Levels of Collectivity
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This paper deals with some central concepts and ideas of contemporary social philosophy. My concerns are the logical order and the common conceptual presuppositions of current models of collective action and intention. My main interest is the problem of the meaning or content of intention and the status of the subject of (collective) action, rather than the particular structure and genesis of particular collectives; or, to put it another way, the general methodological framework of individualism.

At first I will sketch a dilemma concerning the nature of collectives and cooperation. Methodological individualism is introduced as an attempt to solve this dilemma. Individualism is supported by a widespread and seemingly unproblematic concept of intention and action. This concept enforces some conceptual consequences; especially it gives rise to what I will call the two-person model of cooperation.

In the second part I will give reasons for the claim that individualism cannot be maintained consequently. I will show how several individualistic approaches to collectivity and cooperation take loans from holistic or collectivist assumptions that are beyond the scope of the framework of individualism. However, this might be thought to be a merely accidental feature of the particular theories considered. I think it is not, and I will show why. Firstly, I reject a possible defence of the “holistic” loans that rests on normality conditions. Secondly, I will give a general objection against the individualistic approach – I call it the “private-action-argument” – which rests on Wittgenstein’s private-language-argument. This argument leads to a holistic approach to collective as well as to individual intention and action by pointing out the social constitution even of individual intentions. Finally, I will draw some conclusions, especially concerning the levels of collectivity and the presuppositions (rather: Geltungsbedingungen) of the two-person-model as a paradigm of individualistic models of collectivity.

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1. Introduction: The conceptual framework and the dilemma of contemporary social philosophy

There are two main intuitions with respect to social phenomena. The first one is this: We are social beings living in a social world. There are hardly ever actions that do not depend on the existence of social practices and institutions. Moreover, often our intentions and actions make sense only within the framework of the different forms of collective action, cooperation and division of labour. Often it is not only reasonable, but also inevitable to speak of collectives as if they had intentions and as if they could perform actions. As far as I can see, it is widely accepted that collective action and action of collectives apparently are more, or at least something different, than the mere addition of individual actions, as well as collective intentionality is another thing than the mere aggregation or superposition of individual intentions. We could understand neither our behaviour nor sociality without reference to collectives. Therefore some forms of “we”, i.e. forms of collectivity as well as forms of speaking about collectivity, are apparently irreducible, at least for explanatory purposes.

The second intuition is, in short, that collective activities are always activities of individuals. Only individuals can perform actions. There are no supraindividuals besides or behind individuals which are agents by themselves or that can settle or fix beforehand the individual's actions. Of course, institutions, groups and other social and cultural entities and facts may influence the course of my action. But in the end, I am autonomous with respect to my intentions and actions, it is all up to me; and if I take part in cooperation, I am free to break it off at any time. (I may be subjected to sanctions then, however, it is my decision.)

Let me point out some consequences of this intuition and some of its closely related and supporting ideas, which, as a whole, constitute the conceptual framework of individualism.

If I am free in my decisions and intentions, but, as a matter of fact, my actions can fail, then one should distinguish an inner and an outer aspect of action, the latter being observable behaviour or bodily movement. However, not all behaviour is action. What turns behaviour into an action is its 'inner' aspect, namely the intention of the agent. One understands an action – or better: one understands behaviour as a certain action – if one understands its subjective sense, its intention. But what is an intention? If there are no supraindividuals, then it must be something in the individual subject itself. Here is some evidence: If I hurt my knee, then my ability to have intentions is not restricted. But if my brain is damaged, then this ability may disappear. Intentions, then, seem to be mental states or states of the brain. These mental states, or better: their intentional content can be identified by means of practical syllogisms. The premises of such a syllogism represent beliefs and desires; its consequence is (the decision to perform) the action in question or a local norm or maxim.

2 A terminological remark: For reasons of simplicity I will subsequently use the term “cooperation” as umbrella term for all kinds of group-action, intentional joint activity, shared goal activity etc.


