

thinking

togetherness

ANDREJ BOŽIČ (*Ed.*)

THINKING TOGETHERNESS

PHENOMENOLOGY AND SOCIALITY

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Marco di Feo

THE ONTOLOGICAL ROOT OF COLLECTIVE INTENTIONALITY

Abstract: The Husserlian notion of intentionality expresses *the transcendental correlation* between the conscious subject and the experienced object. Consciousness is always *consciousness of something*. In every intentional act, we find a fundamental structure, which is composed of three intrinsically connected parts: *the noetic pole* (the subject), *the intentional modality* (the act), and *the noematic pole* (the object). The notion of *collective intentionality* imposes the following question: what kind of consciousness occupies the place of subject? By comparing different types of intentionality (individual, intersubjective, and collective), I intend to demonstrate that collective intentionality can belong to a network of people who are bound to each other within an ontologically structured order of social unity. This membership *status* is rooted in the normative constraints that give existence and identity to the collective.

Keywords: collective intentionality, social ontology, social belonging, social normativity, collective consciousness.

I. Introduction

In the paper, I attempt to accentuate the ontological foundations of collective intentionality, in order to free it from the suspicion of subjective arbitrariness. The ontological foundation that I intend to show also distances the notion of collective intentionality from individualistic reductionism (methodological individualism),¹ which reduces it to the mere sum of individual acts. In order to achieve my purpose, I will proceed through two interconnected steps:

¹ On *methodological reductionism*, see: Epstein 2009 and 2014.

- First, I will free the notion of intentionality from its psychological reductionism (“psychologism”).²

- Second: I will show how it is possible to accept a non-reductionist notion of collective intentionality, without hypostatizing supra-individual entities of a substantial type.

II. Intentionality as essential dynamism of experience

When we try to analyze phenomena, such as social acts, collective subjects, relationships between individuals and communities, interactions between groups, etc., we must first of all address one of the most debated issues in social ontology: *collective intentionality*.³ In general, the concept of *collective intentionality* refers to intentions that allow us to act together, to feel the same emotions together, or to think in a common and shared way. In the current debate, these intentions are mostly understood as psychological and mental experiences. Collective intentionality would, therefore, correspond to the *will* to act, feel, or believe in certain contents (values, beliefs, etc.) together with other people.⁴

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From the phenomenological point of view, however, the concept of intentionality exceeds and precedes that of intention. It expresses the *essential* way, in which a consciousness can be *the consciousness of something*. Being conscious means being the pole of *a transcendental correlation* that inseparably binds consciousness and reality. Thanks to this correlation, reality is a *world* of perceptible, knowable, thinkable, intuitable, appreciable, and affirmable phenomena. In other words, intentionality is the transcendental condition, by which there is a world of facts, objects, and subjects, to which a consciousness can refer in terms of reality. This does not mean, however, that reality is a mere

² On the concept of *psychologism*, see the critical analysis of Husserl in: 1984 and 1988.

³ For a general introduction to social ontology, see: Gilbert 1989; Bratman 1999; Searle 2001; De Vecchi 2012; Epstein 2018; Baker 2019. On *collective intentionality*, see: Schweikard and Schmid 2021; Tuomela and Miller 1988; Tuomela 1989, 1991, 1995, 2005, 2007, and 2013; Gilbert 1990, 2009, and 2013; Searle 1990, 1995, and 2010; Pettit 2003, 2007, and 2009; Schmid 2003, 2012, and 2018; Petersson 2007; Tomasello 2014; De Vecchi 2011, 2012, and 2014.

⁴ According to Searle, for example, the notion of intentionality simply indicates *having an intention of*, that is, having certain types of beliefs and cultural references.

construct of mental categories. In a realistic framework, intentionality expresses the correlation that a conscious subjectivity can have with *the thing itself*. An intentional act is a *stance* that allows the subject to be in the presence of something or somebody. It is the mode, through which conscious subject (*the noetic pole*) takes a stand in the face of the thing (*the noematic pole*), being in the presence of it.⁵ There are several kinds of acts: perceptual, cognitive, linguistic, intuitive, etc.⁶ In each intentional act, we find a fundamental structure, which is composed of three intrinsically connected parts: *the noetic pole* (the subject), *the intentional mode* (the act), and *the noematic pole* (the object). This correlation is a sort of *transcendental in rebus*, because any kind of conscious experience is always realized in this way. Intentionality does not therefore mean having a psycho-physical desire or a volitional intention. It means *to be in the presence of*. It means to be the conscious correlate of a phenomenal givenness. Collective intentionality is not reducible to the sum of individual intentionalities, because they are *two essentially different ways of the consciousness–world correlation*. My consciousness of a givenness x and your consciousness of the same x do not in any way generate a collective pseudo-consciousness of x.

