

Frederick Stoutland

The Ontology of Social Agency

Abstract: The main claim of the paper is that there are irreducibly social agents that intentionally perform social actions. It argues, first, that there are social attitudes ascribable to social agents and not to the individuals involved. Second, that social agents, not only individual agents, are capable of what Weber called “subjectively understandable action.” And, third, that although action (if not merely mental) presumes an agent’s moving her body in various ways, actions do not *consist* of such movements, and hence not only individual persons but social groups are genuine agents. We should be pluralists about individuation, rejecting both individualism and collectivism by granting that social agency is neither more nor less ultimate, well-founded, or basic than non-social agency.

0. Introduction

Philosophers of action have not paid much attention to social agency, that is, to actions performed not by individual persons but by social groups of various kinds. Discussion has centered on what individuals, do, believe, or desire, and on the reasons each has for acting, the standard story being that actions consist of bodily movements that are rationalized and caused by the agent’s beliefs and desires. Although we often describe an agent’s actions in terms of their results rather than in terms of the bodily movements involved, the claim is that *what* we are describing are the agent’s bodily movements. Since each of us has a distinct body and moving it is something we do on our own, this view apparently rules out genuinely social agency, that is, agency that is not reducible to the agency of individuals.

Recently, however, there has been increased interest in social agency, which has received careful discussion from a number of philosophers.¹ But most of these discussions, while taking social action seriously, display an individualist, anti-social bias about agents. Many of them focus, for example, on cases like painting a house together or moving a piano, which involve actions people do together but which they could have done separately. Given pianos and our limited strength, most of us could not move a piano alone but it is not incoherent to think of

¹ Bratman 1992; 1993; 1999; Gilbert 1989; 1990; 2000; Pettit 2007; Searle 1995; Tuomela 1984; 1991; 2007. For further references see Baier 1997. This paper was a major source of inspiration for my paper, and I am grateful to it for examples and ways of putting things. Her paper documents very well the individualist bias in recent philosophy of action.

so doing. It is, therefore, not difficult to think of the actions of social groups like these in terms of the actions of each of its members that are coordinated in various ways.

That is not the case for actions like playing a Mozart symphony, passing a law, appointing a president of a university, declaring a stock dividend, or winning the World Series. Those are not actions individuals can perform on their own. Only an orchestra can play a Mozart symphony, only a parliament pass a law, only a university name its president, only a corporation declare a stock dividend, and only a baseball team win the World Series. Only social agents can do or intend to do these things, and while the actions of individual agents are essential to their doing them, it is the groups that act intentionally in these ways.

Philosophers who are biased toward individualism respond to this in different ways. Some take the eliminativist view that there really are no social agents; we may speak in social terms but what we say applies only to the actions, intentions, beliefs, and reasons of individual agents. Others respond, not by denying that social agents have intentions or beliefs and act for reasons, but by arguing that these are reducible to—definable in terms of—the intentions, beliefs, actions, and reasons of members of the group. Still others reject reductionism, claiming in particular that social intentions and beliefs cannot be defined in terms of individual intentions and beliefs since their content must be mutually referring in distinctive ways. But the anti-social bias remains because the intentions and beliefs themselves are not ascribed to social groups but to their members.

My aim in what follows is to undermine the individualist bias in accounts of the ontological status of social agency by showing, in particular, that social groups—not all of them but many—are not ontologically secondary but have a reality of their own. This involves showing that it is legitimate to ascribe actions, reasons, intentions and beliefs to social groups as such, not only to their individual members. In short, there are, I shall argue, social agents in addition to individual agents.

This is a relatively narrow topic and a uniquely philosophical one, which is only indirectly relevant to claims about the social explanation of behavior, about how individuals are dependent on society, or other claims made by social scientists. The social groups that I am concerned with are not a primary source of the social constraints Durkheim articulated (cf. Aron 1967, 72f.). Orchestras, parliaments, corporations, or baseball teams constrain their members in various ways but that is secondary to their role in making possible a range of actions and attitudes that would not be possible outside the groups. My focus, however, is not on that—on what social groups constitute—but on what constitute groups as social agents and what it is to ascribe to them actions, attitudes, and reasons.

1. Social Agents

In our discourse together we constantly speak of the agency not only of individuals but also of social groups. We speak in terms of social agents, of their actions and their reasons for acting, and of their intentions, beliefs and other attitudes. I shall say something about each of these in the course of this paper.

Let us distinguish two kinds of *social agents*. One is *plural agents*, where the agent is referred to as ‘they’ and agency expressed by ‘we’: thus they played a Mozart quartet, they played chess, we nailed up that long board, we moved the piano, we took turns, we had a quarrel. The other is *collective agents*, where the agent is not plural but singular, referred to by a name or definite description or as ‘it’, not as ‘they’, though typically *expressed* as ‘we’. Thus the Senate debated a new tax law but *it* hasn’t passed it yet, the Company laid off a lot of employees but *it* will lay off more, and—as an expression of agency—we intend to appoint a new president of the university, and so on.

What I have just said reflects American rather than British English. In the former it is said that the government *is* planning to do such and such, whereas in the latter that the government *are* planning to do such and such. This shows that the line between these two kinds of agents is not sharp. There are, nevertheless, significant differences. Plural agents come into being just by people coming together and doing things jointly—nailing up a board, playing a string quartet, having a dinner party. Collective agents cannot come to be in that way: they require a history of practice. Even if they are established by fiat—‘we formed a new company yesterday’—the fiat is effective only against the background of social groups of that kind that were not established by fiat. The group cannot therefore be transitory or ephemeral: collective agents have a permanence plural agents do not. The senate, the company, or the family outlive particular members or the actions they perform. Plural agents in general do not: the we who nailed up that board does not exist as a we beyond that act.²

Another difference is that collective agents typically involve structures that institutionalize authority relations.³ These enable the decisions of certain members to be decisions of the social group and permit persons to speak on behalf of the group, so that statements they make are statements of the group. When the president of the university speaks, for instance, the university, as a matter of institutional structure, speaks. This is in general not the case for plural agents, which do not institutionalize authority. Individuals may have special authority but it is informal and fluid, based on others letting them have it rather than on their office or status.

