Commonality and Particularity in Ethics

20. Ibid.
21. Gerald Massey in 'Tom, Dick and Harry and all the King’s Men,' 89–107, discusses predicates such as 'moved the piano' which are 'multi-grade' in that they can take conjunctive subjects, which he treats as 'sum-individuals'.
26. In David Lewis’s analysis, where there is common knowledge of something, there will be a state of affairs, A, the 'basis' for the common knowledge, which all the common knowers believe to obtain, which indicates to them all that each has reason to believe it, and indicates to each the slightly more complex state of affairs which is common knowledge, on this basis. A, the basis, gives them whatever is peculiar to this particular piece of common knowledge, as distinct from what they need to believe about each other to believe any common knowledge among them to be a possibility. See Lewis, op. cit., 56–57.
32. See my Tanner Lectures on 'Trust,' Tanner Lectures on Human Values, vol. XIII, for more on how trusting involves the transfer of discretionary powers.
33. Bratman uses this phrase in 'Shared Intention,' given at the Alan Donagan Memorial Symposium, University of Chicago, September, 1992. A later version of this paper appears in Ethics 104 (October 1993), 97–113.
35. Elster, op. cit., 150.
37. Elster, op. cit., 141.
38. Wilfrid Sellars, Science and Metaphysics, Ch. VII, XVI–XX.
40. Bob Brandom, Making it Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment.
41. See David Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature, Bk. III, Pt. II, Sect. II.
42. See Sellars (1968) loc. cit.

2 Why are Philosophers of Action so Anti-Social?

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1. INTRODUCTION

Philosophers of action in the analytic tradition 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 centred on what individual agents do or intend and on the reasons each has for acting. The standard assumption has been that there can be actions only where there are basic actions – actions one does not do by doing something – construed as ways in which we move our bodies. Since each of us has a distinct body and moving it as a basic action is something we all do on our own, there can be no basic actions which are social. The hope is to show how social actions can be derived from basic actions, but analysis seldom gets that far.

There are exceptions, and recently there have been some careful discussions of social agency, by Michael Bratman, Margaret Gilbert, John Searle, Raimo Tuomela, and others. But these discussions, while taking social action seriously, display an anti-social bias. 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 so doing, as it would be to think of playing a Mozart quartet, getting married, playing football, or passing a law, none of which we could on our own.

Michael Bratman argues that a discussion of social agency ought to start with types of actions we could do on our own, because otherwise we risk assuming the very idea of social intention we wish to analyse. In so arguing, he assumes that social intentions are problematic in ways individual intentions are not, an assumption characteristic of most recent discussions.
of social agency: social agency must be explained in terms of individual agency, for the former is problematic in the way the latter is not. This priority given individual agency is taken by some to require showing that social actions or attitudes can be reduced to individual actions or attitudes. Others reject reductionism, claiming that social attitudes cannot be defined in terms of individual attitudes since the content of social attitudes must be mutually referring in distinctive ways. But the anti-social bias remains because even when the content of the attitudes is social, the attitudes themselves are ascribed not to social groups per se but to their members.

My aim in what follows is to undermine individualist assumptions about the analytic and explanatory priority of individual agency. I shall do this, first, by arguing that there is as much reason to ascribe action and attitudes to social agents as to individual agents, that indeed there are respects in which individual agency presupposes social agency. It follows that there are genuine social agents, that we can ascribe intentions, beliefs and other attitudes to such social agents as social agents, and that they can act for reasons in the same sense that individual agents can. Second, I want to consider why philosophers remain in the grip of individualist assumptions and hence regard social agency as problematic and requiring special treatment, resisting the sensible idea that there really are social agents and that social reality is as ultimate and well-founded as non-social.

Why are Philosophers of Action so Anti-Social?

2. 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 the actions they perform, and of their having and expressing intentions, beliefs and other attitudes. I want to say something about each of these in turn.

First, the agents of action are often social groups. 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 normally 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, we intend to appoint a new President of the University, and so on.

What I have just said reflects American rather than British English. Americans say, 'the government is planning to do such and such' whereas the British tend to say 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 which were not established by fiat. The kind of 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.

Another difference is that collective agents involve structures which institutionalize authority relations. These enable the decisions of certain members to be decisions of the social group, and they 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.

Plural agents and collective agents are alike, however, in that neither kind is identical with individual persons. The Senate does things individual senators cannot do, like 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.6 This is obscured in the case of plural agents if we are not careful with our examples. Playing a Schubert quintet together is not something anyone can do alone – not something an individual agent can do – and the same is true of quarrelling, playing football, or getting married. That is not the case with our holding up a long board so we can get it nailed in place; it would be very difficult for either of us to do it alone, but it could be done. This particular act token is, nevertheless, the act of a plural agent because the two of us do it as the two of us. The act is indivisible among individual agents: our holding up the board cannot be divided among us. That means more than that there is one common act type we both perform; it means that there is only one act token we both perform, because we perform it not as individuals but as a plural agent.