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III. The difficult case of collective intentionality

As long as we talk about individual intentionality, there is no doubt about the elements that constitute it: an individual consciousness (*noetic pole*), a certain type of individual intentional act (*intentional mode*), and a given object (*noematic pole*).⁷

For example: “I admire this sunset.” (i) “I” is the individual noetic pole; (ii) “I *admire*” is the intentional act, through which “I” place myself in the presence of something (this sunset); (iii) “*this sunset*” is the noematic pole, which gives itself to my consciousness through my intentional act.

⁵ On the Husserlian notion of *noesis* and *noema*, see Husserl 1988.

⁶ On the phenomenological notion of *act*, see: Scheler 2000; Mulligan 1987; De Vecchi 2017.

⁷ There is a heated debate around the question if a pure individual consciousness really exists. Indeed, every personal consciousness fully emerges as such only thanks to its original belonging to a certain community. On this topic, see: Scheler 2000 and Zahavi 2021.

The problem arises by means of the following question: is there a real collective intentionality, in which *the noetic pole* is not an individual, but a group?

If we analyze a collective experience, for example: “We admire this sunset,” then several ontological problems seem to arise. (i) About “we”: does it indicate a supra-individual subjectivity? (ii) About “we *admire*”: is there really a plural subject who performs this act? (iii) About “*this sunset*”: can we consider it a real collective givenness, that is, the intentional correlate of a real “we”?

230 The three mentioned problems are rooted in the central ontological problem: *the nature of the bearer*. On the one hand, there are those who believe that collective intentionality is not merely individual. Its bearer would then be the collective (i.e., “*the Irreducibility Claim*”).⁸ On the other hand, there are those who argue that only individual subjects can be the bearers of intentionality. Consequently, collective intentionality would be nothing more than the aggregation of independent individual acts (i.e., “*the Individual Ownership Claim*”).⁹ Reductionism postulates necessary coincidence between consciousness and psycho-physical corporeity of its bearer. If the bearer is a flesh-and-blood subject, then his consciousness can be only individual. Consequently, those who maintain the existence of a collective intentionality must also support the existence of a supra-individual subjectivity. Therefore, they must demonstrate how it is embodied in a psycho-physical corporeity, which is different from that of the individual. In my opinion, this incarnation, which is ontologically impossible, is not necessary. From my ontological point of view, the intrinsic correlation is not between subjective corporeity and consciousness, but between consciousness and the subject’s status of

8 According to Schmid (2018, 234), there are four essential dynamics of self-consciousness: “(a) self-identification, (b) self-validation, (c) self-commitment, and (d) self-authorization.” He argues that they can also belong to a collective experience. “What’s collective about collective intentionality is that it is plurally self-known. This form of the intentionality in question is the subject, and it is plural. Subjectivity does not only come in the singular, but in the plural, too. The differences between the ways in which subjectivity is realized in the singular and the plural and that are obvious in the different ways in which the functions of self-identification, self-validation, self-commitment, and self-authorization are realized can only surprise on the base of the mistaken assumption that subjectivity is always singular.” (Ibid., 241.)

9 On this topic, see Epstein 2018.

independence. To be the bearer of an individual consciousness, the subject would have to be totally independent. That is, he would be able to take a position on something in a completely independent way with respect to any type of external constraint. If we take into account the normal course of our days and all the occasions when we have to make choices, then we see how this condition is quite rare. In most cases, we intentionally relate to the world as *parts of wholes* that include us, motivate us, empower us, etc. In these instances, common beliefs, mutual duties and rights, shared values, sentimental ties, role responsibilities, etc., come into play. In most cases, then, the social whole, of which we are a part, takes a stand in the face of reality through our intentional acts. Although this happens differently from person to person, because each of us is unique and unrepeatable, the noetic correlate of our intentional act is nevertheless often a collective consciousness. This consciousness is structured by our social bonds and acts through them, in compliance with the obligations and responsibilities that they impose on us.¹⁰

The ontologically central point is as follows: when subjects authentically assume the *status* of members, then they undergo *an ontological change*. They become *constituent parts of social wholes* that *bind* them.¹¹ *The root of their collective intentionality is the normative structure that gives existence and identity to their group membership*. When normative constraints organize an authentic *us*, then they are capable of producing a real *we*, that is, a collective consciousness.