² Plural agents can become collective agents. Four musicians who play a quartet together may establish themselves as the Toledo Quartet, which institutionalizes itself and may outlast all the players who began it.

³ This is not always the case, for example, with families, which are natural rather than instituted social agents. There usually are authority relations in a family, and they may be fairly strict, but they stem neither from the institutional structures typical of collective agents nor from the informal power relations of plural agents. They show another sense in which there is no sharp distinction between the two kinds of social agents.

Collective agents and plural agents are alike, however, in that neither kind is identical with individual agents. The senate does things individual senators cannot do, such as pass laws or issue a resolution. The university appoints a new president, which no member of the university can do. The quintet plays Schubert's 'Trout', which is something no individual musician can do.⁴ This point may be obscured in the case of types of actions that either an individual or a social agent could perform. An example is our holding up a board so we can get it nailed in place, a type of action either of us could (with great difficulty) do alone. This particular act is, nevertheless, the act of a social agent because it is not divisible between the two of us. That entails, I contend, not only that each of us performs the same *type* of action—namely, lifting a board—but that we perform a single act *token*. Lifting a board is something *we* do as a social agent. It is true that in lifting the board, each of us also acts as an individual agent, exercising his own strength and moving in a distinctive way, which makes the social action possible, but these individual acts are not identical with the act performed by the social agent. It was neither you nor I who did so but *we*, that is, the group of which we are members.

2. Social Actions

Social agents perform social actions, which are similar to the actions of individual agents in a number of ways. First, there is no acting where there is no *intentional* acting. What distinguishes mere behavior—where things happen but there is no agency—from acting, is that the latter is intentional under at least one description. Acting, that is to say, is *essentially* intentional, and insofar as it falls short of being intentional, it is a diminished form of acting. Second, whenever an agent acts, his so acting is not intentional under other descriptions. Acting always has unintended results, which are diminished forms of acting: in acting intentionally, agents also do things in ignorance, by mistake, accidentally, and so on.

Third, an agent who acts does so, in general, for a reason that yields a description under which her acting is intentional. An agent may act for no reason—whistle idly, for instance—but that is necessarily exceptional and, moreover, an act that could have been done for a reason.⁵ It is exceptional because the capacity to act for reasons is essential to agency and hence for the capacity to act intentionally (and hence to act). If one acts for a reason, one acts intentionally

⁴ Numerous real life instances of social agents are discussed in writings about corporate responsibility and similar topics. A good example is French 1984. He discusses the case of the Ford Motor Company being sued for murder in the Pinto case, involving a car it produced with a faulty fuel tank. The suit was against the company, not against its officers or employees; the company itself, it was contended, was morally responsible for knowingly killing innocent people. A more recent case is the Minneapolis School Board appointing a company to be superintendent of its schools. The president of the company was interviewed but it was made clear that not he but his company would manage the schools. (This arrangement did not last very long.)

⁵ 'No reason' is a relevant answer to the question why you were whistling, whereas it would not be a relevant answer to the question of why you tripped on the rug.

(under a description): one cannot have a reason for acting inadvertently or in ignorance because if one did so act for a reason, it would not be acting inadvertently or in ignorance. And if one acts intentionally, one knows what one is doing under a description, which means one knows at least the immediate reason for what one is doing.

These claims, assumed in most conceptions of individual action, apply straightforwardly to social action. The Senate acts only when it acts intentionally under a description, but in so acting it does not act intentionally in all respects. For example, it intentionally passes a budget law, but in so doing, it inadvertently increases unemployment in certain sectors and angers some citizens. Its passing a budget law was intentional because it did so for a reason, namely, because the law was required to bring down the deficit. Its reason for action did not include increasing unemployment or angering citizens, so it was not intentional in those respects. A quartet intentionally plays Beethoven's last quartet because a patron requested it, but unintentionally wakes up a baby or inspires a bad review (which were not requested by a patron). The same analysis, so familiar for the actions of individuals, applies straightforwardly to social action generally.

Many philosophers, however, even among those sympathetic to social action, will reject this account. They may admit that there are social actions in the guise of 'joint actions', which are social in that they are not divisible among the individual agents who make up the group. But they will deny that this indivisibility entails that there is one *token* action the group itself performs.

Take four persons playing a string quartet. If this is a genuine social action, there is, I maintain, one token action that the quartet performs, namely, playing a quartet, which involves a complex pattern of blended sounds. The four players also perform actions of their own, each playing from a score that marks out the notes she will play. But the quartet played consists of the joint sounds that result from the players playing together, which must be heard together to hear the quartet. The harmony, dissonance, tempo, or what have you, that marks a quartet, is played not by individuals but by the quartet: there is numerically one act that it alone performs, namely, producing those sounds that jointly constitute the quartet.

The reaction to this is sometimes reductionism: there is nothing to a quartet other than four individual players coming together, and the so-called social action of playing a quartet is reducible to the individual actions of four persons performed at the same time, meeting certain conditions of harmony and cooperativeness. Philosophers sympathetic to social action usually reject reductionism, however, on the ground that it fails to admit that there is anything unique about social actions, in particular for failing to take account of their indivisibility. Four persons do not *each* play a quartet, and while it is true that each player plays a distinct part, the joint sounds—the harmonies and dissonances and patterns—are not divisible among them.