4 Of course, this identity is in debate. For my purposes it is enough that the claim of a close connection between the mental and the individual (or its brain) is widely accepted, a platitude, quite independent from the question, whether mental states are brain states, or whether brain states are only the material bearer of intentionality.
(concerning the action in question, namely that, all things considered, this action shall be done). To put it in a nutshell: The essence of action, its differentia specifica, consists precisely in those mental phenomena; hence, an action is individuated by its intention. Whether a kind of behaviour is an action at all and which kind of action it is depends essentially on the mental state of the agent. Hence, and this is a crucial point, a relation or the reference to other individuals is not a necessary condition for an individual movement being an action. This is closely connected with the following claims:

First, only individuals can feel, perceive, wish etc., therefore, so the conclusion, the individual psyche or rather mind is the bearer of knowledge and intentionality. That is, mind is psychologically interpreted. Searle articulates this claim as a constraint for theories of intentionality and action: “… the account must be consistent with the fact that all intentionality, whether collective or individual, could be had by a brain in a vat or by a set of brains in vats.” Of course, this constraint may seem overdrawn and will probably be rejected by most philosophers. With respect to the problem of cooperation, however, it is a good metaphor. It can be interpreted as the assumption of the cognitive and conative (mutual) independence of individuals, including their social isolation, that is, as the conceptual horizon, that makes individualism a meaningful project. From this point of view, the idea of a brain in a vat is an implication of individualism.

Second, if intentions individuate actions, and if intentionality is a kind of mental

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5 Cf. Searle 1990, 407; similar considerations are to be found in Searle 1983 and 1995. The brain-in-vat-constraint stands in the rationalist as well as in the empiricist tradition that starts with Descartes and Locke as representatives of conflicting camps within the framework of a general picture of the relation between mind and world. In my view Searle contradicts with the brain-in-a-vat-constraint his own “principle of expressibility”, which claims that “Whatever can be meant can be said” (Searle 1969, 20), that is, whatever can be meant can be understandably articulated in a common language. Vice versa holds per contraposition the principle: What cannot be understandably articulated in a common language cannot be meant. (For discussion see my earlier papers on the principle of expressibility (Kannetzky 2001, 2002)). But to speak of a common language of a brain-in-a-vat seems a contradiction in itself. Either the very idea of a brain-in-a-vat itself or the idea of a brain-in-a-vat that could have determined thoughts is incoherent. Given the mentioned premises, the only way to make the brain-in-a-vat-idea convincing seems its association with the idea of private language and private intention (or a language of mind). Collective intention, then, can only be the mere coincidence of private intentions, a mere summation of individual wills. But a mere aggregation contradicts the irreducibility-thesis, which is supported by Searle himself (cf. Searle 1990, 404: “We-intentions cannot be analyzed into sets of I-intentions, even I-intentions supplemented with beliefs, including mutual beliefs, about the intentions of other members of a group.”)

6 As a basis of philosophical critique, the rejection of a proposition does not mean per se that it is not implied or presupposed by non-rejected or widely accepted convictions. This holds true for some basic, seemingly absurd propositions of philosophy, which are hardly ever acknowledged, but nevertheless follow from widely accepted assumptions that are harmless at the first glance. Scepticism and, as a branch of it, solipsism are good examples.

7 It could be objected here that, though intentions might be embedded into a socio-cultural framework of “collectives”, nevertheless having an intention is a psychical state, and psyche is always bound to the individual, hence intentions are always states of an individual mind. However, this is not a serious objection, but rather testifies a lack of confidence in individualism, because individualism aims just at the explanation of “collectives” of all sorts by means of concepts that have application to individuals only.
state that can be adequately described only in terms of the individual psyche, then the problem of the correct description of action arises. The reason is that, given individualistic premises, one cannot know the other's intentions. Hence, it seems possible to ascribe any intention to any behaviour, that is, to describe one piece of behaviour in different or even contradicting ways as action. For theories of collective action here the problem of mind reading arises, that is, the problem of figuring out the other's beliefs, intentions etc. What could, for example, mutual knowledge mean, if we, for principal reasons, can only guess the other's beliefs and intentions?

Note that the sketched approach to intention and action involves some conceptual decisions. Although it is regarded as a "natural" point of view, there are alternatives. Especially the notion of "having an intention" is a 'red herring'. It draws attention to the problem of how to define an intention or what an intention is, neglecting the circumstance that the structure and the possible contexts of "having an intention" could be the true problem here.