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Norms are then the ontological foundation of every possible collective subject, in which an authentic collective intentionality can take shape. There are informal (such as those that depend on a sentimental bond) and formal norms (such as those incorporated in a law). They allow members to know what others are doing (Tuomela and Miller 1998; Bratman 1999), to converge in reciprocity (Gilbert 1990), and to be confident that everyone will do their part (Schmid 2013).

¹⁰ The bond also works in case of transgression. In fact, even when we break a bond with a certain act, the noetic pole of our choice is the collective consciousness, to which the bond refers.

¹¹ For an introduction to Husserl's social ontology, see Caminada 2015 and 2019. For a possible deepening of the phenomenological approach, see: Schütz 1962, 1970, and 1976; Salice and Schmid 2016.

IV. Collective subjects vs. social aggregates

When I talk about collective subjects in my ontological framework, I am not referring to any kind of social aggregate, in which two or more people share a certain type of experience. Rather, I always refer to *wholes* of a social nature, that is, to forms of a social unit, in which the cooperation between people depends on a plot of structural and normative constraints. Only in this case people become *non-independent parts* of their group. This new condition concerns both *the horizontal relationships* of dependence, or co-dependence, with other members, as well as *the vertical relationship* of dependence with the whole collective. *The assumption of this twofold dimension of constraints is precisely the root of collective intentionality.* A real social whole has its own normative structure, which assigns roles, establishes rules, and organizes joint actions. It also has its own specific identity, that is, a set of emerging characteristics, which are irreducible to those of individual parts (e.g., the democratic being of a state, the oppressive being of a sect, the winning being of a team, etc.). Thanks to this emerging level of features, it also holds a specific causal power (e.g., a state can declare war, a sect can expel its members, a team can create new products, etc.). If there is *a real we*, ontologically founded, then the subject “we” manifests the existence of constraints that impose, or motivate, many individual subjects to think, feel, and act in a non-independent way. The possessive adjective “our” (*our* thoughts, *our* feelings, *our* actions, etc.) precisely expresses *the belonging of us* to an ontologically-founded *we*, without which *our* thoughts, feelings, actions, etc., would not exist.

All the other forms of collaboration, or sharing, do not establish real social wholes, but only social aggregates. Therefore, they are not able to found a real collective intentionality.

In a very general sense, a social aggregation is a simple sum or sharing of individual acts, which do not require a vertical constraint of belonging. For example, we have an aggregation of individual acts, when two subjects listen to music, at the same concert, or walk together for a stretch of the road. They are actually doing something together and they have to coordinate in some way (e.g., one walks at the same speed as the other, one keeps to the right and the other to the left, etc.). However, this intersubjective coordination

does not require a collective consciousness, according to which one *must* act in a non-independent way with respect to others. This type of sharing does not generate a normative structure, which is capable of giving life to an ontologically emerging *we*. So, we can understand these cases as examples of social interactions that do not change the *status* of ontological independence. They simply involve an intersubjective intentionality, which is the interaction between individual acts, that is, acts detached from a higher order of unity.¹²

V. The noetic pole of collective intentionality

Ontological conditions of the subject (dependence, co-dependence, or independence) establish the modes of her/his intentional positioning. The latter is configured as a certain *x-intention* and is declined in the following essential forms:

(i) *I-intention (individual intentionality)*: subject takes a stand towards the surrounding world *in an individual way, starting from her/his ontological condition of independence*;

(ii) *us-intention (or intention-of-us, intersubjective intentionality)*: several individual subjects take a *stand* towards the surrounding world *in a shared way, saving their ontological condition of independence*;

(iii) *we-intention (collective intentionality)*: a *group* of individuals takes a stand towards the surrounding world *in a collective way*, according to the normative and structural system that gives shape and identity to it.¹³

Therefore, a real collective intentionality is not a mere psycho-physical or mental faculty, which can be arbitrarily activated. Its intentional acts have a specific and original way, which is essentially different from that of an *I-intention*. The *we-intention* is the intentional dynamism that allows thoughts, values, ideas, etc., of a group to take a stand in the world through the coordinated and joint intentional acts of its members. It is the *transcendental*

12 For the essential differences between several types of intentionality, see De Vecchi 2011 and 2014. On the phenomenological notion of *grounding*, see Husserl's notion of *Fundierung* (1984). On this topic, see also: De Monticelli and Conni 2008; De Monticelli 2018 and 2020; di Feo 2022a and 2023.

