

**Raimo Tuomela**

*Social Ontology: Collective Intentionality and Group Agents.*

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Our social life has always occupied a central position in Western philosophy. The principles that hold a community together, the way our interactions shape the surrounding environment, the fundamentally social nature of human beings—among many other related issues, these topics have greatly inspired philosophical reflection and discussion in the last two millennia. While the basic question of the last century’s worth of philosophical insight has been the problem of how we create and/or maintain parts of our social realm, in the last couple of decades many accounts have been put forward that argue for answering it (and many related questions) on the basis of collective intentionality. These accounts aim to establish a new kind of social philosophy, a ‘philosophy of society,’ which is to be regarded as a branch of philosophy different from both political philosophy and the philosophy of the social sciences. The main focus of such a field should be – as John Searle put it in *Making the Social World* – ‘the study of the nature of human society itself: what is the mode of existence of social entities such as governments, families, cocktail parties, summer vacations, trade unions, baseball games, and passports?’ (John Searle, *Making the Social World*, New York: Oxford University Press 2010, 5)

Besides Searle’s works concerning social reality, many others have contributed to the discussion from the point of view of collective intentionality and group agency – most notably Margaret Gilbert, Christian List & Philip Pettit, and Raimo Tuomela. In his latest book, Tuomela sets out to further articulate and partially modify his earlier accounts of sociality developed in *The Philosophy of Social Practices* and *The Philosophy of Sociality*. The basis of his theory remains largely unchanged in his latest assessment of social objects, and throughout the nine chapters of *Social Ontology* the notions of collective intentionality and group agency remain the focal points of his investigations. After some introductory remarks, he carefully elaborates the concept of various forms of social groups in chapter 2, and of collective intentionality itself (chapter 3). With the key concepts defined and articulated, he ventures on to take agents’ (both individual and group agents) reasons (chapter 4) and the various formulations of collective acceptance (chapter 5) into account. After dealing with the problem of cooperation and authority (chapter 6) within both egalitarian and non-autonomous social groups, he turns his attention to the practical implications of his theory. In the chapter that follows, he argues that his account of sociality based on we-mode social groups (groups that satisfy his requirements of group reason, the collectivity condition and collective commitment – more on these below) fares better in standard game-theoretic contexts than most kinds of rational choice theories that ultimately anchor sociality in its individual building blocks (chapter 7). The book concludes with Tuomela’s assessment of social institutions (chapter 8) and group solidarity (chapter 9).

It is clear from both of his earlier writings and his current treatment of social entities that Tuomela’s approach toward social ontology is fundamentally collectivistic – with we-mode groups standing in the center of attention. According to his theory, a social group has to meet certain criteria in order to qualify as a genuine we-mode group (as opposed to I-mode groups, wherein members only take part in joint activities for their own benefits). It has to operate with respect to the group

reason (a collectively accepted ethos that distinguishes what is and is not in the group's best interest); the members have to accept the group's goals and only feel satisfied in reaching them when every other member feels the same (qua being a member of the same group); and the members have to be group-normatively committed to contribute to the achievement of these goals precisely because they are parts of the group in question. These three conditions (the aforementioned group reason, collectivity condition and collective commitment respectively, elaborated on pages 38-46) form the basis of Tuomela's group-centered social ontology, and they all involve a certain sort of collective intentionality.

The book attempts to explain the notion of collective intentionality in great detail (62-96) – distinguishing we-mode (collective) intentions from joint intentions (which serve as foundations for the former) and I-intentions (both *genuine I-intentions* that have nothing to do with social groups, and *pro-group I-intentions* that at least take sociality into account, but ultimately motivate the agent through her own individualistic reasons). Here is where an important background assumption of Tuomela's approach (and indeed of all approaches toward social ontology based on collective intentionality) has to be laid bare: he does not question the ontological status of individual mental states. He addresses the problem of possibly fictional entities when talking about group agents and their intentions (how a corporation cannot be said to literally *think, want* or *intend* anything), but he leaves the problem of individual intentions – whether I-mode or we-mode intentions – largely unaddressed. Although he himself admits as much in a footnote (270), I am inclined to bring the issue up mainly because his whole ontological system depends on a certain kind of realist interpretation of individual mental states. Besides committing to a realist point of view, one also has to hold that mental-state-attributions are universally valid: that all kinds of social life can be accounted for via the methodology present in theories of sociality based on the concept of collective intentionality. However, both the realist approach to mental entities and the culturally universal nature of mental-state-attributions are far from unquestionable – and are the subject of contemporary criticism from both philosophical and anthropological perspectives.

Regarding social institutions, Tuomela presents an account based on the collective acceptance of certain facts by members of a group. His views on the constitution and maintenance of institutional reality are best compared to Searle's most recent approach, the merits and potential pitfalls of which Tuomela discusses at length (233-41). The most striking difference between the two theories is in their reliance on language as a necessary instrument in the generation of social facts: while Searle holds that the constitution of social institutions follows the logic of declaratives, and therefore relies heavily on certain kinds of speech acts, Tuomela maintains that non-linguistic representations can also play a part in the creation of institutions. Allowing that, Tuomela's account fares better against the common objection that linguistically motivated theories of all social institutions cannot address the constitution of language (a social institution itself) on pain of circularity. Non-linguistic features of our social world (social practices described on the behavioral level, for example) can also contribute to the construction of institutional reality on Tuomela's view, since the collective intentions need not be manifested exclusively through linguistic means.

Besides showing how collectivistic accounts of sociality manage to provide a better answer to game-theoretic dilemmas that pose a serious problem for individualists (described briefly on 108-10, and in great detail on 179-213), Tuomela also attempts to put his approach in a historical context. This is a welcome, though somewhat brief addition to the new 'philosophy of society' (94-6), the main ideas of which have never been explicitly traced back to their possible historical roots. Tuomela

mentions Rousseau's notion of 'general will' and various formulations of a collective will in the works of McDougall, Tönnies and Vierkandt, which can all be considered precursors for modern versions of collective intentionality. As a potential addition to the historical tableau, it is worth mentioning that an important part of joint intentions is the *belief* that other members of a given group also have the intention in question (144-5) – which sounds rather similar to Émile Durkheim's notions of 'collective consciousness' and 'collective representations' (designating those elements of the human mind that have to be present in others as well in order for a society to function properly). Further investigations into the historical aspects of collective intentionality and its implications might also consider it a topic worthy of inspection – and Tuomela's historical remarks could certainly encourage scholars of social theory and social philosophy to continue examining the theory's main concepts from the point of view of the history of ideas.

Tuomela's latest book on social reality is a meticulously constructed account of collective intentionality and the groups and group agents it ultimately brings to life. His theory is well-argued, and after many previous articulations, *Social Ontology* presents all of its most important constituents and their implications as a cohesive whole, ending up with probably the most fine-grained picture of collective intentionality to date. It is not a particularly easy read, but Tuomela's insight and attention to detail make it an essential contribution to the discourse on the metaphysical and epistemological nature of social objects.

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