

Plural Subjects IV.

A Plural Subject Account of Collective Intention

Joint activity is intentional in virtue of **our plural self-knowledge** in the same way my individual activity is intentional in virtue of **my singular self-knowledge**.

Joint activity is intentional in terms of collective intentionality; what's collective about collective intentionality is that it is plurally self-known. This form of the intentionality in question is the subject.

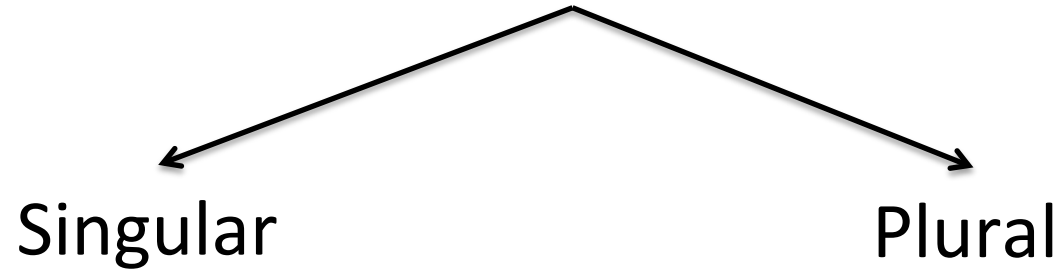
-  Content-Account: We_{distr} intend to ϕ_{coll} .
-  2. Subject-Account: We_{coll} intend to ϕ_{coll} .
-  Mode-Account: We_{distr} we_{coll} -intend to ϕ_{coll} .

Subjectivity

Pre-reflective/non-thematic self-consciousness

Immediate/first-“personal” self-awareness

Non-observational/groundless self-knowledge



Plural Subject-Accounts: Problems

- The **petitio principii/infinite regress problem**: According to Gilbert, the formation of a Plural Subject involves a (however implicit) communication procedure. Such a procedure is an intentional joint action, and would thus presuppose the formation of another Plural Subject.
 - The **spookiness problem/metaphysical worry**: If the two of us jointly intend to go for a walk together, there are two subjects involved, not three: there is no additional „We“ having „our“ intention.
- **How does New Plural Subject Theory address these issues?**

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The Regress Problem Solved

- In Gilbert's account, there is something we (at least implicitly) have to **do together** in order to share an intention (we have to **agree**) – as joint action has to be collectively intended, this sets off a regress.
- Plural Pre-Reflective Self-Awareness does not presuppose another joint action!

The Regress Problem is not Specific to the Plural!

- Consider the following view: in order to do something intentionally, you have to form an intention. You form an intention by deciding to do it.
 - Deciding is something you have to do intentionally. In order to decide, you have to decide to decide etc. etc. pp.
- The feature in virtue of which this view is absurd in the singular case, it is absurd in the plural case! Just as you sometimes intend „just like that“, **we** sometimes intend „just like that“, and if we engage in a joint decision procedure, it is **just like that** → **the pre-reflective case is a condition of the possibility of the reflective case!**

...but isn't this spooky?

It is counterintuitive to assume that there is such a thing as “the we”; if the two of us are acting together, it's just you and I!

- If you and I intend to ϕ together, it is not the case that “the we” (rather than you and I) intends to ϕ (and pulls off the ϕ -ing).
- There is no additional subject; If you and I go for a walk together, it's just the two of us out there, **not three**: it's not that there's a third subject somehow coming along with us.
- There's **nothing “over and above”** our heads that is or has our intention.

„The I“ is Just as Spooky as „The We“!

The Spooky “We”

If you and I intend to ϕ together, it is not the case that “the We” (rather than you and I) intends to ϕ (and does the ϕ -ing).

If you and I go for a walk together, it’s just the two of us out there, not three: it’s not that there’s a third subject somehow coming along with us.

There’s nothing “over and above” our heads that is or has our intention.

The Spooky “I”

If I intend to ϕ , it is not the case that there something of the sort of “the I” that does (or has) my intending (otherwise, why should I care about what that “I” intends?)

If I intend to go for a walk, it’s just me out there, there is no such thing as “the I” coming along with me.

There is no homunculus with or within me that has my intention.