Letting these problems aside, and trusting in the (in my view fallacious) promise that psychology or brain science will solve these conceptual matters for us in the future, then the central problem is how to resolve the dilemma of the incompatible intuitions. On the one hand we cannot deny the essentially social nature of our life, of collective and even of individual agency; sociality is regarded as irreducible. On the other hand there are only individuals and individual actions; we live in a universe of autonomous, isolated, if not atomic – or if you prefer: asocial – individuals that, for the moment, all exist in their own world of beliefs and desires. The latter intuition forces us to construe social life from individual action and commits us to reductive descriptions of cooperation and sociality. Furthermore, science seems to oblige us to individualism; alternative approaches seem obscure.

Now, contemporary social philosophy attempts to bridge the conceptual abyss between these intuitions. A way to resolve this problem is to explain social concepts in terms that apply to individuals only. This is the program of individualism. Its central conviction is that social phenomena like institutions, roles, rules, conventions and, of course, social groups at all levels are to be understood in terms of individual intention, action and decision. This leads to the question of cooperation and collective intention. A central idea is to define cooperation as well as "we"-groups within this

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8 Actually, it is possible to know the others intentions as we know from everyday life, at least for the most part and at least with practically sufficient certainty. As a matter of fact, we do not become entangled in "underdetermination-traps" in every day life. On the contrary, usually we describe certain behaviour properly as a certain kind of intentional action, that is, we ascribe intentions quite definite. However, individualism cannot explain this possibility without additional premises.

9 Without further arguing here, mutual knowledge itself has a cooperative structure; therefore it must not be among the basic notions that are used to explain cooperation. It can be argued quite analogous and to the same end with respect to the notion of knowledge as it is done for the notion of intention in this paper.

10 "With the help of we-intentions [i.e. individual intentions with a special content – F.K.], mutual beliefs, and (intentional) joint actions, one can characterize social norms. Give the notion of social norm social roles can be analyzed. Next, with the help of roles and we-intentions, on can define a strong, normative notion of a social group. From social groups one can proceed to social organizations, institutions, and finally to the notion of social community without adding any holistic (or – if you prefer to call our we-intentions holistic – any supraindividual notions) to the conceptual basic of the analysis."(Tuomela/Miller 1988, 370)
atomistic framework by modelling the “We” in terms of a relation between at least two individuals, which, ex hypothesi, are not interrelated in advance. Now, if we assume that intentional action is individuated by its intention and that this condition similarly holds for intentional collective activity as well, then, loosely speaking, it is a special relation between you and me or a special relation between our individual intentions, beliefs and decisions that generates “we-intentions” and a “we”. Note that the term “you” is used only indexically here. It stands for other individuals that are necessary for cooperation. No further relations between you and me shall be presupposed, otherwise the whole approach would become circular.

So, given that action is prior to result, a central idea is to explain large-scale social phenomena by analyzing the structure of small-scale cooperation and the corresponding collective intentions. I name this model two-person-model of cooperation. Accordingly, the various analyses of cooperation and collective intentionality usually start with paradigmatic examples of cooperation like carrying a piano upstairs (Tuomela), walking together (Gilbert), painting a house together (Bratman) or pushing a car together (Searle).

What are the benefits of these conceptual decisions, that is, of individualism? The reduction of social to individual matters plus the description of intention or mind as a matter of psychology and cognitive science is supported by modern science. Hence individualism allows embedding social philosophy into the project of natural science. This decision is regarded to be without any serious alternative, taken “serious” as “in accordance with science”. Modern sciences are “atomistic” and reductive, they seemingly do not leave room for collective entities like collective intentions or other supra-

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11 The difference between cooperation and merely coincidentally coordinated behaviour has been assumed to lie in the inner aspect of the former, namely the proper intention(s). I think this basic assumption is simply false; it does not take into account that any action takes place in a context or course of preceding and further actions. Only in abstraction from the context of action the collective intention appears to be the relevant moment of a collective action at all – at least as relevant as the intention is for the usual course of behaviour. For example, Searle claims that the intention of the persons involved is the most important, if not the only, difference between the (coincidentally-coordinated) behaviour of a crowd of people who seek shelter from rain in a tent and the behaviour of the members of a ballet company who perform a modern piece of art (say: “Seeking shelter”), or so (cf. Searle 1990, 402f.). But, presumably, a ballet company does other things before and after its performance than a mere accidental crowd of people. This, at least, indicates that the identification of actions (collective or not) depends to a high degree on their embedding or fitting in routines, procedures, action-schemes, plots etc., that is, in generic action-types or practices. I will come back to this point.