But philosophers with an individualist bias deny that there is one *token* action performed by the quartet, claiming rather that the only token actions are those performed by each individual player. What marks out these actions as social is that the action of each individual player is a *type* of action it would not be were

it performed in isolation. Reductionism misses this point in claiming that the type of actions players perform when playing on their own is no different from the type of actions they perform when playing a quartet. On the contrary, when playing a quartet, each player must not only play his own part; he must also contribute to the quartet, pay attention to his colleagues, aim at harmony, and the like, all of which involve characteristics his action would not have were he not a member of a group. Social actions are not reducible to individual actions because the former are types of action the latter are not. They can, in other words, be described in ways the actions of isolated individual agents cannot.

On this view, however, social actions still consist of numerically different act tokens performed by distinct individuals: a social action is performed by a social group, not because there is a token action the group itself performs, but because individual persons act in ways they would not act were they not in the group. This individualist bias is more subtle than individualist reductionism in that it recognizes a difference between social and individual actions. But the difference is not between social and individual *agents*—the agents are individuals, each performing a distinct action—but between the kinds of descriptions of the actions performed by individuals.

This individualist view rests on a number of claims, of which I will consider three. First, the attitudes necessarily involved in agency—intentions and beliefs in particular—can be ascribed only to individuals not to social groups, and hence there are no genuinely social agents. Second, action is intentional only if the agent is capable of what Weber called ‘subjectively understandable action’, but social agents do not have such self-understanding. Third, actions not only always involve bodily movements (if they are not merely mental acts), but actions *consist* of an agent’s moving his body in various ways, and since only individual agents have bodies and can directly move only their own, there cannot be genuine social agents. I shall discuss each of these objections in the rest of this paper.

3. Social Attitudes

The first objection is the most common, and a great deal of energy and ingenuity has been expended showing how to avoid ascribing intentions, beliefs, and other intentional attitudes to social groups. In my view, this is a mistake: since social actions are not divisible among individual agents, the social attitudes involved are also not divisible among individual agents but are the attitudes of groups as social agents. By social attitudes, then, I do not merely mean intentional attitudes with social *content*. Nor do I mean attitudes directed toward some social rather than individual good, or which involve social rather than individual interests.⁶ I mean attitudes whose *subjects* are social agents.

⁶ This distinction does not line up with the ones I am making here. A social agent, for example, need not act for the social or common good but for its own good or for the good of some individual, just as an individual person may act not for his own good but for the common (or social) good.

There are numerous examples of such attitudes. A corporation has beliefs and intentions, and while its employees may share the content of some of those attitudes, they are the corporation's attitudes. More typically, its employees will not share its attitudes, and, indeed, there may be attitudes ascribable to the corporation which are not ascribable to any of its members. The corporation may, for example, have set a certain level of sales as its aim for the next fiscal year, even if no member of the corporation shares that aim (perhaps the figure is a compromise, different from the aims of any of the managers or board members⁷). But even if the corporate attitudes are shared by some members, they are *corporate* attitudes, not attitudes of individual agents.

The examples may be extended. Intentions, beliefs, and desires are ascribed to universities, churches, parliaments, charitable organizations, and orchestras, which their members may or may not share, but that in any case are the intentions, beliefs, and desires of the social group. No doubt social agents would not have attitudes if their members did not, and in many cases their attitudes reflect the attitudes of their members. But the converse is also true; individual agents not only reflect the attitudes of the groups to which they belong, but there are attitudes they would not have had if the group did not have them. Expecting to vote in the next election presupposes that the government intends to hold one. Believing that the parliament will raise taxes assumes that it wants to do so. Wanting to cash a check presupposes banks that intend to cash them.

Many philosophers find this objectionable. Reductionists argue that so-called social attitudes are no different from the attitudes of individual agents: they have no distinctive contents that the attitudes of solitary individuals do not have. The beliefs or desires of a church, for example, are just the attitudes of its members, and their contents do not presuppose any social group. To speak of what a church believes is to speak of what is believed by most of its members, beliefs they could in principle have all by themselves.

Individualists who take social action more seriously reject reductionism by maintaining there are attitudes with distinctively social contents that solitary individuals do not have. Consider a social belief, for example, one expressed by a congregation saying, 'We believe in God'. If that is a genuine social belief, it is, on this view, not simply a case of each member believing in God, for there is nothing social about that. It involves in addition each member believing of the other members that they believe in God, and believing that the other members believe that, and so on, with perhaps other attitudes as well. Attitudes with such mutually referring contents are, it is claimed, distinctive of social beliefs, marking out a type of *contents* individual beliefs do not have. But attitudes with such contents are still not genuinely social if only individuals and not social groups have them,⁸ and, indeed, the point of this kind of proposal is precisely to avoid ascribing attitudes to agents other than individuals.

⁷ If the aim was set by the board, this does not mean a social action has been reduced to individual actions, for the board is itself a social agent.

⁸ The same is true of Tyler Burge's anti-individualist arguments, which aim to show that the content of attitudes is socially determined, for example, by one's language. Burge assumes that however social the content of attitudes may be, they will be ascribed to individual persons. See, for example, Burge 1979.

This is, in my view, a mistake: social agency requires not only that attitudes have social content but that they be ascribed to social agents. This is most evident in the case of intentions. The proposal that intentions are social if they have mutually referring contents maintains that to ascribe an intention to a social group is just to ascribe to each member of the group an intention with the *same* mutually referring content. Social intentions, on this view, are individual intentions with distinctive *common* contents. But there are, I conclude, no such intentions: different agents cannot have intentions whose content is common in the relevant sense.

