

Abstracts – Book Symposia and Keynote Speakers

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Book Symposia

Francesco Guala, *Understanding Institutions: The Science and Philosophy of Living Together*, Princeton U P 2016

Participants:

Rico Hauswald

Institution Types and Institution Tokens: An Unproblematic Distinction?

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Institution Types and Institution Tokens: An Unproblematic Distinction?

- Commentary on Francesco Guala's *Understanding Institutions*

Rico Hauswald

Technische Universität Dresden

Abstract

The distinction between institution types and institution tokens plays an important role in Francesco Guala's philosophy of institutions. In this commentary, I argue that this distinction faces a number of difficulties that are not sufficiently addressed in *Understanding Institutions*. In particular, I critically discuss Guala's comparison between the taxonomy of organisms and the taxonomy of institutions, consider the semantics of institution terms on different levels in this taxonomy, and argue for an alternative solution to the problem of how to reconcile reformism and realism about institutions like marriage.

**Kirk Ludwig, From Individual to Plural Agency: Collective
Action 1, Oxford U P 2016**

Participants:

Sara Rachel Chant,
Tulane University

Michael Schmitz,
From group minds to group mindedness
University of Vienna

Raimo Tuomela
Comments on Kirk Ludwig's book From Individual to Plural Agency, 2016, OUP
University of Helsinki and University of Munich

Kirk Ludwig
Reply
University of Indiana

From group minds to group mindedness

- Commentary on Kirk Ludwig's *From Individual to Plural Agency*

Michael Schmitz

University of Vienna

Abstract

The philosophy of collectivity is still often driven by fear of group minds. Defenders of content accounts like Michael Bratman attempt to analyze away all occurrences of “we” as a subject of intentions, proposing that at least small-scale collectivity can be entirely explained in terms of attitudes of the form “I intend that we J”. Proponents of mode accounts like John Searle reject this and embrace group mindedness as irreducible, but are also dismissive of collective subjects. In his recent book, Kirk Ludwig makes valid criticisms of the mode account and of Margaret Gilbert’s version of a plural subject account and develops a very rich and improved version of the content account. However, I will argue that this analysis is still inadequate and subject to counterexamples, and that it throws out the baby of the group mindedness essential to understanding joint intention with the bathwater of group minds. I conclude by sketching an account of groups as subjects of intentions that responds to Ludwig’s criticisms of Searle and Gilbert. It explains how group mindedness ties the group members together so that they can jointly be the subjects of intentions and other attitudes. A group has minds, not a mind. As a subject of intentions it is therefore essentially a plural entity, while both the notion of a group mind and the content account try to reduce it to something singular. Joint commitment is one form of group mindedness that ties subjects together into collectives, but there are also others such as e.g. joint attention, joint skills, or joint habits.

Comments on Kirk Ludwig's book *From Individual to Plural Agency*, 2016, OUP

Raimo Tuomela

University of Helsinki and University of Munich

Abstract

The main ideas of the book

It is rich in content and extensive in scope. There are useful summaries in both parts of the book. On the whole, the book is an exceptionally well-argued, high-level contribution to analytic single-agent and plural-agent action theory.

Social groups are viewed as plural agents in the book and they thus ontologically consist of a collection of single agents who generally are capable of shared we-intending that they act together in specific ways.

Ludwig's book develops an analysis of individual action, agency, and intention, with special focus on the logical form of singular action sentences. The logical form is characterized basically in terms of refined and extended Davidsonian event-based analysis.

In Ludwig's account the action verb is treated as introducing two quantifiers over events. To say that an agent melted the chocolate is to say roughly that he was the immediate agent of some event that brought it about that the chocolate melted (that an event of melting of the chocolate occurred).

The second part (of this book) develops an account of collective action and intention. It focuses on an account of the logical form of plural action sentences ("We built a bridge") and on sentences attributing "we-intentions" to action (e.g. "We intended to build the bridge") as well as on the content of individuals' intentions (viz. "we-intentions") when they are engaged in joint intentional action.

Plural action sentences are typically ambiguous between a *distributive* and a *collective* reading, where the ambiguity is due to quantifier scope ambiguity but not lexical ambiguity concerning intending. Singing the national anthem could involve that we each did so (distributive reading), or that we did so together (collective reading). On the distributive reading, for each of us there is an event of which he is the sole agent and it is the singing of the national anthem. The collective reading is obtained by reversing the order of the quantifiers. On it, there is an event, viz. a singing of the national anthem, of which each of us is an agent. Here group agency is taken by Ludwig to involve multiple agents of a single event, not an event of which there is a single *group* agent. In both readings the *we* is present. Only the group members are agents here.

For Ludwig collective intentional action is the most fundamental form of social reality. E.g. social institutions, practices, and interaction depend on it. Our foundational understanding of social reality is said to depend on understanding the nature of collective intentional behavior and how it differs from individual intentional behavior. An account of collective intentional behavior should be built on an understanding of individual intentional behavior, and the account should be built on a proper understanding of the logical form of the relevant descriptive sentences. This "rests on the assumption that the logical and conceptual resources of our discourse about the social are fitted to the phenomena we use it to talk about". Laying bare the logical form of our discourse tells us the fundamental ontology of the domain we are interested in. This view is somewhat problematic as it seems to depend on our a priori common sense ideas rather than on empirical research.