12 Though I share this claim, I think it is in need of completion. With respect to the explanation of social phenomena, the fact that results survive actions and prepare the ground for further actions in one or another way (e.g. by tools, techniques and institutions of all sorts) seems equally important.

13 “The idea is that we can discover the nature of social groups in general by investigation such small-scale temporary phenomena as going for a walk together. This idea is attractive insofar as it should be relatively easy to understand what it is to go for a walk with another person.” And further: “I shall propose […] that analysis of our concepts of shared action discovers a structure that is constitutive of social groups as such. To this extent, then, going for a walk together may be considered as a paradigm of social phenomena in general.” (Gilbert 1990, 2)

14 As claimed by Bratman these examples should be “cooperatively neutral” (Bratman 1999a, 96). Their simplicity shall guarantee that no implicit “collectivist” concepts sneak into the analysis. More complex examples, which usually involve common rules, social institutions etc., should be analysed not before elementary cooperation is defined in terms of individual intention and action.
individuals on the basic level of ontology – and individualism fits these requirements (e.g., it promises an ontologically reductive description of groups on the level of individuals and an approach to human social life within the conceptual framework of evolutionary theory, and it fits the epistemological claim that nothing what we can know about individual mental states guarantees the existence of real things in the world etc.)

Furthermore, and more important, the premises of individualism conform to our everyday life. They seem to support our self-awareness as agents, that is, as cause of our own actions. Though I may fail to perform an action (successfully), I plainly cannot be in error on my intentions. Even the possibility of different descriptions of behaviour as a definite action is supported by everyday experience, at least prima facie. Often we simply do not know other’s intentions, and we are familiar with the fact that we can dispute about the true motives of an action without end. This experience supports the theoretical assumption of the impossibility to gain certainty on other’s intentions.

A last point only to mention here is the practical interest in defending individual freedom against the impositions of collectivism, that is, the conviction that liberalism is possible only on the basis of individualism. Though this plays a role in the background, it is hardly articulated in the context of the theoretical dispute on collectivity and cooperation, and so I will refrain from discussing that dimension of the problem here. However, a reasonable approach to collectivity should be able to fit these intuitions of individualism, and, moreover, it should be able to explain, why such assumptions seem quite natural from an agent’s point of view.

2. The blind spots of individualism

Given this general framework of individualism, collective intentionality and with it cooperation is conceptualized in different ways. However, there are some blind spots common to all of these strategies, as will subsequently be shown by going through some approaches to collectivity and cooperation. These blind spots concern the systematic presuppositions of individualism. I will show that individualism presupposes notions of sociality.

Collective intention as aggregation of individual intentions (R. Tuomela)

R. Tuomela defines ‘collectives’, namely “group-action” and “group-intention”, by individual intentions and mutual belief.\(^\text{15}\) Searle has remarked that such reductive analyses are subjected to counterexamples.\(^\text{16}\) But in his critique, Searle in a sense missed the special point of Tuomela’s definition of those individual intentions that form a “group-intention”. According to Tuomela, the propositional content of such individual intentions is “to do my part of \(X\)”, \(X\) being the collective action itself. Therefore, Tuomela calls the relevant intentions – a little bit misleading – “we-intentions” and claims that they “reflect the idea of a group at the level of the individual.”\(^\text{17}\) So the concept of “we-intention” as individual intention with a “collective

\(^{15}\) Cf. Tuomela/Miller 1988; see also Tuomela 1997, 176.

\(^{16}\) Cf. Searle 1990, 402ff.

\(^{17}\) Tuomela/Miller 1988, 371.
propositional content” can solve the problem of the reductive analyses at a first glance.

But there’s no such thing as a free lunch. Tuomela transfers, so to speak, the “we” into the individuals, and this move either leads into a circle, or it leaves the framework of individualism. For if the concept of individual intention is sufficiently enriched, then there remains no problem of defining collective notions in terms of individual ones. In short: If we presuppose fully socialized individuals that already master generic action-types and social practices \( X \), i.e. individuals that can have the intention to do \( X \) (or to do a part of \( X \) in case \( X \) is a collective action-form, i.e. based on the division of labour) at all, then the conceptual problem of cooperation, namely that of collective intention, disappears.

