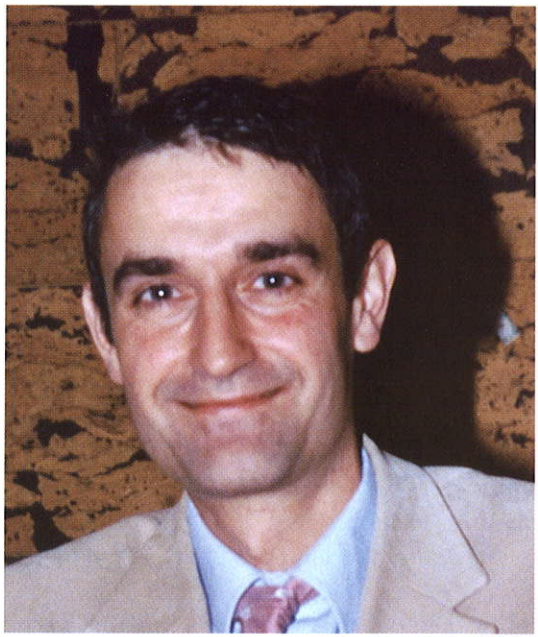
Collective Intentionality Analysis – Background, Advances and Future Prospects



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The field of study in which most of the research I have been carrying out over the last six years is placed has come to be called *collective intentionality analysis*. I shall start with some remarks on the background, nature and significance of this field of work (1.), before turning to a very brief sketch on the line of research I have taken and further developed in the work for which I was awarded the Latsis Prize of the University of St. Gallen in 2006 (2.). I will conclude my brief exposé with some remarks on some future perspectives of my research (3).

1.

Each of the words in the label "collective intentionality analysis" needs some explanation. What is *intentionality*, how can it be *collective*, and why should it be *analyzed* ?

I shall address each of these questions in turn. First, intentionality is a word some medieval philosophers made up to describe a particular (and indeed very peculiar) feature of some of our mental states. These mental states are characterized firstly by their having an *object* or some *content* (this feature of intentional states is sometimes also called *aboutness*). To give some examples, the mental state of fear is fear *of* something, doubt is doubt *about* something, and longing is longing *for* something, and so on. Not *all* mental states are intentional (think of moods or toothaches), not all intentionality is *exclusively* a matter of mental states (think of symbols), and not all intentional mental states are *conscious* (one does not have to take somebody to be currently thinking about the shape of the earth in order to say that she believes that the earth is round). Yet it is rarely disputed that the *basic kind* of intentionality is a matter of *mental states*, that intentionality is *central* to the mind, and I believe that those philosophers are right who claim that in principle at least, intentional mental states have to be *accessible to consciousness*.

Second, these mental states are directed towards the object in question in some particular *mode*. Fears, hopes, love and hate can all have the same object – though hopefully not by the same person at the same time –, but they capture (or are directed at) their object in a different *way* or

mode. This brings us to the third (and perhaps most problematic) feature of intentional mental states : they have a *subject*. There has to be somebody who *has* them as their source or bearer.

From René Descartes up until very recently, most philosophers have tended to think that the subject has to be an *individual*, an isolated *ego*. So how can intentionality be *collective* ? At the face of it at least, the answer is very simple. Not all intentional states are of the form *ego cogito* – "I think". There are some of the form *nos cogitamus* – "*we* think" – too. Some of our intentional states are a matter not of what we think (or *want*, or *feel*) *individually*, but of what we think (or want, or feel) *together*. It was only some twenty years ago that philosophers of the analytic tradition have finally turned their attention to this topic. Starting in the late eighties of the last century, more and more analyses of collective intentionality have been put forth. Gradually, an international research network has developed to cover this new field of research, with an increasing number of conferences and publications.

One might ask : what for ? Why analyze collective intentionality ? What is so important about these shared intentional states that there should be such a whole new branch of philosophical research devoted solely to this topic ? The short answer is : Collective intentionality is a phenomenon that is important and poorly understood at the same time. Let me first address the *importance* of the phenomenon, before turning to the conceptual problems. Put very bluntly : collective intentionality analysis answers the question concerning the *essence of the social*. Or, to put it with some more caution : Collective intentionality analysis opens new perspectives on basic questions concerning the ontology of groups, the basic structure of human relations and the nature of cooperation, coordination and social conventions. It is now widely recognized as a new topic of international philosophical research, and it has started to attract increasing attention from neighboring fields, such as social and economic theory, cognitive science, developmental and social psychology, and legal theory. In all of these areas, the conceptual tools developed in collective intentionality analysis have already proved to be useful.

In spite of this apparent success, however, there are persisting differences concerning the very nature of collective intentionality. This goes down to the most basic questions. As strange as it might sound to non-philosophers, it even seems that the more attention is devoted to the task, the more controversial it becomes just *who* intends *what* in *which mode* when intentionality is shared !