The reasons for this is that intentions necessarily include reference to the agent who has them. An agent can intend only to do something *herself*: she cannot intend anyone else to act, but at best only intend to do something herself that might induce someone else to act. I cannot intend *you* to buy *me* a dinner, but only intend to do something that might have that result. But if the content of an intention always includes an implicit reference to the agent who intends, the intentions of different agents do not have a common content. Art can intend to go to a film and Mary can intend to do the same; but their intentions do not have a common content since Art's intention is *his* going to the film and Mary's is *her* going to the film. This means that the notion of 'we intend' cannot be analyzed in terms of the notion of 'I intend' since they involve the intentions of different agents. We must either construe social actions in terms of intentions with individual contents or recognize that intentions are social attitudes to be ascribed straightforwardly to social agents.⁹

The first alternative is unacceptable. If an agent can intend only to do something herself, then the only intentions an agent can *fulfill* by her actions are her own. It follows that if a social action fulfills an intention, the intention must be the intention of the agent who performed that action, namely, a social agent. Otherwise the action would be fulfilling the intention of someone other than the agent of the act (an individual agent), which is not coherent since agents can fulfill only their own intentions.

A number of proposals have been made to avoid this objection by arguing that it is, after all, possible to construct a notion of intentions that have *common*, hence social, contents *shared* by members of a group. Here is Michael Bratman's analysis (1993, 104):

We intend to J if and only if:

1. (a) I intend that we J and (b) you intend that we J
2. I intend that we J because of 1a and 1b; you intend that we J because of 1a and 1b
3. 1 and 2 are common knowledge between us.

⁹ This does not mean that I consider Mary and Art's going to the film to be the action of a social agent. The point of the example is simply to illustrate the point that the only intentions agents, either individual or social, can fulfill are their own.

Bratman takes this analysis to yield intentions with common contents that individual agents share, thus avoiding the objection that actions performed by individual agents cannot fulfill intentions that are social in the sense of being shared. Since the contents of ‘we-intend’s’ are distinct from the contents of ‘I-intend’s’, in that the former are ascribable to individuals only as members of a group, it is not a reductivist analysis. But while it allows actions to fulfill intentions that are social in that agents can have them only as members of a group, it does not allow social *agents* to have intentions. A shared intention, Bratman notes, is

“a state of affairs that consists in attitudes [...] of the *participants* and interrelations between those attitudes [...]. It consists primarily of a web of attitudes of the individual participants [and involves] two main elements: (1) a general treatment of the intentions of *individuals* and (2) an account of the special contents of the intentions of the *individual* participants in a shared intention.” (107f.; my emphasis)

Bratman explicitly recognizes the problem I have posed:

“What I intend to do is to perform actions of my own; I cannot intend to perform the joint action J. So how will the conception of the joint action get into the intentions of the individuals?” (101)

To resolve that, Bratman introduces the technical notion of *intention that*, which does not require that what the agent intends be an act of that same agent. I can intend *that* you buy me dinner, and one person can, in general, intend *that* another person do something. If that is so, then an individual can intend *that* a group do something. Since it is just this notion that plays the key role in Bratman’s analysis of ‘we intend [...]’—it is given in clause 1—it is not surprising that we get a notion of shared intention with common content.¹⁰

There are two objections to this proposal. The first is that Bratman’s analysis simply *postulates* a technical notion of intention whose point is just to permit common content, and that begs the question, namely, *whether* the intentions of different agents can have common content. The other is that intentions do not take propositional objects: we may intend to do something or we may act with an intention, but in either case the object of our intending is an activity, not a fact or state of affairs. An agent intends to drive *to* Minneapolis, or is driving *to* Minneapolis with the intention to buy a piano, or intends *to* buy a piano because he intends *to* learn how to play. If these intentions are construed as having propositional objects, they cease to have the distinctive features of intentions and become attitudes of a different kind.¹¹

¹⁰ Wilfrid Sellars introduced a notion of ‘intend that’ that is like Bratman’s, but he noted that it presupposes the concept of ‘intend to’ and emphasized “the conceptual priority of intentions to do even in the case of intentions that someone do”. To intend that such and such be the case, he said, means, roughly that I intend to do that which is necessary to make it the case that such and such. Insofar as there is a non-technical notion of intending that such and such, Sellars’ view is surely the correct one. Cf. Sellars 1968, 184.

¹¹ For an excellent discussion of intention that is directly relevant to this point, cf. Moran/Stone 2008.

Bratman contends that his notion of *intention that* is not “some new and distinctive attitude [but one] [...] already needed in an account of individual intelligent agency. But we are allowing this attitude to include in its content joint activity.” (ibid., 102) While intentions are indispensable to individual agency, *intention that* is not, because an individual can only intend to do something herself. *Allowing* the attitude to include in its content joint activity is not to *establish* that an agent can intend a joint activity but to construct a new attitude that is essentially different from the intentions we ascribe to individual agents.

An analogous point applies to beliefs. Unlike intentions, beliefs take propositional objects, and their contents may be common to different agents. But the beliefs that play an essential role in explaining an agent’s actions as intentional must be beliefs of the agent himself. One may, for instance, act in a certain way because it is necessary for some end, but the necessity of the action will explain one’s acting only if one *believes* it is necessary, and that must be the agent’s own belief. He may, of course, see that the act is necessary because someone else believes it is and tells him so, but that the act is necessary explains his acting only if he himself comes to believe it is necessary. For a belief to play a role in explaining a social group’s action, therefore, it must be a belief of the group itself, not of its members. Its members’ beliefs may underlie the beliefs of the group but they play a role in the reasons for which the group acts only by way of beliefs of the group as such.