From this point of view, collectivity is already given by the form of the generic action-types themselves, which determine, or which are the content of, possible intentions. This does, as shown below, not only hold for collective intention and action, but for individual intention and action, too. Now the circularity of Tuomela’s approach with respect to the content of collective intentions can be characterized more precisely: It is not – of course not – a simple circularity of explaining collective intention and action by collective intention and action, but a circularity with respect to the social presuppositions even of individual intention and action, a circularity, which undermines the general explanatory goal of the individualistic program in social philosophy. For the individual intention “to do my part of \( X \)” already requires as a logical precondition an understanding of \( X \), \( X \) representing a common action-type (in case of a collective action a group-action-type, including a corresponding collective goal, mechanisms of joint success evaluation and control etc.). Otherwise \( X \), and with it the agent’s intention, would not be settled at all, hence, it would not make sense to speak of “doing my part of \( X \).”

Tuomela could reply that the problem of the determination and identification of intentions and actions is not his business in dealing with collective action, though it is a general problem of action-theory; and that he only relates individual and collective intention and action in a certain way, taking the concept of individual intention and action for granted on the assumption that action theory and theory of mind provide appropriate concepts. However, if one could show that mind, intentionality and intention themselves are socially determined or even socially constituted, then this reply breaks down. I think that a variant of Wittgenstein’s private language argument proves just this link between intentionality and sociality to be a conceptual link: Intentions are bound to generic action-types (or to social practices as systems of systematically interrelated action-types), and action-types are bound to sociality. For this reason, the concept of individual intention seems the general problem here, if

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18 The notion of “generic action-type” may sound strange, because a type is generic per se. However, there are other uses of the notion of type that aims at universals – which is not the type of type I speak about here. For the notion of action-type and similar notions see Stekeler-Weithofer 2002, 65ff., Kamlah/Lorenzen 1973, §6; Kambartel 1989, 123ff. These concepts resemble von Wright’s concept of ‘generic act’ (in contrast to ‘individual act’, cf. Wright 1963, chapter III; for further discussion of these concepts in the context relevant here see Kannetzky 2004.

19 Of course, other problems remain, especially with respect to conflicting intentions and to the effect of motivational and moral problems of cooperation.

regarded as the basic notion of accounts to collectivity and sociality. For it concerns not only Tuomela’s account, but also the whole program of individualism in social philosophy, and even the approaches of Gilbert, Bratman and Searle – to mention only a few.

Anyway, there is another serious problem with Tuomela’s notion of group-action and group-intention X as well. For X is not only with respect to its content socially determined, but with respect to its constitution as a collective intention, too. That is, even if, for the sake of argument, the question of generic action-types is left aside, the question of the subject of the collective intention remains and leads into a dilemma: If X stands for a mere coincidence of individual goals, then the analysis will not arrive at the level of “we-groups” and true collectivity at all, that is, at the level of joint (instead of merely shared) intention and action. It would be affected by Searle’s counterexamples of a mere accidental conformity of individual intention and action and would be simply false then.\(^2\) On the opposite, if collective intentions are not accidental (with respect to their collectivity), then we have to presuppose a collective process of forming collective intentions, say by communication. However, then we get a circle by presupposing some kind of cooperation and its norms and rules. One can explain some forms of cooperation, but only by tacitly presupposing other forms of cooperation. The dilemma is: Merely accidentally shared intentions are not proper “group-intentions” and cannot explain cooperation. But if we assume proper group-intentions, then we presuppose a kind of cooperation.

Collective intention as intentions of collectives (M. Gilbert)

M. Gilbert bypasses this dilemma by introducing the notion of “plural subject” as the bearer of collective intention and action.\(^2\) A plural subject is constituted by agreement, that is, by a kind of contract. The persons involved individually decide to join a collective action X, if and only if the others do so. This way a joint commitment is established – though by simultaneous and interdependent individual decisions, nevertheless by individual decisions. The plural subject’s activity is mediated by its members, which have, as members of the plural subject, particular rights and obligations. Joining a plural subject means to change one’s normative status as well as the normative status of the other participants. This way Gilbert’s plural-subject-strategy can explain a central intuition on cooperation, namely that it differs from mere shared activity in its normative dimension. Further it explains, why the intentions and actions of the participants of a collective activity in a sense are derived from the shared goal.