3. SOCIAL ACTIONS

This brings us to the second sense in which agency is social, namely, that there are actions which social agents perform – call them 'social actions' – and which are not performed by individual agents, even when they are members of the social group in question. To clarify this, I want to make a couple of distinctions. The first is a distinction between types of action descriptions. Every action is describable in many ways. Thus an act token – the particular action done by an agent at a place and time – may be writing a cheque, paying a bill, using a pen and (accidentally) spilling some ink. The action actually performed is describable in all these ways; I have given four descriptions of the same act, which is intentional under the first three but not under the fourth. I want to distinguish three types of such descriptions.

First, there are action descriptions which are coherently ascribable only to actions which individual persons can perform. An example is taking a walk. Although we can take a walk together, each of us has to walk on our own; there are no social agents who walk. Other examples are raising an arm, playing the violin, writing on the blackboard. Groups cannot (literally) do any of those things, so let's call them individual types of act descriptions.

Second, there are action descriptions which are ascribable only to actions social agents can perform – it is incoherent to think of individuals as performing them – which we will call social types of action descriptions. Examples are playing a quartet or symphony, passing a law, waging a war, outvoting the opposition. No individual could (literally) do any of those things, not for lack of strength or talent, but because conceptually they require social agents, which are 'composed of' individuals, though the act cannot be divided among them. An individual can play in a symphony orchestra, but she cannot play a symphony; only the orchestra can do that. An individual can contribute to waging a war, but he cannot literally wage it; only a military organization can do that.

Finally, there are action descriptions ascribable to actions performable either by individual or social agents; let us call them neutral types of action descriptions. Examples are moving a piano, building a house, playing baseball, writing a cheque (as opposed to writing a personal cheque), quarrelling. An individual can play baseball, but so can a team, which is a social agent. Individuals quarrel with each other but so do families or companies.

I have defined these types of descriptions so that any action must be a token of at least one of the types, though no action can both be a token of an individual and of a social type or description (but it can be a token of one of those types and also of a neutral type). Thus the agent which plays a symphony (an orchestra) or passes a law (a legislature) cannot also walk or raise an arm, and vice versa. The orchestra can, however, build a house, quarrel with its rival, or move a piano, all of which can also be done by individual agents.

This distinction is not meant to carry a lot of theoretical weight; the individual-social distinction, for example, is surely not a sharp one, and there are other ways of contrasting individual with non-individual actions. But it has value in showing that we have a grip on a distinction between social and individual actions and that we speak of the former as straightforwardly as the latter.

There is a second distinction which cuts across this one, having to do with preconditions for ascribing action
descriptions of each of the types. Some types of action descriptions presuppose that other agents are performing or have performed certain actions and some do not. For example, while I as an individual can get married, my getting married presupposes that someone will marry me, which means that I can get married only if we get married, which is a plural agent: getting married is not divisible among the parties, for there is numerically one action we both perform. Exactly the same is true of quarrelling, which also assumes a plural agent of the one quarrel we are having. On the other hand, I can take a walk even if no one takes a walk with me.

Getting married or quarrelling are cases of actions individuals can perform only if a plural agent performs them at the same time; hence they illustrate one way in which individual agency depends on social agency. The converse is also true: we can get married only if I get married, we can quarrel only if I quarrel. There is reciprocal dependence of social and individual agency, and this is common. These are cases where the social action and the individual action take the same description: I can get married only if we get married, quarrel only if we quarrel. Other cases involve different descriptions. I can score a goal only if there are two teams playing football. I can play violin in a quartet only if there is a quartet playing some piece of music. Again, there is interdependence; teams play football only because individuals kick a ball around; quartets play music only because individuals play instruments — though the actions performed by the individuals and by the groups take different descriptions.

In all these cases what is presupposed is another action, social or individual, going on at the same time. There are many examples where what is presupposed is that another action has gone on. No one could vote unless other actions had been performed, most of which are social — such as a government establishing procedures for voting, something an individual cannot do. Indeed, there would be no such thing as voting — not even the intention to vote — had not many social actions been performed. Cashing a cheque is exactly parallel; an individual can cash a cheque only because of many previously performed actions which only social agents could perform. These are cases where content itself depends on social agency.

Such social agency no doubt presupposes in turn individual actions; governments and banks come about as the result of many actions of many individuals. These individual actions in turn presuppose social actions: for example, that there is a community with a common language, and so on. It is pointless to establish conceptual or explanatory priority among the actions of individuals and the actions of social groups. We switch back and forth effortlessly, sometimes explaining the social in terms of the individual, sometimes the individual in terms of the social.

This parity of individual and social actions shows itself in the case with which they can be conceptualized in parallel ways. Consider the following three ways.

First, there is no action, individual or social, where there is no intentional action. What distinguishes mere behaviour — where things happen but there is no agency — from behaviour which is doing something, is that agency involves behaviour which is intentional in some respect.

Second, wherever there is behaviour which is intentional, there is also behaviour which is in some respects not intentional. These two points can be expressed by saying that there is no action unless there is behaviour which is intentional under some description, but that behaviour is never intentional under every description.

Third, intentional behaviour is paradigmatically behaviour which is rational in the light of an agent’s reasons for acting and which the agent performs for those reasons. Intentional actions are in general, therefore, though not necessarily, actions done for reasons.