To Conclude

- The “spookiness” of the plural subject comes from a misconception of what it is to be a subject, not from its plural form.
- Hume, Fichte, Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Wittgenstein (and countless others): **The way in which mind is subjective (“somebody’s”) is not in terms of “the self”/“the I”/“the we” in terms of some extra entity that is somehow represented in the intending.**
- The subject is an immanent feature of the intending itself (its being self-knowledge).
- Conceived of in this way, the plural subject is not spooky at all.
- **No particular exorcism is needed (other than some re-reading of the classics); we can safely adopt this plural subject view of CollInt.**

Collective Responsibility of Random Collections

Plural Self-Knowledge Among
Strangers

The Topic

- A, B and C (know that they) should ϕ .
- Φ is an intentional joint action.
- A, B, and C are a random collection of individuals.

The Paradigm Case (cf. Held 1970)

In a sparsely occupied subway car, passenger Y is being harassed and physically abused by Z, an exceptionally strong individual.

It is obvious that none of the fellow passengers in the random collection R – individuals A, B, C – could stop the abuse alone (or in cooperation with Y) without serious risks to his or her own health. If at least two of the fellow passengers cooperate (which they could), the abuse could be stopped without great risks.

No joint action ensues.

Who's to Blame?

- 1. Each individual? (distributive)** But: given the situation, neither A, B, or C was morally required to coming to the victim's aid.
- 2. The collection? (collective)** But: how can collectives be held responsible, especially *if they are not an agent?*

Held's (1970) Solution

Random collections **can** be morally responsible:

“we would hold the random collection morally responsible for its failure to act as a group” (477)

But this responsibility is **distributive**, not **collective**:

“if random collection R is morally responsible for the failure to do A, then every member of R is morally responsible for the failure to do A, although, perhaps, in significantly different proportions” (ibid.).

What exactly is “Action A”?

- If it is “coming to the victim’s aid“, the distribution does not work, as no individual is morally responsible to coming to the victim’s aid.
- If it is “subduing the bully“, Held’s distributive account is incompatible with “ought implies can”.
- A more plausible description: responsibility is distributive with regard to something like “acting so as to make it happen that the random collection cooperates to subdue the bully” → **“collectivization duty”**

A Problem with This Account

If the responsibility the random collection's failure to act is reduced to a distribution of each member's responsibility to make it the case that they act, a central feature of the failure in question is lost: **A, B, and C are not just individually responsible for not making it the case that they act. Rather, they are responsible for not acting!** This responsibility is **collective**, and this is what is lost in this account.

A Disanalogy

Assume I don't show up at the scheduled time for our meeting. The reason is, as I explain, that I played around with my calendar app and accidentally deleted this entry without noticing, thus **failing to make it the case** that I show up.

It seems natural that you now blame me for my playing around with my app (**failing to make it the case that I show up**), rather than blaming me for **not showing up** (analogy to the collective case).

But if you do so, this is because this implies that I *wanted* to come and *would have* come had I not failed to remember. Such blame works only against a background of “blameless” agency.

It may seem that there is no such background in the random collection case, as the failure seems to be a failure in *constituting agency*.

Exploring the Collective Side

The responsibility for **not acting** is the collection's, it is not the participating individuals'.

Chant's (201) recommendation, based on a more radical example ("The Hollywood Standoff") that blocks the distributive "blameworthy failure to collectivize"-charge: let's bite the bullet, sometimes collectives are responsible without being agents!

But: insofar as responsibility is tied to such reactive attitudes as reproach and the practice of blame, responsibility targets agency.

Sketching an Alternative Route

The core of agency is not in its **established organizational structure**, but in its **subjectivity**.

The core of subjectivity is in a feature that has been labeled with such terms as self-consciousness, self-awareness, self-knowledge, de se-thought (the special first-personal knowledge I have of what it is I'm doing/I should be doing).

Our random collection can rightfully be called collectively responsible if it had a first-person perspective *in the plural* (If *we* knew [first-person plurally] what it was we were doing/we should have done)

Epistemic Conditions of Responsibility

“To hold an individual responsible for an act requires that he be aware of the nature of the action, in the sense that he is not doing A in the belief that he is doing B” (Held 1970, 472).