However, entering into an agreement means to accept a more or less predefined generic action-type, which determines the obligations, entitlements and activities that are the content of the agreement. Otherwise the agreement would be underdetermined, the content of the shared goal and the corresponding commitments

\(^2\) Cf. Searle’s counterexample of the business men, who trust in invisible hand mechanisms in order to jointly improve the world by pursuing their individual goals as rational egoists (Searle 1990, 404f).

\(^2\) For the following see Gilbert 1990, 1993.

\(^2\) That is why I sort Gilbert’s approach into the individualist’s camp. The notion of “plural subject” seems to be an abbreviation for a complex structure of the interrelation of individual decisions.
would not be intelligible. The proposal of walking together, then, appeals to a social practice or a generic action-type, just as the acceptance of the proposal refers to this. An agreement to do X presupposes X as the content of the agreement, that is, it presupposes the norms and fulfilment conditions of generic actions. Therefore, agreements cannot define these action-types. Similarly the notion of agreement itself refers to a normative practice and general norms of cooperation, or, if you prefer: to moral norms that are not generated by the particular agreements, but precede them logically. Thus, M. Gilbert’s strategy relies on the existence of social institutions. That means again: Either she breaks the individualistic framework or her approach becomes circular with respect to its basic prerequisites.

Nevertheless, M. Gilbert’s approach seems highly plausible, just because her approach leaves behind individualism – however, she does this not by introducing the notion of a “plural subject”, but rather because of agreements and joint commitments obtain their obligatory nature and content by being embedded into a frame of already established social practices. We do not reinvent, for example, walking together and its normative implications each time. Rather we actualize or instantiate an already existent social practice or action-type and its norms by agreeing into walking together.

Collective intention as web of interdependent intentions (M. Bratman)

M. Bratman considers collective intentions as an “interlocking web of the intentions of the individuals”\(^{24}\); his strategy is to explain “we-intentions” as a functional equivalent of (in a certain way) interrelated individual intentions and beliefs. Cooperation requires that every participant intends “that we J in accordance with and because of meshing subplans”\(^{25}\) of the other participants. However, mutual dependence of intentions leads into a regress, cooperation could not start at all.\(^{26}\) A possible solution is communication between the participants: Expressing my intention may give you reason to trust in my intention. However, not only is communication itself a social practice that falls in the scope of the individualistic explanation of sociality; but also is communication about intentions, beliefs etc. a higher order, i.e. a reflective social practice\(^{27}\) – which is, given the explanatory goal of individualism, a circle again. Bratman tries to solve this problem by claiming that “I intend that we J”\(^{28}\) is a reasonable individual intention. But I can only intend my own actions (even as part of a cooperation or as doing my part of our action).\(^{29}\) Hence, it must be possible for me to

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\(^{24}\) Bratman 1999b, 143.

\(^{25}\) Bratman 1999a, 100.

\(^{26}\) Given that you and me as participants have either the intention “I will do X, if you will do X”, than there occurs a regress of mutual dependent, conditional intentions to the effect that cooperation will not start until the intentions are deconditionalised, for example, if one of us decides to do X.

\(^{27}\) This will become clearer after the considerations about normality conditions and the “private-action-argument”.

\(^{28}\) Bratman 1999b. Note that “we” does not stand in the scope of the propositional content of the intention.

\(^{29}\) In case that others are merely means to the ends of an authority, one would not speak of a joint action or a collective intention, but of the authority’s intention and action quite analogous to individual instrumental action, even in case “that control can be mediated by another agent” (Bratman 1999b, 152). The difference is that the circumstances of the authority’s action now embrace other people, which occur not as subjects viz. persons, but as objects of the action. The case of enforced
fix your intentions in order to integrate them into my intentions. But your intentions are up to you. One could be tempted to circumvent this problem by referring to a kind of mind-reading capabilities. So, Bratman claims that it is sufficient for my intention that we J, if I can predict your free decisions and intentions. However, I think that such a ‘prediction’ is possible only on the background of shared practices that give such predictions and expectations a basis at all. Also putting free decisions and intentions into the open between the potential participants of a cooperation as well as bargaining shared goals and meshing subplans presuppose a common practice, especially that of communication and language. By assuming such a common background, however, the individualistic framework is abandoned again, namely by (tacitly) introducing additional premises about shared action types, social practices and socially constituted competences, in contrast to the aim of analysing cooperation and other social matters in terms of concepts applicable to individuals only.