These claims, assumed in most conceptions of individual action, apply straightforwardly to social action. The Senate acts only on an occasion when it acts intentionally 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 deficit was too large. Its reason for action did not include increasing unemployment or angering citizens, so it was not intentional in those respects. Or a quartet intentionally plays Beethoven’s last quartet, but unintentionally wakes up a baby or inspires a bad review. The same analysis, so familiar for the actions of individuals, applies straightforwardly to social action generally.
4. INTERLUDE: THE INDIVIDUALIST REACTION

What I have said so far seems to me straightforward and unproblematic. But many philosophers, even among those sympathetic to social action, will think I have already gone too far. That there are social actions may be admitted 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 those who think I have gone too far will not take this indivisibility as meaning that there is one token action the group itself performs. Take four persons playing a string quartet. If this is a genuine social action, then, I maintain, there is one token action which the quartet performs — playing a quartet — which involves a complex pattern of blended sounds which cannot be divided among the players. The four players also perform actions of their own, and they each engage in movements of their own bodies, but there is also a token action performed by the group and only by the group. As far as the group itself is concerned, there is numerically one act which it alone performs, namely, producing those joint sounds which constitute the quartet.9

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 grounds 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; only the four together can do that. 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 these philosophers still deny that there is one token action performed by the quartet. They claim, rather, that the only token actions are performed by each individual player. What marks out these actions as social is that the action of each individual player takes a type of description it would not take were it simply an individual action. This is the point reductionism misses 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 so on, 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 involve types of descriptions the latter do not.

But social actions still consist of numerically different act tokens performed by distinct individuals. For these philosophers, what we mean by saying that a social action is performed by a social group is not that there is a token action the group itself performs, but that there are individual persons who act in ways they would not act were they not in the group. This anti-social bias is more subtle than individualist reductionism in that it recognizes a difference between social and individual actions. But the difference is not a difference in the agents, which remain individual, each performing a distinct action but in the kinds of descriptions taken by the actions performed by individuals. Social actions differ from individual actions in the descriptions they exemplify but the agents of both are individuals and not social groups.

5. SOCIAL ATTITUDES

The immediate reason for construing social agency in this anti-social way is to avoid having to ascribe intentions, beliefs, and other intentional attitudes to social agents as social. A great deal of energy and ingenuity has been expended in showing how to avoid that, which in my view is beside the point: ascribing intentional attitudes to social agents is problematic only for those in the grip of the bias against the social.

Since social actions are not divisible among individual agents, the attitudes which social agents express in their actions should also not be divisible among individual agents. Such attitudes should be ascribed to social agents as social agents. By social attitudes, then, I do not mean intentional attitudes with social content. Nor do I mean attitudes directed toward some social rather than individual good, or which
Involves social rather than individual interests. I mean attitudes whose subjects are social agents as social agents.

There are numerous examples of social attitudes in this sense. A corporation has desires and intentions, and while its members may share the content of those attitudes, they belong to the corporation. More typically, its members will not share its attitudes, so that the range of attitudes ascribable to a corporation is not ascribable to any individual in the corporation. Indeed, there may be attitudes ascribable to the corporation which are not ascribable to any of its members. The corporation may, for example, aim at a certain level of sales, 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). But even if the corporate attitudes are always shared by some members, they are corporate attitudes, not attitudes of individual agents.

The examples may be extended. Beliefs, desires, and hopes are ascribed to universities, churches, governments, families, and orchestras, which their members may or may not share, but which in any case are the beliefs, desires and hopes of the social group. No doubt social agents would not have attitudes if their members did not, and surely in most cases the attitudes of social groups reflect the attitudes of its members, though they need not. But the converse is also true: individuals not only reflect the attitudes of the groups to which they belong, but there are attitudes they would not have did the group not have them. Expecting to vote in the next election presupposes that the government plans to hold one. Believing that someone is married assumes that the state also believes she is. Wanting to cash a cheque presupposes banks which intend to cash them.

While I do not think this is problematic, many philosophers do. Reductionists argue that social attitudes are no different from the attitudes of individual agents. They claim both that only individuals have attitudes and that so-called social attitudes have no distinctive contents which the attitudes of solitary individuals do not have. The beliefs or desires of a church, for example, are just the attitudes of its members; only its members have attitudes and their contents do not presuppose any social group. To speak of what a church believes is to speak of what is believed in common by its members, beliefs they could in principle have all by themselves.

Individualists who take social action seriously reject reductionism about social attitudes (as they do about social actions), maintaining there are attitudes with distinctively social contents which solitary individuals could 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 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.

A proposal of this kind does succeed in marking out a special class of contents which attitudes ascribed to solitary agents could not have, since the contents of mutually referring attitudes require a social group. But attitudes with social contents are still not social attitudes in my sense if they are ascribed only to individual agents and not to social agents.

Indeed, the point of this kind of proposal is precisely to avoid ascribing attitudes to agents other than individuals. This, I maintain, is a mistake; social agency requires not only that attitudes have social content but that they be ascribed to social agents.

The reason for this is most evident in the case of intention, because it raises difficulties even for the idea of social content. I have just summarized a proposal about how to explain the social content of belief in terms of contents which are mutually referring, which aims to show that 'we believe' can be understood in terms of the mutually referring 'I believe's' of members of the group. On this view, social beliefs are individual beliefs with distinctive common contents.