As to we-intentions, consider again the case of singing the national anthem intentionally. On the distributive reading, the members of “we” sing the anthem separately or severally while in the collective case they sing the anthem jointly so that each of them nevertheless is in the agency relation to the end result of the anthem having been sung. I agree with Ludwig’s account about this in principle but argue that the plural subject group can be the agent of anthem singing in an approximate functional sense of acting (see Tuomela, 2013, ch. 2).

For Ludwig the plural subject group is not an agent, only its members are agents when acting intentionally on their relevant we-intentions. A we-intention is an intention of an individual that is directed toward an action of his while at the same time purporting to contribute to a collective action in which that individual has a part, which itself results from everyone having the same collective action plan associated with his intention when he acts as part of the group.

A central achievement of Ludwig’s account is that it gives detailed and innovative technical representations of many central notions and phenomena that action theory is about, although this takes place in individualistic terms and without the assumption of a *sui generis* “we-mode” or the like notions. The book purports to show that collective action can be appropriately analyzed in terms of individualistic notions.

We-intention is a central element in Ludwig’s account (see chapter 13) and also in a somewhat different sense in my own account that in contrast to his content-based account uses “thick”, *we-mode* we-intentions (e.g. in my 2013 book). It does not agree with Ludwig’s thesis that we-intentions should be analyzed solely on the basis of concepts which are already in play in understanding individual intentional action. The we-mode is with us in many cases of collective thinking and acting – people are typically cooperative and also disposed to act together in the we-mode. (Some experimental work by e.g. Colman supports this claim.)

I have argued that we-mode we-intentions are in many cases (e.g. Paretian collective action dilemmas) needed for social theorizing and for the best description and explanation of the social world. My account centrally involves the “adverbial” view given on pp. 36-38 of Tuomela (2013) concerned with somebody intending or believing (etc.) a content or acting on it. These activities can be characterized partly in terms of the phenomenal features of the intender’s awareness of the group as subject (and his experiencing others as co-subjects) when intending (etc.) and also in terms of what special overt “groupish” features the satisfaction of the intention involves. In the case of the I-mode we are dealing with individualistic activities of the kind in which a single agent intends as a single person in contrast to intending in the we-mode as a group member.

Keynotes

Stephen Butterfill

Cooperation and Motor Representation

University of Warwick

Sara Rachel Chant

From Minimal to Complex Collective Actions

Tulane University

Christian List

Levels: Descriptive, Explanatory, and Ontological

The London School of Economics and Political Science

Karen McComb

Sociality, communication and cognition in non-human animals

University of Sussex

Julie Zahle

Explanatory and Ontological Levels in the Individualism-Holism Debate

University of Copenhagen

From Minimal to Complex Collective Actions

Sara Rachel Chant

Abstract

Collective action theory models both the salient questions and answers for collectives after individual action theory. Since the first problem for individual action theory concerns the conditions for something's being an individual action, the first problem for collective action theory concerns the conditions for something's being a collective action. Likewise, since standard answers to the first problem in individual action concern the mental states of an agent (e.g. their beliefs, desires, plans and intentions), standard answers to the first problem in collective action theory concern the mental states of the group. Because this approach is straightforwardly applied from individuals, and individuals are saliently different from groups, providing a unified analysis across the wide range of actions taken by groups proves far more challenging than its individual counterpart. As a result, most theories of collective action focus on 'small-scale' actions to discuss the minimal conditions for something's being a collective action, with the hope that they can extend that minimalist account to cover the very wide array of complex actions of groups. In this talk, I will suggest that the standard minimalist proposals are not minimal enough, and that that mistake arises from the general approach taken in collective action theory. Once we recognize that mistake and consider truly minimal collective actions, we may begin to see the way toward a unified theory from minimal to complex collective actions.

Levels: Descriptive, Explanatory, and Ontological

Christian List

The London School of Economics and Political Science

Abstract

Scientists and philosophers frequently speak about levels of description, levels of explanation, and ontological levels. The aim of this talk is present a unified framework for modelling levels and to illustrate its relevance to social ontology. I give a general definition of a *system of levels* and show that it can accommodate descriptive, explanatory, and ontological notions of levels. I further apply the framework to some salient philosophical questions: (1) Is there a linear hierarchy of levels, with a fundamental level at the bottom? (2) Are there emergent properties, such as emergent indeterminism and randomness in social systems? (3) Are higher-level descriptions (such as “macro” descriptions) reducible to lower-level ones (such as “micro” descriptions)? Although I use the terminology of “levels”, the proposed framework can also represent “scales”, “domains”, or “subject matters”, where these are not linearly but only partially ordered by relations of supervenience or inclusion.

Sociality, communication and cognition in non-human animals

Karen McComb

University of Sussex

Abstract

Communication through vocal, visual and olfactory signals is a fundamental mechanism at the basis of animal and human social systems. In my talk I will explain how such signals, when presented to animals in naturalistic experiments (in isolated modalities or in combination), can be used to investigate the cognitive abilities that underlie complex social systems and reveal how animals interpret their social and emotional worlds. I will focus on four areas that are highly relevant to exploring origins in animals of advanced human traits:

- Numerical assessment
- Social knowledge
- Cross-modal recognition and representational knowledge
- Emotional communication

In considering these areas I will draw from my research on lions, elephants and horses and illustrate how it is possible to delve deeply into the mental lives of social animals using naturalistic paradigms. Such investigations have revealed a range of advanced cognitive abilities and high levels of social and emotional understanding in these non-verbal species that had hitherto been considered uniquely human.