Collective intentionality as mode of individual intentionality (J. R. Searle)

Searle’s account to collectivity focuses on the mode of individual intentions. As parts of collective intentions they do not have a special content, but a special modus, namely they are biased towards cooperation. As such collective intentions are a “biologically primitive form of animal life”, an irreducible disposition of individuals that makes the difference between a mere summation of individual behaviour and cooperation. Again collective intentionality as basis of cooperation is transferred into individual intentionality; it is regarded as a, for the moment, silent link between the individuals of a species. This way, however, Searle’s account trivialises or deflects the problem of cooperation – collective (and, as the case may be, cooperative) behaviour and intentional collective action are two pairs of shoes. Only the latter is specific to human sociality and the true subject of social philosophy. By claiming that the preconditions of cooperation are biologically given, Searle does not only beg the question, but blocks further analysis (and, by the way, levels important differences between human agency and animal behaviour). For, if collectivity is a pre-intentional, biologically given background matter of intentional agency, then a further analysis of collectivity in terms of intentionality is neither possible nor required. However, the content of a collective intention cannot be determined this way, it remains hopelessly underdetermined without reference to social practices. The reference to a universal biological background does not help to explain any particular action, be it individual or collective; it is with respect to the particular action as relevant as the fact of breathing – perhaps a necessary, but surely not a sufficient condition. But, if the necessary background of (collective) action and intention must, at least partially, be in-

collaboration, therefore, is not a relevant case of “I intend that we J”, that is, of collective or even joint action. (Nevertheless, even enforced collaboration as a form of division of labour presupposes some general cooperative abilities, however, on a more basic level that is not in focus here.) Or to put it differently: An enforced we is a derived we. (For discussion see Velleman 1997).

31 Searle 1990, 402; see also Searle 1995, chapter 1.
32 „So if there is anything special about collective behaviour, it must lie in some special feature of the mental component, in the form of intentionality.” (Searle 1990, 402).
33 For this difference see Tomasello 1999, chapter 2 and 3 (especially on the “cooperation” of the Great Apes) and Tomasello/Rakoczy 2003.
terpreted in terms of social practices, then we get a circle again.

**Provisional summary**

Let me systematize the matter. The crucial point is not that collective intention and action is traced back to individual intention and action, but that the social nature of individual intention and action is not considered, especially with respect to its consequences for individualism as a program of social philosophy. Intention and action, individual or collective, are already social notions. I think that the common source of the mentioned problems and, at the same time, the systematic gap of individualism – its blind spot concerning the presuppositions of cooperation – is the neglect of the very social nature of action and intention. Independent of its concrete shape, every notion of cooperation presupposes an answer to the question of how to explain the specific content of the corresponding individual and/or collective intentions. “Doing my part of X”, “agreeing into X”, “meshing subplans of X” as well as “dispositions to collectively perform X” presuppose a notion of X. But what does X refer to? In my opinion, X refers to a generic action type viz. a common practice (qua set of systematically interrelated action-types) that precedes the concrete actualisation of X. Otherwise it would not make sense to speak of “doing my part of X” etc., especially if we distinguish between intention in action and prior intention. In case of the latter, which is, according to Anscombe, more fundamental than the former, a thing that does not exist yet shall nevertheless determine the content of a present individual intention.

The general problem is that the mere affirmation that we cooperatively do X simply does not suffice to explain what we are doing collectively. Hence, it does not suffice to determine the individual actions as parts of the collective action. It does not explain how we distinguish between an attempt to do X and a mistaken performance of, say Z. Without reference to action-types, social practices and their norms, we have no criteria and mechanisms of evaluation and control of success. We could neither say that we or anybody else intentionally do, or attempt to do, X at all (and do not bring about X merely coincidentally, that is, we could not distinguish between intentional action and the natural course of events), nor could we distinguish between merely believing to do X and actually doing X, even in case that all participants of a cooperation believe that they collectively perform X. (Obviously, the latter depends on the former – without reference to a generic action-type X and the concept of intentional action, the difference between merely believing to do X and doing X in fact would be pointless).