While the idea of common contents is relatively straightforward for most intentional attitudes, it is not for intentions, because an intention necessarily includes a reference to the one who has the intention. An agent can intend only to do something herself. She cannot intend anyone else to do some act, but at best intend to do something herself that gets someone else to do the act. I cannot intend you to buy me a dinner; I can only intend to do something which might result
in that. But if the content of an intention always includes an implicit reference to the agent who intends, it seems that different agents could not share the very same intention. Art can intend to go to a film and Mary can intend to do the same; but their intentions do not have common content, since Art’s intention is his going to the film and Mary’s is her going to the film. That is the special problem of how intentions can have common contents.

Now, if there are no intentions with common content, then the notion of ‘we intend’ cannot be understood in terms of the notion of ‘I intend’. Unlike the case of belief, it will not be possible to explain the social content of intention in terms of common contents. We will either have to construe social actions in terms of intentions with individual contents or recognize that intentions are social attitudes to be ascribed straightforwardly to social agents.

The first alternative is unacceptable. Social actions cannot involve intentions with individual contents because of the special character of intentions just noted. If an agent can intend only to do something herself, then the only intentions an agent can fulfill by her actions are her own. Intentions are in this respect different from, say, desires; you can fulfill my desire to have you buy me a dinner but you cannot fulfill my intention to have you buy me a dinner (the intention expressed by ‘I intend you to buy me a dinner’) because that is not a coherent intention. 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.

Much labour has been expended on avoiding the ascription of intentions to social agents by trying to show that it is, after all, possible to construct a notion of shared intentions with common contents. A number of proposals have been made; I will briefly summarize Michael Bratman’s, which illustrates the general character of the proposals. Here is his analysis of a shared intention:12

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.

This analysis of ‘we intend...’ is like the analysis of ‘we believe...’ in terms of mutually referring attitudes, an analysis which made the content of ‘we-believe’ distinct from the content of ‘I believe’ but which ascribed those contents only to individual agents. Bratman claims that this analysis of ‘we intend...’ is sufficient to give us an intention with social contents which a social action can fulfill, thus avoiding the objection that social actions performed by social agents cannot fulfill the intentions of individual agents. 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 proposal. Indeed, Bratman says that on his view, a shared intention is ‘not an attitude in any mind.... Rather, it is a state of affairs that consists primarily in attitudes (none of which are themselves the shared intention) of the participants and interrelations between those attitudes.’[107f]

This analysis of shared intention does not ascribe intentions to social agents. A social intention, Bratman notes, ‘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.’[108; my emphasis] But it does not solve the problem of social intention, because the proposed solution depends on the introduction of a technical notion of intention which begs the question. The problem of shared intention is to see how an intention ascribed to an individual agent can be fulfilled by an action performed by a social agent. To resolve that, Bratman introduces the technical notion of intention that, which is like ordinary intention except that it does not require that what the agent intends should 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 of intention that which plays the key role in Bratman’s analysis of ‘we
intend...' – it is what clause (1) of the analysis is about – it is not surprising that we get a notion of shared intention with common content. The analysis rests on postulating a technical notion of intention whose point is just to permit common content, which begs the question at issue, namely, whether intentions can have common content. 13

Bratman says that the notion of intention that is not 'some new and distinctive attitude'. 'The attitude we are appealing to is intention – an attitude already needed in an account of individual intelligent agency. But we are allowing this attitude to include in its content joint activity.' 102 That gives the game away. Like other individualists, Bratman takes for granted an attitude needed in an account of individual agency, and if it doesn't work for social agency, he fixes it by 'allowing' it to 'include in its content joint activity'. The question is why we should begin with individual agency as problematic and try to extend it to social agency, by postulation if necessary. Why the bias against recognizing that it is as unproblematic to ascribe attitudes to social agents as to individual agents?

6. ATTITUDES, REASONS, AND THE CAUSAL THEORY OF ACTION

It is, of course, true that 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 are necessarily connected issues. 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 restricted (though perhaps there are metaphorical senses in which social groups weep or laugh). Much more could be said about the kind of attitudes that can be ascribed to social groups – once we clear away the individualist assumption that none can be so ascribed. The question remains why not give up that assumption and recognize that some attitudes are ascribable to social agents and some are not, just as some attitudes are ascribable to individual agents and some are not.

The answer is a mistaken but entrenched view about what such attitudes are, together with confusions about how they are related to actions and to reasons for action. These mistakes and confusions coalesce in the causal theory of action – the received view among analytic philosophers of action14 – which I regard as mistaken, not least because it rules out any adequate conception of social agency. Individualists take the causal theory of action for granted and make what they can of social agency. I suggest we admit the reality of social agency and let the causal theory go.

The causal theory begins with two claims. First, that there is no action where there is no intentional action: behaviour is action only if it is intentional under some description. Second, that intentional behaviour is paradigmatically behaviour justified in the light of the agent's reasons for acting and which they perform for that reason. These are, I agree, claims any adequate conception of action must admit, but they do not yield a causal theory of action. The latter construes these claims in a distinctive way. Its basic thesis is that intentional behaviour is behaviour with rational causes. More precisely, behaviour – various motions of our body – is intentional (under some description) if and only if the mental states whose contents rationally justify the agent's behaviour also cause it (in the right way).