13 On the notion of *we-intention*, see: Tuomela and Miller 1988; Tuomela 2003 and 2005; Roth 2017; Epstein 2018; Schmid 2018; Schweikard and Schmid 2021.

world-consciousness correlation that characterizes the acts of those who belong to a collective. The bearers of a real *we-intention* (members) are always interconnected subjects who find themselves in the ontological condition of thinking, feeling, and acting as *relatively non-independent parts of a social whole*.¹⁴ Going back to the previous example, when *we admire this sunset* collectively, *we* know and feel *we* share this experience together. Each of us then perceives qualities of the landscape as something that strikes all group. While this vision strikes me, it also affects the other members of my group. In addition, I am also struck by what others are experiencing, so much so that their joy becomes mine. This is not a sub-personal emotional contagion, as in mass phenomena, but is a deep sharing, which has its roots in our bonds of co-belonging.¹⁵ This experience is, indeed, impossible for those who do not belong to the group. They can share this experience with us, but never in the form of *intentional interdependence*. In other types of collective experience, moreover, this interdependence can take more structured and complex forms, such as those that characterize the agency of a team or the institutional organization of an institutional collective subject.

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In summary: *collective intentionality is a specific and distinct form of intentional correlation, in which the noetic pole is an ontological concatenation of people who collectively take a stand in the world.*

VI. The noematic pole of collective intentionality

Jointly, *the noematic pole* of this particular intentional modality is *a collective givenness*, which is originally given to the whole collective. This characterization does not depend on the accidental projection of individual subjects that feel it,

¹⁴ Subjects fully integrated into a group are authentically and spontaneously bearers of *we-thoughts, we-desires, we-intentions, we-actions*, etc. At the same time, since no social constraint should compromise a space of autonomy and personal self-determination, a good integration does not inhibit the dimension of *I-intention*, through which individuals take their own standpoints towards the surrounding world. On the topic of *identification*, see Salice and Miyazono 2019. On the topic of *social integration*, from a phenomenological and ontological point of view, see: di Feo 2019 and 2022b.

¹⁵ This sunset, which we are watching, could still be a moment that we were waiting to live together. Therefore, it would be originally and intentionally given as an event for *us*.

think it, experience it, *as if it were* so. It is collective from the beginning onward. For example, insults against the community strike it in its entirety. Once again, this is possible, because there is a pre-existing *we*. Within it, every member grasps this givenness as something that concerns, affects, threatens, etc., the entire community. Therefore, the collective givenness is not the object of individual experiences. It is not the correlate of individual consciousnesses, but is a collective event, which is addressed to the entire collective. What we think, desire, feel, etc., in the *we-intentional modality* is properly and originally *given to us*, in *our* experience, because *we are an ontological unit with its own collective consciousness*.

Some eminent philosophers argue that the collective configuration of certain experiences depends on their content. For example, according to Bratman (1999), a common purpose is a necessary and sufficient condition for uniting subjects and making them act jointly. The weak point of this thesis is the failure to identify the ontological conditions, for which a purpose can be properly collective. The difference between common and collective purposes is precisely the following: while the former can motivate relationships and interactions between independent subjects, the latter can exist only as the noematic correlate of an ontologically existing *we*. That is, the ontological distinction between social aggregates and social wholes is missing. According to other philosophers, collective intentionality is configured as such by the *mode* of the act. For example, Tuomela (2003 and 2007) highlights the difference between the individual act (“*I-mode*”) and the plural act (“*we-mode*”), and also identifies the relationship between this second type of intentionality and group membership. However, dismissing a deep ontological investigation, he focuses on modal variations of the act, concluding that intentionality depends on the type of act. On the contrary, I argue that intentional dynamism configures both the modality of the act and the collective nature of the givenness.

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VII. Conclusion

Collective intentionality is *an essential dynamism of human consciousness*, which is different from the individual as well as the intersubjective one. Its ontological foundation is the existence of an emerging social unit, in which the interconnection between horizontal constraints (part–part) and vertical

constraints (part–whole) gives people a real *status* of belonging. This status becomes the source of a real collective intentionality to the extent that it motivates a coordinated and joint participation. If such conditions are realized, then members become bearers of a collective mental dimension.

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