4. Ascribing Attitudes to Social Agents

Not every intentional attitude is ascribable to social agents, any more than every type of action can be performed by a social agent; indeed, those claims are necessarily related. Social agents cannot walk or jump or engage in other bodily actions, and so they cannot intend to do them or believe they are doing them. Since social agents cannot weep or laugh, the range and kind of emotions ascribable to them are also restricted (though perhaps there are metaphorical senses in which social groups weep or laugh). Although more could be said about the kinds of attitudes and emotions that *cannot* be ascribed to social agents, my concern here is to articulate a view that shows why many intentional attitudes *can* be so ascribed.

I want first to consider a primary reason many philosophers refuse to ascribe attitudes of any kind to social agents, namely, a mistaken but entrenched view about the nature and role of the attitudes in explaining action. On this view, the attitudes are causally efficacious events or states internal to an agent’s mind/brain, which cause events in his nervous system that in turn cause his bodily movements. They have rational content that are an agent’s reason for acting, and if they cause the agent’s bodily movements in accord with that content (not accidentally or deviantly), they are intentional under a description and hence are actions of the agent. An agent’s action *consists*, then, in his moving his body, and although we describe that in terms of many things, in particular in

terms of what the bodily movements cause in the world beyond his body, *what* we are describing are his bodily movements.¹²

This is the so-called ‘standard story’ of action, which comes in a number of versions that develop in sophisticated ways the simple points set out above. My concern here is with aspects of the story that bear directly on the individualist bias in philosophy of action and thereby rule out an adequate account of social agency. One is its claim that actions consist in bodily movements (which I will discuss in section 6), while the others concern the attitudes: that they are events or states internal to an agent’s mind/brain, their fundamental explanatory role being the causal production of bodily movements in accordance with their content.

If these claims are accepted, attitudes like intentions, beliefs, and desires cannot be ascribed to social agents because doing so would require that social agents have brains and nervous systems that causally produce their actions. Or it would require that they have super-personal, collective minds, which might have some metaphorical point but would not fulfill the causal function attitudes have on this view, namely, to be causally productive of an agent’s actions. The absurdity of these alternatives is sufficient to account for the individualist refusal to ascribe attitudes to social agents.

But if those claims about the attitudes are rejected, then it is not absurd to ascribe the attitudes to social agents. I think they should be rejected on the ground that they yield an inadequate account even of individual agency. The attitudes are not entities, they are not located in an agent’s mind/brain, and their explanatory role is not the causal production of bodily movements (or anything else). Although I cannot adequately defend these counter claims in this paper, I will articulate the conception of the attitudes they presume and show how they apply to social agency.¹³

I have written indifferently of events and states (which is common among defenders of the standard story), but they should be clearly distinguished. Events are particulars in having numerous intrinsic properties (or descriptions), many of which may be undiscovered, and they are causally efficacious in that they are causally related to other events (or things) that they produce. Claims about such causal relations are extensional in that they are true under every description of the events; they are not true *in virtue of* some property of the events (and hence false *in virtue of* some other property).

If attitudes were events, they would be causally efficacious, but they are states and not events. Events happen at a time but attitudes do not happen; states, hence attitudes, obtain through time. Nor are attitudes particulars that are located at some time or place or that have undiscovered intrinsic properties. They are property-like and not referred to (as events are) but *predicated* of a

¹² In this paper, I use ‘bodily movements’ both transitively, to mean ‘moving one’s body’, and intransitively, to mean ‘one’s body moves’, because the distinction is not relevant for my discussion.

¹³ The best defense of these claims is Steward 1997. They are claims Davidson has made. See, for example, Davidson 2003, 499 and 654; and Davidson 1993.

subject.¹⁴ It is agents that intend, believe, or desire, and in characterizing an agent as intending to write, believing that it will rain, desiring to own a house, we do not refer to entities in his mind/brain but we characterize *him* as intending to write, and so on. Those are properties of an agent that are individuated by their content—to write, that it will rain, to own a house. We may predicate the very same attitude of different agents, who may have the same belief, the same desire, even (with the important qualifications discussed above) the same intention: each of us may have the intention to write or see a film, although it will be directed in each case to the one who has the intention.

As states, attitudes are not causally efficacious: they are not causally related to—do not produce—bodily movements or other events or things. But they play a role in the explanation of actions (or other attitudes) by being *causally relevant* to actions, other events, states, and so on. A property is causally relevant to an outcome just in case the outcome would have been different had the property been different (or absent). ‘Being rotten’, for instance, is a causally relevant (but not causally efficacious) property: that the tree was rotten did not cause the tree to fall down; but it was causally relevant because, had the tree not been rotten, it would not have fallen over in the wind. So it is with the attitudes; an agent’s beliefs do not causally produce his action, but had he not believed what he did, he would not have (or probably would not have) acted intentionally as he did. There may, of course, be an explanation of why an attitude—intending to build a garage, desiring to own a house—is causally relevant to an action, but causal relevance does not depend on our knowing that explanation, or even on there being one. Many explanations refer to causally relevant states, and their explanatory power does not depend on our knowing why they are causally relevant.¹⁵

This view of the nature and explanatory role of the attitudes is essentially Davidson’s, and I would appeal to his status in the philosophy of action in defense of the view. In any case, it allows the ascription of attitudes, not only to individual agents, but also to social groups of various kinds. We can ascribe to a quartet an intention to play a piece by Mozart, a belief that it should keep a fast tempo, a desire to satisfy its patron’s request. It is irrelevant that the quartet has no brain or nervous system or that attitudes directed toward its own actions as a quartet are not causally productive of its actions. The attitudes that we ascribe to the quartet, no more than those we ascribe to individual agents, are not located in a mind/brain; they are properties predicated of the quartet that are causally relevant to its actions as a social agent. Had the quartet not intended to play a piece by Mozart, not believed it should keep a fast tempo, not wanted to please its patron, its actions would have been very different. A complicated story might be constructed about why those attitudes are causally relevant, but we do not know that story, and the explanation does not depend on it.