This omits subtleties and ignores differences among alternative versions of the theory. But it is enough for our purposes, for unpacking it yields a number of claims which any version of a causal theory of action must endorse but which are not consistent with ascribing attitudes to social agents. Let me spell out these claims.

1) Intentional behaviour consists in motions of the agent's body; that is, when we describe what an agent does as of such and such a type, what we are describing are motions of that person's body. Those motions constitute the tokens which constitute distinct actions.

2) When we describe what agents do, we describe their bodily motions in terms of all sorts of things: their causes, their effects, what they are in virtue of their context or various conventions, and so on. Those yield the descriptions in terms of which we describe actions. For example, if I describe
someone's action as trying to get the chair's attention, I describe the movement of their arm in terms of its causes and effects, in the context of certain conventions. We seldom describe an agent's behaviour in terms of bodily motions though it does consist of them.

3) Behaviour, whether or not intentional, consists of the same kinds of bodily motions. Whether I intentionally break a window, accidentally do so while distracted, or do so as a result of someone's action as trying to get the chair's attention, I de-

The point I want to emphasize here is twofold. On the one hand, constituting causes must carry the rational (justifying) content: the causes must be the reasons. Conversely, nothing can be a reason for an agent's acting as she did if the reason is not a cause of her behaviour: the reasons must be causes.

4) The direct causes of an agent's bodily motions are (uncontroversially) inner states of the agent. But since some of these causes, those which constitute the behaviour as intentional, must carry the rational content and be reasons, the causes which are reasons must also be states internal to the agent - must, that is, be mental states. This means that reasons for which agents act are always mental states which are internal causes of the bodily motions of which the act consists.

5) On the received version of the theory, these mental states are either beliefs or desires. Beliefs are cognitive relations to contents, desires are conative relations ('pro-attitudes') toward the same contents, and they exhaust the reasons why we act. If an agent claims she opened a window because it was too hot, what she really means is that she opened it because she believed it would relieve the heat and because she wanted that end. Explanations of action which appeal to objects or situations in the environment are always elliptical; making them explicit shows that their explanatory power depends on the beliefs and desires which are inner states of the agents of the actions.15

Could such an account of intentional behaviour be extended to social action? To do so, we would have to identify the bodily motions (or other physical movements) intentional behaviour consists of and then identify the rational causes which constitute those motions as intentional. Take a plural action like playing a Mozart quartet. If the motions that action consists of are the bodily motions of each player, then we cannot even get off the ground, for we will have not one but four token actions and hence not even have a candidate for a social action. But it might plausibly be maintained that the action consists of the joint sounds made by all the players together, on the grounds that there is no quartet without those joint sounds and that those joint sounds cannot be divided among the players individually. We would have, therefore, a social action. But what about the reasons which by causing the motions constitute them as intentional behaviour? They would have to be both causes of the motions and carry a rational content, and hence would have to be mental states internal to the players, hence mental states of each player. That means the agents of the action would have to be the individual players, and there would, again, be no social agents.

An alternative is that the joint sounds which constitute the playing of the quartet are caused by mental states which belong to the quartet as a quartet. The difficulty here is not that we cannot ascribe intentional attitudes to the quartet as a social agent - that is, central to the idea of social agency - but that it takes such attitudes to be causes of the motions the actions are said to consist of. The view has been held, namely, by those who believe in a super-personal mind or consciousness whose mental states cause the behaviour of social agents. It is belief in such super-minds which drew the ire of Isaiah Berlin in his critique of 'invisible powers and dominions', conceived as 'impersonal entities at once patterns and realities, in terms of which...men and institutions must behave as they do.'16 If belief in social agency means that, it should be resisted. But social agency requires collective super-minds only when it is construed in the light of the causal theory of action.

If we accept the causal theory, then, we must be individualists about agency and either accept a reductionist account of social agency or show that mutually referring content for shared intentional attitudes is enough social agency. In either
case what is taken for granted is individual and what is problematic is social. The alternative is to reject the causal theory of action on the grounds that it is an inadequate account of social agency. Not only on those grounds, however, for individualists will argue that begs the question, but also on the grounds that it is a mistaken account of individual agency. It is mistaken on three counts.

First, it is a mistake to hold that what constitutes behaviour as intentional is its causes. No doubt intentional behaviour has causes, and perhaps there is no intentional behaviour, social or otherwise, whose causes do not include events or states interior to individuals. Such causes make possible — enable — the kind of behaviour which is intentional. Since enabling causes presuppose physical laws which do not govern social reality as social, the causes of social behaviour include the behaviour of individual agents and what goes on in their heads. But individualism about causes does not imply individualism about intentional behaviour, for the causes which enable intentional behaviour are not constitutive of its intentionality. Intentionality is rather constituted by the applicability of norms: behaviour is intentional in being governed by norms of rationality, and these are not causal laws but complex principles of practical reason.

How behaviour is caused is not irrelevant to intentionality. If you break a window because of a sudden seizure, your behaviour, having been caused by a seizure, is not intentional. When intentionality breaks down, the causes that are always in the background of intentional action come to the foreground, and the causes of behaviour displace the reasons we might have. But what is required for explanation in the case of a breakdown does not play the same role when behaviour proceeds as we intend.

