some strange collective hive consciousness involved whenever we decide to jump-start a car, or perform a dance in the park. The claim, rather, is that there are particular kinds of psychological modes that necessarily involve two subjects rather than one. The notion of a dual-subject state should be distinguished from the troublesome notion of a collective consciousness or collective mind, because it is not the case, on this proposal, that there is one mind hovering between two bodies, but rather, it is the case that there are two minds, with two bodies (i.e., two subjects) who have entered into a singular functional mental state.

The notion of a dual-subject mental state is gaining some traction in areas of cognitive science (albeit in areas not quite yet in the mainstream). In developmental psychology, for example, appeals to basic intersubjective states are sometimes utilised to explain infant’s abilities to recognise other minds at an age before they can explicitly *represent* other minds (Trevarthen 1979, Tomasello *et al.* 2005, Ratcliffe 2007). There is nothing in the suggestion that need be incompatible with a wholesome naturalism, the account needn’t posit anything over and above physical individuals with physical bodies and brains. Attempts to “naturalise” intentionality are on-going, and there is nothing

within naturalism which dictates that intentionality must, always and everywhere, be the achievement of one brain on its own, rather than, in some cases, being the achievement of more than one brain. Particularly in the case of infantile mentality, it is a plausible working hypothesis, that an infant’s abilities to deal with the world are largely dependent on their ability to do so in concert with a caregiver.

Searle resists appeal to a collective content, on the other hand, on the grounds that “all that I can actually cause is my individual performance” (Searle 2010, 45). This worry can be assuaged by countenancing the notion of a plural subject: all *I* can actually cause is my individual performance, but *we* can cause quite a bit more. It is not implausible to suppose that evolution has thrown up creatures whose intentional capacities are, in some cases, unsaturated unless placed within a properly interactive context. This might involve particular kinds of psychological modes whose function is to operate within an interactive social context, and that the nature of that mode is to be spelt out accordingly. This, indeed, was a claim that Searle once appeared to come close to, when he said:

The crucial element in collective intentionality is a sense of doing (wanting, believing, etc) something together, and the individual intentionality that each person has is derived from the collective intentionality that they share (Searle 1995, 25).

Of course, there will be a unique neurological – and perhaps even cognitive-cum-computational – story to tell of what is going on at the individualistic level in each individual within such a context. But there is no guarantee that such models would amount to a full semantic explanation of what is going on within joint contexts. Such a reductive guarantee might be missing if, as Searle suggests above, collective intentionality has a basic, irreducible pedigree from which individualistic intentions are derived.

Finally, Searle’s third restriction was that an account of collective intentionality must resist appealing to “mutual beliefs”. I agree that that such an appeal would be merely shifting the onus of understanding onto something equally difficult to capture if the appeal to mutual beliefs were an attempt to *reductively off-load* the troublesome notion of collectivity. However, mutual beliefs (if, by this, we mean to include the related concepts of mutual knowledge and joint attention) cannot be of themselves impossible, since it seems that they are an integral part of everyday lives – most of our daily

lives are spent in the company of people in which not just our intentions, but also our beliefs and attention can be shared, and transparently so. It is quite possible that joint attention, mutual belief, collective intention and coordinated action are a family of concepts that share interesting conceptual/causal links to each other. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore this idea in any detail, it would seem that one way of further elucidating the idea of genuinely shared mental states as *sui generis* explanatory concepts would be to explore the conceptual, causal and normative links that hold between them. On the face of it, at least, it would seem that joint attention rationalises mutual belief, that mutual belief rationalises collective intentions, and that collective intentions rationalise joint action.

4. **Conclusion** Searle's approach to collective intentionality is novel, understanding collectivity in terms of a distinctive psychological mode. His position, however, is hampered by a number of background commitments that severely limit what can be said about this distinctive mode. I have argued that if we are to understand collectivity intentionality as primarily a matter of a distinctive psychological mode, then this will mean that Searle must relinquish a number of background assumptions: in particular, the claim that collective intentionality must be understood as an individualistic attitude, something that can be achieved by me and me alone. On the contrary, I have argued that collective intentionality should be understood as a single, natural, irreducible psychological mode of thought that involves two subjects rather than one.

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