¹⁴ On this point see Steward 1997, chap. 4. She argues convincingly that the notion of a *token* state (which is to turn a state into a particular) is incoherent.

¹⁵ This way of formulating the distinction is from Steward 1997. I developed the distinction, though formulated differently, in Stoutland 2008.

A similar account can be given of the attitudes of numerous social agents—universities, parliaments, corporations, banks, churches, social agencies, etc. We speak often of their beliefs, intentions, what they want, even what they fear or hope for, and there is no reason to feel uneasy in so doing or to take solace from the philosophical analysis of those committed to individualism. It is true that there would be no social agents without manifold complex relations between individuals more or less like those that philosophers spell out so carefully. But those relations will vary a great deal depending on the social group: they may be cooperative, but they may not; they may not involve mutual knowledge; they may or may not be institutional; there might not be significant intentions shared by members of the group. But what those diverse relations make possible is something new—a social agent to which attitudes are ascribed that are not ascribed to individuals who are members of the group. This is something that need not be resisted given an adequate understanding of the nature and explanatory role of the attitudes.

5. Social Agents' Knowledge of What They are Doing

I want now to consider briefly the claim that action is intentional only if it is what Max Weber called “subjectively understandable”, which in his view is not true of social actions.

Weber defended ‘methodological individualism’, which he defined as the view that “in sociological work collectivities must be treated as solely the resultants and modes of organization of the particular acts of individual persons”. He argued that only individuals “can be treated as agents in a course of subjectively understandable action” (Weber 1968, 13) on the ground that social inquiry is different from that of natural science in that it aims at an interpretive understanding [*verstehen*] of social phenomena. That entails, he held, that intentional action must be the focus of investigation because (as Joseph Heath puts Weber’s claim) “actions can be understood in a way that other phenomena cannot, precisely because they are motivated by intentional states”. Methodological individualism comes into the picture because Weber also held (in Heath’s words) that “only individuals possess intentional states, and so the methodological privileging of actions entails the methodological privileging of individuals”.¹⁶

The connection of all this with ‘subjectively understandable action’ is that investigators aiming at an interpretive understanding of social phenomena must grasp the intentional states that motivate the agent, which means they must grasp the agent’s *own (subjective) understanding* of her action: what she intends to be doing, what she believes is necessary to fulfill her intention, how she perceives situations in the world as reasons for her to act, and so on. The agent herself may not have a perfect understanding of such things, but as an agent who acts, she must know what she is doing intentionally, which means she must have a grasp of what she is intending, what she takes to be necessary to achieve

¹⁶ Cf. Heath 2005. This is an excellent article though I am not certain that Heath gets Weber exactly right.

ve her ends, her own reason for initiating action, etc. While investigators must *interpret* an agent to know these things, the agent knows them about herself directly, without interpretation.

Weber is, in my view, right about much of this—about the role of interpretation, about the centrality of intentional action, about the latter being ‘subjectively understandable’. But he is wrong in maintaining that these claims apply only to individual agents and not to social groups. His claim that only individuals ‘can be treated as agents in a course of subjectively understandable action’ presumes (if Heath understands him correctly) that only individuals possess intentional states. But this premise, I have argued, is false: we can ascribe attitudes like beliefs and intentions to social agents.

Even if it is granted that social agents can have intentional attitudes, it may be argued that it does not follow that social action is ‘subjectively understandable’, which I take to mean that social agents do not know what they are doing intentionally and what their intentions, beliefs, or other attitudes are. I think that the relevant sense of ‘know’ here is, as Anscombe has argued, ‘know without observation’. If we know what we are doing only by observing our action, then we are not the agents of the action but only observers of it. Similarly, if we need evidence to discover what we intend to do, or what we believe necessary, or what is our own reason for initiating action, then those attitudes are at best remotely connected with our acting intentionally. The issue is whether social agents have such knowledge, at least with respect to more primitive descriptions of their action and their more short term reasons for acting (cf. Anscombe 1957, 6 and 28).

In my view, social agents do have such knowledge. If it were a matter of introspection, if it required that an agent have introspective access to the content of her mind, then such knowledge by a social agent would be unintelligible. But since, in my view, an *individual* agent’s knowledge of what she is doing intentionally is not based on introspection, and the attitudes are not items in her mind/brain, there is no reason to think of *social* agents in that way. The knowledge required, I suggest, is what Anscombe called *practical* as opposed to theoretical: agents know what they are doing intentionally not by matching their judgment to their actions but by matching their actions to their intentions. If they are mistaken, the mistake is not in their judgment but in their performance: they fail to do what they intend.

A corporation, for instance, decides to do something, and then its employees are instructed to carry out the decision; if things do not go as decided, the problem is not that the corporation is wrong about how things went but that the decision was not properly executed, that external conditions changed, or that things went wrong in some other way. The mistake with regard to how things went is not in the judgment (the reports) but in the performance. When it is discovered by investigation that things did not go as intended, there is *theoretical* knowledge of the action. But if things did go as decided, the corporation knows what it is doing simply because its decision was carried out as intended: it has *practical* knowledge of its action—knowledge of what is happening by doing it.¹⁷

¹⁷ This is a view articulated by Anscombe 1957, 33, 34, 45, 46. Since she did not discuss

6. Bodily Movements and Action

A third objection to the notion of social agents that I shall discuss is that actions *consist* of bodily movements, and since each of us has a distinct body that we move directly only on our own, individuals are the real agents of action. To counter this objection, we should consider carefully how bodily movements actually figure in the actions of individual agents.