The causal theory is mistaken in the second place in requiring that a reason which explains an action must be its cause. Davidson held that the distinction between an agent’s acting while having a reason (which might justify her act) and her acting because of that reason (which explains her act) must be causal; causation, he held, is the only way to distinguish rationalization from explanation, and hence it must account for how reasons constitute behaviour as intentional.

Davidson took this point as obvious, but I think it is false. The word 'because' does mean 'cause' in one sense of that protean word, and so it is obvious that when one acts for a reason, the reason causes the act — if 'causes' is taken just as a synonym for the original 'because'. Moreover, it is true that counterfactuals apply to action. 'If her car had not broken down, she would not have come by train.' 'If the wind had not shifted, he would not have changed course.' 'If the symposium were not in that room, I would not be heading that way.' But these counterfactuals do not imply anything about causation beyond the sense of 'cause' the original use of 'because' commits us to. There may be narrower sorts of causality at the back of them, but they are not constitutive of the counterfactual claims themselves.

The difference between rationalizing our behaviour and explaining it in terms of reasons is not causal but normative, and normative all the way down. It is not a sharp distinction marked by the presence or absence of a causal relation, but a distinction grounded in the various ways in which our behaviour is governed by norms, and hence a multidimensional and indeterminate distinction. It cannot be marked out by attention only to a single act or purported reasons for a single act. It may involve not only what comes before an act but also what comes after. Indeed, it may involve large stretches of a person’s life, and in some cases, neither exotic nor rare, there may be no answer as to whether certain reasons really explain someone’s behaviour or merely rationalize it.

The third way in which the causal theory is mistaken is in assuming that reasons for action must be mental states internal to the agents whose behaviour they account for. Consider the examples I have just mentioned. I said that the reason for her taking the train was that her car broke down; a broken car is not an inner state, nor is the shift in the wind which was his reason for changing course. I am heading for that room because the symposium is being held there, not because some inner state is causing my behaviour.

Defenders of the causal theory hold that strictly speaking, I am heading for that room not because the symposium is being held there but because I believe it is being held there. They maintain that strictly speaking, the reason for her taking the
justified in changing course because the wind shifted and, indeed, I think a significant, if subtle, mistake is being made here.

The reasons which justify people's behaviour are, in general, not their beliefs, desires or other intentional attitudes, but various events or situations in their environment. A sailor is justified in changing course because the wind shifted and, under the circumstances, only because the wind shifted. I am justified in heading for that room because the symposium is being held there, and if it isn't there, then, in these circumstances, I have no reason for going there. She ought to stop at the corner because there is a stop sign there, whether or not she believes there is one; what justifies her stopping is the stop sign not her beliefs about it.

What justifies an act may not explain it. Someone else may also be justified in going to that room because a symposium was being held there, though in fact she went only because she wanted to see a friend. What makes the difference is the agent's attitude: her desire to see a friend made the presence of her friend in that room not only a justification for going there but explained her going there. It was the condition for that justification also being an explanation. That is the case in general: intentional attitudes like beliefs and desires are necessary conditions for a reason which justifies our doing something to be the reason which explains our doing it.

But it doesn't follow that the attitudes which are necessary conditions for a justification to be an explanation must themselves be the explanation. That, however, is what proponents of the causal theory conclude: only the attitudes of agents explain intentional behaviour (by causing it). If her friend's presence at the symposium explains her going there only on the condition that she wants to see her friend, it is concluded that it is her desire which explains her action. But that is a mistake. What explains her going to the symposium is that her friend is there; her attitudes are preconditions for that justification to be an explanation, but they do not thereby constitute the explanation. To think otherwise is to maintain that what justifies her action - that her friend is at the symposium - cannot explain it since it is not a mental state. That cannot be correct:

while what justify actions do not always explain them, what explain them must (in general) justify them.

The situation is more complicated when such justifications fail. If her friend is not at the symposium, then we step back and say, 'Well, she believed she was', which gives a much more restricted kind of justification. She should not have gone to the room, given what she wanted, but it's understandable why she did. In this case her belief, which originally functioned as a precondition for the justification being an explanation, is itself part of the explanation. It becomes an explanatory factor, that is to say, just in case she was mistaken about the situation originally appealed to as justification. That is the general case: attitudes become themselves explanatory factors when agents are mistaken about the events or situations originally taken to justify their actions. But that also shows that these explanatory factors are not productive causes, for the behaviour is the same in either case - whether or not the agents are mistaken and whether or not intentional attitudes had an explanatory role.

The situation is precisely analogous to someone's flipping a switch to turn on a light, without the light going on. In this case, he tried to turn on the light, just because he failed, which would not be the case if he succeeded in turning it on without difficulty. In the latter case he didn't try to turn on the light; he just turned it on. From the fact that what someone did when he failed to turn on a light is that he tried, it doesn't follow that what he did when he succeeded also included some kind of trying. Analogously, given that what explains my going to a room where I do not find my friend is that I believed my friend was there, it does not follow that what explains my going to that room when my friend is there is also that I believed she was there.

Putting together these three objections to the causal theory gives us the key to an account of intentional behaviour which, in better fitting individual behaviour, also allows for a non-reductive account of social agency which does not assume it is more problematic than non-social agency. The intentionality of behaviour is not constituted by its causes, reasons need not be the causes of the behaviour they explain, and reasons need not be mental states internal to the agents who act. I shall not develop the positive counterparts of these objections here,
having done so in other places. I want rather to turn to the question of why the causal theory of action itself, thoroughly individualist as it is, is so entrenched in current analytic philosophy.