Very roughly, one can distinguish three interrelated main issues around which the most basic controversies in the current debate revolve :

- The structure issue : what is the precise structure of collective intentionality (concerning subject, mode and object) ?

- The collectivity issue : where – if at all – does the *collective* enter the picture : on the level of the content, the mode, or on the level of the subject ?

- The normativity issue : What is the relation between the individuals who share an intentional state : in how far does it involve (i.e. presuppose or generate) commitments and obligations ?

As is evident from these issues, collective intentionality analysis is not limited to action theory, from which it originated in the 80ies of the last century. It involves philosophy of mind (especially in the structure issue) as much as ethics (normativity issue) and ontology (collectivity issue).

2.

Let me now quickly turn to the second point of my short exposé, and give a rough idea of my own position in this debate. The base of the work I have been pursuing over the past six years is a critical assessment of the received accounts of collective intentionality. In the view I have developed, the works of the main protagonists of collective intentionality analysis – philosophers such as Raimo Tuomela, Margaret Gilbert, Michael E. Bratman, and John R. Searle – play a dual role. On the one hand, each of these accounts is acknowledged a fundamental

and indeed groundbreaking role for the understanding of one or several features of the phenomenon in question. On the other hand, these accounts are held to be symptomatic for the *conceptual difficulties* we have to overcome on our way to an adequate concept of collective intentionality. Since there is no space to elaborate on this in any detail here, I shall limit myself to one single catch-phrase, which I will cash out in three claims. The catch-phrase (which epitomizes the general thrust of the argumentative line I have been pursuing) is the following : We have to overcome the *Cartesian Brainwash* in order to understand the structure and role of collective intentionality. We have to break away from some deep-seated assumptions concerning the nature of the mind, which can loosely be associated with Descartes, and which are implicit in most of the received accounts of collective intentionality. This cashes out in three main claims :

- First : many philosophers believe that individuals somehow have to take themselves to be members of a group in order to share an intentional state. In this view, the sharedness of intentional states is a matter of some reflective attitude, however conscious or explicit. Against this view, I have argued that reflective awareness is neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition, and that it *presupposes* collective intentionality where it occurs. In other words, collective intentionality is *pre-reflexive*.

- Second : many authors have tried to reduce collective intentionality to sets of individual intentional states. Against this view, I take sides with those few authors who claim that no adequate reductionist account of collective intentionality can be given. There are intentional states of the form "we intend", and there are intentional states of the form "I intend". None of these two kinds is reducible to the other (even though there are I-intentional states that are "we-derivative", such as in the case when one intends to perform one's individual contribution to a shared intentional venture).

- Third : some influential authors claim that collective intentionality is compatible with the view that intentional states do not depend on the existence of anything outside the intending individual's mind.

> Against this view, I argue that collective intentionality is not so much a matter of internal features of individual minds, but of the *interrelations* between different minds (and indeed bodies). These interrelations, I claim, are not simply a *semantical* matter ; they have an *ontological* status. Where there is shared intentionality, there is genuine collectivity.

The general thrust of my argument is largely holistic. At the same time, I have argued that it is not enough to *overcome* the Cartesian Brainwash. There is more to do : the Cartesian Brainwash also needs to be *explained*. The question is : *if* collective intentionality is pre-reflective, irreducible, and relational, how come there are so many reflective, reducible and non-relational accounts around ? My answer to this question is that these individualistic misconceptions of collective intentionality are ultimately rooted in a feature of the phenomenon itself. It is part of the very *nature* of a particular class of joint intentional activities that they *appear* to involve no such thing as pre-reflexive, irreducible and relational sharedness.

3.

One last remark concerning the further outlooks of my research. Together with my small team of cooperators that is sponsored by the Swiss National Science Foundation as a part of my SNSF-Professorship at the University of Basel, I will pursue the following three topics in the future. First, we will turn our attention to a neglected *type of intentionality*. Whereas most philosophical analyses of collective intentionality have been focused on either shared *conative* (or practical) intentionality (i.e. shared intentions), or shared *cognitive* (or theoretical) intentionality (i.e. shared beliefs), next to no attention has been paid to a third mode of shared intentionality, i.e. shared *affective* intentionality. The question is : What does it mean to share an *emotion* ? Second, we will try to bring together those interested in the conceptual tools developed in collective intentionality analysis from as much disciplines and fields of research as possible in order to advance the current debate. And third, we are committed not to make the mistake that is so frequent in current analytical philosophical research : Instead of constantly

re-inventing the wheel, we shall thoroughly and systematically inquire into what earlier thinkers had to say on the topic, and make the results of their work available to the current debate. In particular, this concerns those highly pertinent, but largely forgotten analyses of shared intentionality in early Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy.

The Latsis-Prize of the University of St. Gallen greatly encourages me and my team in our hopes that our work will help to advance our understanding of the basic structure of the social world.