Individual agents are, of course, necessary if there are to be social agents. A corporation could not refocus its efforts, declare a dividend, or build a new plant if there were not individual agents at work doing what is relevant to such corporate actions. A quartet could not play Beethoven if each of its members did not play an instrument according to the score. Moreover, the actions of individual agents are, in a sense, sufficient for the actions of a social agent. Once the employees of a corporation have completed their assigned tasks, there is not a *further* action done by the corporation, and once the members of the quartet have played the parts assigned to them, there is no *further* playing on the part of the quartet. The reason these individual actions are ‘in a sense’ sufficient is that conditions must be right for them so to be. The employees of a corporation must complete their tasks successfully, there must be suitable coordination, their actions must not be countermanded, and so on. Similar things apply to the quartet because what individuals play is not always sufficient for the playing of a quartet.

It is crucial to recognize that analogous points apply to the relation between an individual’s bodily movements and his action. An agent acts in the world (and not merely mentally) only if he moves his body, and having moved his body in very complex ways, there is nothing *further* to do in order to act in various ways—provided conditions are right and things work out as he intended. If the world cooperates, then his moving his body is his moving his pen, which is his writing a sentence, which is his writing a letter, which is his pleasing his friend, etc. In moving his body, he may do many things; that is, his acting may have many descriptions that do not mention his moving his body, under some of which his acting is intentional, under many of which it is not.

The standard story of action takes this point to mean that an agent’s action *consists* of his moving his body; that is what an action *is*, the rest being descriptions (or properties) of the bodily movements. The descriptions are true of the agent’s moving his body because of what those movements result in, but his acting just *is* his moving his body. In Quine’s terms, that is the ontology of action and everything else is ideology. Since only individuals move their bodies directly, it follows immediately that the agents of action must be individuals.

In my view, the standard story is mistaken: even if an agent’s moving her body is both necessary and, given the right conditions, sufficient for her acting,

social agency, I do not know if she would agree with my applying her view as I do. She gives an example that does, however, suggest she might agree. It concerns a man “directing a project, like the erection of a building which he cannot see and does not get reports on, purely by giving orders [...]. He is not like a man merely considering speculatively how a thing might be done [...]. *His* knowledge of what is done is practical knowledge.”

it does not follow that her acting *consists* of her moving her body. It does not follow, that is, that when we describe the many things an agent is doing, *what* we are describing is her moving her body—that the many descriptions of her acting are only *true of* her moving her body. As Anscombe wrote: “The proper answer to ‘What is the action, which has all these descriptions?’ is to give one of the descriptions. Anyone, it does not matter which; or perhaps it would be best to offer a choice, saying, ‘Take which ever you prefer.’” (Anscombe 1981, 209) This is the right answer, although it does not rule out contexts in which one description is more basic than others and hence can, in that sense, be taken as specifying *what* we are describing when we describe an action.

Bodily movement descriptions are rarely basic in that sense because to specify *what* action we are describing, we specify *an* action, that is, something that has a unity as action, and this is rarely a matter of the bodily movements involved. I am, for instance, now writing a paper, which has been my primary task over many days. The ways in which I have moved my body in acting are complex and extremely diverse, and as such they have no unity but are merely a miscellany. My writing a paper, however, is *an* action, one that has a unity so that *it* can be described in many ways. Whatever unity there is to my bodily movements as action derives from my writing a paper and not vice versa, and it, is indeed, more plausible to say that what the bodily movement descriptions are true of is my writing a paper, than to say that what the paper-writing descriptions are true of is my moving my body. Moreover, an explanation of what I am doing that cites my reason for doing it explains my writing a paper, and it is the latter that explains my moving my body as I do.

Given this, it is evident that the actions of individual agents can be both necessary and (given the right conditions) sufficient for the actions of social agents without the latter *consisting* of the actions of individuals or without descriptions of social agents being *true of* individual agents. The members of any social group perform numerous and diverse actions as members of the group. White collar employees of a corporation write letters, hold meetings, offend colleagues, waste time, make decisions, etc., actions that are intentional under a description, but that viewed simply as the actions of individuals are a miscellany with no unity. If we understand, however, that the corporation intends to down-size and focus on one central mission, then we can grasp the unity in those individual actions as directed toward that goal. There is *an* action performed (or intended) by the corporation, an action individual agents cannot perform, and although the individuals’ actions are (given the right conditions) sufficient for the corporation’s actions, descriptions of the corporation’s actions are not true of the individual actions. Moreover, it is not the actions of its employees that explain the corporation’s action; on the contrary, the corporation’s action explains the actions of its employees. It is because the corporation is down-sizing that its employees have reasons to be active in those diverse ways.

The point is, then, that although bodily movements are necessary and (in a sense) sufficient for individual actions, and although individual actions are necessary and (in a sense) sufficient for social actions, individual actions do not *consist* of bodily movements nor do social actions *consist* of individual actions.

Ascribing actions to social agents presumes that we can ascribe attitudes to them that are explanatorily relevant to the actions of the individuals involved, hence causally relevant to the bodily movements of individuals. But it does not presume that social agents have bodies that they are able to move directly.

7. Individuating Agents

The underlying issue in this paper can be formulated as how to *individuate* agents and actions. When several descriptions are descriptions of the same thing, then that same thing has been individuated—that is, distinguished from other things—so that different descriptions can be asserted of it. The standard story assumes that there is one right way of individuating agents and actions, namely, in terms of an individual agents' own bodily movements. Philosophers who defend that story disagree on the so-called problem of the individuation of action—whether action should be individuated in a fine-grained or coarse-grained fashion. But these differences are built on agreement that actions consist of an agent's bodily movements, the differences being how finely we should individuate *them*.