7. INDIVIDUATION, INDIVIDUALISM, AND PHYSICALISM

There are many reasons why the causal theory is the received view, but I shall discuss only one, namely some mistaken assumptions about individuation. The crucial one comes right at the beginning when defenders of the causal theory assume that intentional behaviour consists in bodily motions. This assumption sets the basic task of philosophy of action to specify what constitutes some bodily motions as intentional in contrast to others—bodily motions of the young, of the insane, of the severely disabled, which result from seizures or nervous tics—which remain mere motions. Given that as the task, there seems no alternative to the claim that bodily motions are constituted as intentional by their causes. What else could constitute bodily motions as intentional than their being caused in distinctive ways?

To assume that intentional behaviour consists in bodily motions is to be committed to the claim that when we describe what an agent does, what we are describing are bodily motions. We describe them in various ways: in terms of their causes or effects, in terms of what they are because of various conventions or institutional settings, and so on. We seldom describe them as bodily motions—in terms of how our arms, legs, heads, or other parts of our body are moving. We describe ourselves as writing a letter, trying to open a door, finishing a paper, reading a book, boring an audience and so on, descriptions in which bodily motion terms play no role. Nevertheless, according to defenders of the causal theory, what we are describing are bodily motions. Hence the basic task is to specify the conditions under which bodily motions can be truly described not as bodily motions but as behaviour intentional under some description.

What is at work here is a way of individuating what is to be described. When several descriptions are descriptions of the same thing, then that same thing has been individuated—that is, distinguished from other individuals—so that different descriptions can be asserted of it. It is the sort of thing we do all the time. The causal theory assumes that there is one right way of doing it for intentional behaviour: the individuals we describe are bodily motions. Philosophers who defend that theory have disagreed 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 an agreement that actions consist of bodily motions, the differences being how finely we should individuate them. All individuation, it is assumed, is ultimately in terms of bodily motions.

There is in current philosophy of action an admirable pluralism about admissible descriptions of intentional behaviour. Most philosophers agree that there are numerous correct ways of describing our intentional behaviour, that most such descriptions are not in terms of physical motions, 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 physical motions, which is what we describe in describing intentional behaviour. The reigning assumption is that no matter how diversely we describe action, we must individuate ultimately in physical terms. Only physical terms identify an individual about which we can ask whether it is intentional under some description or what an agent’s reasons for doing it might be.

This reigning assumption—that we individuate ultimately in physical terms—may be divided into two. The first is that there is one right way to individuate, and the second is that this one right way is physical. The first amounts to the assumption that the world consists ultimately of a unique set of individuals, the second that this set is comprised of physical individuals. The first assumption is ontological individualism; the second is a strong version of physicalism. I shall conclude with some comments on these two assumptions, both of which I think should be rejected.

Ontological individualists claim that there is one ultimately right way to individuate the world. The objection to this is not the belief in individuals, or the belief that there would be nothing if there were no individuals, or even the belief that the world consists of individuals. What is objectionable is the
claim that the world consists of a unique set of individuals, which is what all descriptions are ultimately about.22

I illustrated this claim about one ultimately right scheme of individuation in terms of the idea that intentional behaviour consists of bodily motions. Let me illustrate the contrary claim, that there are equally correct schemes of individuation, by a concrete example. I am now writing a paper. It is an action about which you may ask what my reasons for it are. In writing this paper, I am unintentionally causing all sorts of things, which are the effects of this action. Does this action consist of bodily motions? There are bodily motions taking place in my writing, and without them there would be no such thing as my writing a paper. But in describing what I am doing, I am not describing them, for what I am describing is something I distinguished from other individuals as an action such that it was being done for reasons and it has various effects. What I am describing has the unity of an action. The bodily motions going on while I write this paper have no such unity; they are just a miscellany. I move my fingers in various ways, move my legs, scratch my head, stroke the desk, etc. etc. Any unity these motions have is not presupposed by my writing a paper but is derived from the unity of that act. It is individuated not in terms of bodily motions but just as my writing a paper.

If we take what I am doing to consist of bodily motions, it seems natural to take the reasons for what I am doing to be the causes of the motions. But if we take what I am doing to consist of writing a paper (better: to consist in the proper parts of writing a paper, like writing various paragraphs or sections), then it is not natural to identify the reasons for what I am doing with its causes. Writing a paper is an act extended over a long time, which is physically very complex and which presupposes a lot of background (what a paper is, what the standards are, what one does with one, etc.), but it may have just one reason: I was invited to do so. The causes of the bodily motions involved must be multiple, but once we drop the idea that what I am doing consists in bodily motions, we can distinguish an explanation of what I am doing from the causes of the bodily motions which enable my doing it.

This does not mean my writing a paper cannot be described in bodily motion terms; of course it can, though with difficulty. Such a description would give the various motions of my body that go on in my writing a paper — the motions that would, for instance, be noted by persons who did not know what I was doing, perhaps because computers or writing papers were alien to their culture. But this would not be a specification of what the act consists in; it would be a description of the act itself — my writing a paper — in terms we do not usually use in describing intentional behaviour.