But: this needs to be made more precise: the awareness/belief needs to be *of the right kind: I can do A, and know that I do A, and still not be responsible because it is not in the right way that I know **of me** that I'm doing A!*

Ernst Mach's Case

“Not long ago, after a trying railway journey by night, when I was very tired, I got into an omnibus, just as another man appeared at the other end. ‘What a shabby pedagogue that is, that has just entered,’ thought I. It was myself: opposite me hung a large mirror.” (Ernst Mach, *Analysis of Sensation*, 1887, 3)

→ Mach knows that he is shabbily clothed, but fails to know it “in the right way” (de se, first-personally). The failure is not in the amount of knowledge, but in the *kind* of knowledge.

A Failure to Know “In the Right Way”

Consider this modification of Ernst Mach’s case:

I enter a bus. I see a shabby-looking man entering the bus from the other side. Also, I see that this man is behaving recklessly in blocking an ailing elderly person who is behind that man. I correctly judge that this man’s behavior is morally objectionable.

I fail to realize that I’m looking into a mirror. That man is **me**. I’m doing the morally objectionable thing.

In this case, Held’s epistemic conditions are satisfied: I know what I am doing, and do not misdescribe what it is I am doing, just that I know it **third-personally** and not **first-personally**.

However: if there is no way I **should have realized** that I’m looking into a mirror (and that there is a passenger behind me), I’m not morally blameworthy → Held’s epistemic condition is incomplete!

Held's Epistemic Condition Modified

“To hold an individual responsible for an act requires that he be aware of the nature of the action, in the sense that he is not doing A in the belief that he is doing B” (Held 1970, 472) – **and the individual needs to know what he or she is doing in the right way, that is, first-personally.**

How This Carries Over to the Plural

A random collection of individuals can be morally responsible if it the case that

- a sufficient number of them knows that they should act together
- that knowledge is “*of them*” (*plurally*) in the *right way* (not “the group should act” but “**we** should act; plural self-knowledge).

The Parallel Train Scenario

We're the passengers in the subway train, and we're looking out of the window. There is another subway train running at the same speed on the neighboring track. The other subway train is unlit, but as the lights of our own train are mirrored in the other train's windows, we're seeing what's going on in our own train, thinking it's happening in the other train.

The Parallel Train Scenario

Assume that what we're seeing is the bully abusing his victim – and we are outraged at the fellow passengers whom we see looking attentively out of the window instead of coming to the victim's aid. In this case, we are fully “aware of the moral nature of the action”, and we strongly condemn what we are doing; but we fail to be aware of the action – or rather, omission – *as ours*: the knowledge, or awareness in question is not of the first-personal kind.

The Parallel Train Scenario

What is that first-personal awareness that is missing in our parallel train case?

It might seem that each of us fails to know that it is his or her *own* train he or she is looking at. In this view, the way out of the misconception is for at least one of us to recognize *him- or herself* in the mirror image, and then to alert the others.

But: you need not recognize *yourself* in the mirror. Recognizing any other fellow traveller, or just our own train, will do. The required reasoning need not run through a moment of “oh, it’s me!”, as there are other equally plausible ways to the decisive insight: **“Oh, its *us!*”**

What is Plural Self-Knowledge?

- „The Subject of ‚We intend‘.“ Forthcoming in: *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*..
- “On Knowing What We’re Doing Together: Groundless Group Self-Knowledge and Plural Self-Blindness.” In: M. Brady/M. Fricker (eds., 2016): *The Epistemic Life of Groups: Essays in the Epistemology of Collectives*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 51-74.
- Plural Self-Awareness. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 13, 2014, 7-24.

Reconsidering the Case

In a sparsely occupied subway car, passenger Y is being harassed and physically abused by Z, an exceptionally strong individual. There are three fellow passengers, A, B, and C, who could help if they team up.

How Does it Matter?

Scenario 1: A, B, and C sit in separate compartments. The view between the passengers is blocked, though each can reasonably assume that there might be others in the car. → in this case, there is no plural self-awareness: **Held's distributive view is right**, all there is to the random collection's responsibility is each one's failure to gather a group together!

Scenario 2: A, B, C can see each other, and it is open between them that they can see each other; they exchange glances. → in this case, there is plural self-awareness: Held's distributive view is mistaken, there is more than the distributive violation of collectivization duties, but a genuine sense in which what they, collectively, are responsible for is **their failure to act!**