There is in current philosophy of action an admirable pluralism about admissible descriptions of intentional action. Most philosophers agree that there are numerous correct ways of describing our action, that most such descriptions are not in terms of bodily movements, that there is no such thing as *the* right way of *describing* what we do. But there is no corresponding pluralism as far as *individuation* is concerned. An action *consists* in an agent's bodily movements, which is *what* we describe in describing action, the reigning view being that no matter how diversely we describe action, we must individuate ultimately in physical terms. Only the latter identify an action about which we can ask whether *it* is intentional under some description or what an agent's reasons for doing it might be.

What I am urging is that we also be pluralistic about individuation. Just as we do not think it necessary to designate one way of *describing* an agent acting as *the* right way, so we should not think it necessary to designate one way of *individuating* an agent acting as *the* (ultimately) right way. Individualists think there is one right way to individuate, a view assumed by proponents of the standard story who maintain that action consists in the bodily movements of individual agents. The contrary mistake is made by collectivists: they think that *social* individuation is *the* (ultimately) right way to individuate, and that collective agents are therefore more ultimate—more well-founded, more explanatorily or conceptually basic—than individual agents. Pluralism about individuation means the rejection of both: social agency is neither more nor less ultimate, well-founded, or basic than non-social agency.¹⁸

¹⁸ Here is another way to put the point. If there is one right way of individuating the world, then the world must consist of a single ultimate domain of individuals, and hence whatever there is must consist ultimately of the same individuals. It may be reasonable to think that those ultimate individuals are physical, which sets the Chinese box analysis going: social action consists of (complex) individual actions, which consist of bodily motions ..., etc., down to physical micro-states which are the ultimate individuals. My claim is that there is

The ontology of action, therefore, is much broader than is allowed by individualists of various kinds. There are in the world social agents that we describe in various way and to which we ascribe intentional attitudes. That we describe agents and actions in social ways is taken for granted; we ought in the same way to set aside our individualist, anti-social bias and take it for granted that what we are thus describing are genuine social realities.¹⁹

Bibliography

- Anscombe, G. E. M. (1957), *Intention*, Oxford
 — (1981), *Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Mind*, Minneapolis
 Aron, R. (1967), *Main Currents in Sociological Thought 2*, New York
 Baier, A. (1997), Doing Things with Others: The Mental Commons, in: L. Alanen/S. Heinämaa/T. Wallgren (eds.), *Commonality and Particularity in Ethics*, New York, 15–44
 Burge, T. (1979), Individualism and the Mental, in: *Midwest Studies in Philosophy 4*, 73–121
 Bratman, M. (1992), Shared Cooperative Activity, in: *Philosophical Review 101(2)*, 321–341
 — (1993), Shared Intentions, in: *Ethics 104(1)*, 97–113
 — (1999), *Faces of Intention*, Cambridge
 Davidson, D. (2003), Replies, in: L. E. Hahn (ed.), *The Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, Illinois
 French, P. (1984), *Collective and Corporate Responsibility*, New York
 Gilbert, M. (1989), *On Social Facts*, Princeton
 — (1990), Walking Together: A Paradigmatic Social Phenomenon, in: *Midwest Studies 15*, 1–14
 — (2000), *Sociality and Responsibility: New Essays in Plural Subject Theory*, Lanham
 Heath, J. (2005), Methodological Skepticism, in: *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <http://www.science.uva.nl/~seop/entries/methodological-individualism/>
 Moran, R./M. Stone (2008), Anscombe on Expression of Intention, in: C. Sandis (ed.), *New Essays on the Explanation of Action*, Basingstoke
 Pettit, P. (2007), Responsibility Incorporated, in: *Ethics 117*, 171–201
 Sandis, C. (2008) (ed.), *New Essays on the Explanation of Action*, Basingstoke
 Searle, J. (1995), *The Construction of Social Reality*, New York
 Sellars, W. (1968), *Science and Metaphysics*, London
 Steward, H. (1997), *The Ontology of Mind: Events, Processes, and States*, Oxford
 — (1993), Reply to Ralf Stoecker, in: R. Stoecker (ed.), *Reflecting Davidson*, 287–290

no such thing as a single, ultimate domain of individuals. Just as there are alternative ways of describing the world, none of which is ultimate or privilege in a general sense, so there are alternative ways of individuating the world, none of which is ultimate or privilege in a general sense. Social discourse individuates in various ways, depending on the discourse, but we should refuse to admit that this way of individuating lines up with the way of individuating when our concern is with non-social agents or with the explanations of the physical sciences.

¹⁹ The origin of this paper is my ‘Why are Philosophers of Action So Anti-Social?’ [Alanen/Heinämaa/Wallgren (eds.), *Commonality and Particularity in Ethics*, St. Martin’s Press, 1997, pp. 45–74], parts of which have been used here. Although the main claim of the paper remains the same, the arguments have been altered in significant ways and many subsidiary claims are different.

- Stoutland, F. (2008), Indeterminism, Intentional Action, and Bodily Movements, in:
C. Sandis (ed.), *New Essays on the Explanation of Action*, Basingstoke
- Tuomela, R. (1984), *A Theory of Social Action*, Dordrecht-Boston
- (1991), Intentional Single and Joint Action, in: *Philosophical Studies* 62, 235–262
- (2007), *The Philosophy of Sociality: The Shared Point of View*, Oxford
- Weber, M. (1968), *Economy and Society*, ed. by C. Roth and C. Wittig, Davis