What I am urging is that we be as pluralistic about individuation as we are about description. Just as we do not think it necessary to designate some way of describing action as the right way, so we should not think it necessary to designate one way of individuating action as the ultimately right way. To adopt pluralism about individuation would be to reject ontological individualism.

How does this apply to social agency? Individualists think there is one right way to individuate. The individualism of the causal theory thinks it must involve bodily motions, and that undermines social agency. 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 persons. Pluralism about individuation means the rejection of both: social agency is neither more nor less ultimate, well-founded or basic than non-social agency.23

So much for ontological individualism as the assumption that there is one right way to individuate. The other part of the reigning assumption is that this one right way is physical: that the world consists of one unique set of physical individuals. Of course, if the first part is rejected, the rejection of this follows as a matter of course. But it is worth independent discussion, because the kind of physicalism it involves motivates ontological individualism.

If accepting physicalism means no more than rejecting dualism, then I do not object. Dualists believe that there are two worlds, one of which is exhaustively describable in physical terms, one of which cannot be described in physical terms but requires mental terms. That view should be rejected, for there is only one world, which is physical in two senses. First, as Quine puts it, "Nothing happens in the world, not the flutter
of an eyelid, not the flicker of a thought, without some redistribution of microphysical states. Wherever there are changes of any kind, there are also physical changes, though there may be physical changes which occur without other kinds. Second, whatever exists can be described in physical terms. That is to say, it is possible to construct, for any object, a physical term (often very complex, perhaps involving disjunctive expressions) whose extension is just that object. It may not be easy and it may look pretty strange, but it can be done (just as intentional behaviour can be described in terms of bodily motions).

There is not, then, as dualists hold, some world distinct from the physical world; there is only one world and it is physical in these two senses. It does not follow, however, that all the individuals in the world are physical, which I take to be the central claim of recent physicalism. Dualists think there are two worlds while physicalists think there is only one, which consists of physical individuals. Both views are wrong: we should be neither dualists nor physicalists.

The claim that all the individuals in the world are physical is the claim that there is only one ultimately right way to individuate the world, namely, in physical terms. That is only one world which is physical is consistent with pluralism about descriptions, as defenders of the causal theory of action recognize. That there is only one world which is physical is, however, also consistent with pluralism about individuation, and that is what the causal theory fails to recognize. If we grant that, then not all individuals in the world are physical, for not everything should be or can be individuated in physical terms. The physical scheme of individuation is only one among others. Everything in the world has a physical description, but just as our descriptions may also be in non-physical terms, so what we describe may not be physical because its unity as an object of description may not be a physical unity.

In particular, there may be in the world social individuals – plural or collective agents – which we describe in various ways and to which we ascribe intentional attitudes. That we describe actions and agents in social ways is taken for granted; we ought in the same way to take for granted that what we are describing are social realities. Individuals come in many shapes and forms, something which – doesn’t this sound paradoxical? – individualism fails to admit. That is why philosophers of action ought to give it up and stop being so anti-social.25

NOTES


3. By ‘social agency’, I mean social agents and the actions and attitudes ascribed to them. I do not mean the social dimensions of the actions of individual persons, though that is an equally important topic. The latter comes into my discussion only when it has some direct relationship to the action of social groups. My focus is not on cases where individual persons cannot do things alone (which is a central concern of Annette Baier’s paper referred to in note 1), but on cases where individuals cannot do things at all, except insofar as a group of which they are members does them.

4. 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.

5. 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.

6. Numerous real-life instances of social agents are discussed in writings about corporate responsibility and similar topics. A good example is Peter French’s *Collective and Corporate Responsibility*. 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 case too recent for French's book 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.

But not by everyone. I have defended them in, for example, 'On Not Being a Behaviorist'.

Similar distinctions can be found, for example, in the works of Margaret Gilbert and Raimo Tuomela cited above in note 1.

I am rather rejecting a certain way of construing that. Eliminativist materialists are correct in many of the criticisms they make of folk psychology but wrong in what they propose to replace it with.

Recent versions tend to take intentions as the causes of behaviour which constitute it as intentional, with beliefs and desires in turn causing the intentions. This avoids some objections to the causal theory, but leaves it vulnerable to the kinds of criticisms I am making.

From his Historical Inescapability as quoted by William Dray in his article on 'Methodological Individualism'.

The term 'enabling cause' comes from John McDowell.

For more on this point of view see my 'On Not Being a Behaviorist'.

For example, in my 'On Not Being a Behaviorist' or 'Reasons, Causes and Intentional Explanation'.

Eliminativist materialists are exceptions, but I will not discuss their views here. Even they do not think that descriptions of intentional behaviour are in general reducible to descriptions in terms of bodily motions. Their view is that a genuinely scientific metaphysics can get along without descriptions that are not physicalistic.

Ontological individualism has significant affinities to aspects of what Putnam calls 'Metaphysical Realism' – for example, the idea of a 'ready-made world' or of there being such a thing as 'all the objects there are', which Putnam rejects. It was not until after I formulated the ideas I present here that I understood what Putnam was up to. See his Reason, Truth and History or 'Why There Isn't a Ready-Made World'.

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. Just as there are alternative ways of individuating lines up with non-social agents or with the explanations of the physical sciences.