The mere affirmation that we cooperatively perform X does not answer the question: What counts as an instance of X, that is, what counts as “the same” here? What are the criteria of X? What counts for a token x as a successful instantiation of (the intended) X? The problem is that the identity of actions, their norms and criteria cannot completely depend on variable, merely subjective judgements, be they collective (for example in case of a particular “plural subject”) or individual. But actually we are able to identify actions, our own as well as those of others. Hence, actions are not identified, i.e. individuated, by ‘private’ intentions, but by their accordance with

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34 See the discussion in Anscombe 1957, §§21-27.
generic action-types and their publicly accessible common criteria, according to which intentions are ascribed (and self-ascribed) to the agent. (Given the notion of intention is properly understood, there is no conflict between these ways of identification (by intention vs. by action-types) in the context discussed here, simply because the content of possible intentions is, or is determined by, action-types. However, this means to regard intention, in contrast to the individualistic notion, as socially constituted and as a, at least potentially, public matter.)

The agent as conceived by individualism lacks (external) criteria for his actions, and that is true in case of both collective and individual action. Even a consensus between the members of a particular collective (or “plural subject”) cannot bring about such criteria of X.35 Hence, if X is presupposed by the variants of the two-person-model, then this model cannot explain X. But if X stands for generic actions, that is, for social practices that are relatively independent (of the judgements) of the particular individuals or we-groups, the analysis within the framework of individualism would be circular, because the presuppositions of individualism lie within the scope of its explanatory goal: Intentions to do X are generic, they refer to socially constituted action-types X. So, even if one admits that individualism ideally explains collective action without using other concepts than concepts that are used for the description of individual actions and that individualism reduces collectives to individuals in this sense, this reduction is, however, not a true progress, because we cannot describe individual intention and action without reference to social practice, that is, without reference to collectives.

But, presuppositions of an approach are usually proved to be circular or incoherent with the assertions that rest on them when their conclusions are systematically drawn, i.e., if the theory that is based on these presuppositions gets more elaborated. In my view, then, the different approaches to cooperation and sociality can be seen as a kind of falsification (if any in social philosophy) of the basic assumptions of individualism and the two-person-model of cooperation. Why? As shown, all of the discussed approaches to collectivity implicitly presuppose common practices. That makes them on the one hand incoherent with the general explanatory goal of individualism. On the other hand, precisely these presuppositions let these approaches grasp important aspects of cooperation – on the background of our common practices, routines and norms – and let them fit to our self-descriptions as social and cultural beings. In other words: The variants of the two-person-model make good sense and elucidate the structure of particular cooperation, if we assume particular collective actions as instances of already understood and mastered action-types and forms of practice on the one hand, the individual intentions and actions as intentions and actions of already socialized, competent persons on the other.

3. Normality conditions

The objections from the perspective of action-types, common practice and public

35 Striking examples are all sorts of collective insanity as present in religious or political sects. However, these are pathological examples of a general difference between the internal evaluation of an action within a group and the external evaluation of that action from the perspective of the general normative subject (i.e. the impersonal we-group, an “over-all-subject”).
control seemingly do not endanger the project of individualism. The individualist
could reply that these claims are quite trivial, simply because there is no theory
without ceteris-paribus-clauses or normality conditions at all. Hence, referring to
such normality conditions of cooperation could easily dispel the mentioned
objections, at least in those simple cases of cooperation that has been regarded as the
paradigmatic subject of conceptual clarification. Admittedly, there is usually no doubt
about how to carry a piano upstairs together and when this action has been
completed successfully. It is common knowledge that for a piano to be taken upstairs it
should be taken upstairs as a whole. And usually we can communicate joint goals and
their means up to a point that practically does not leave space for further doubt on
what it is “to do my part of X”. For example, carrying the piano upstairs together
does not mean that I am sitting on top of the piano steering you up to the sixth floor
– every child knows that. Normally, there is a fair division of labour in cooperation,
otherwise the disadvantaged would not be willing to agree in it, or to continue with
it. And normally we cooperate only with persons who have the necessary abilities to do
their part. Nobody would carry a piano with the help of a child, a sick or an old
person.

This seems a quite plausible and obvious description of the phenomena in ques-
tion. Nothing can be easier than carrying a piano upstairs together, at least with re-
spect to the control of success and the fulfilment conditions of corresponding inten-
tions. The claim that our cooperative efforts can fail for reasons of disagreement
concerning the fulfillment conditions of the collective intention, the judgement of
success, the ways and means of doing the task, and the division of labour seems to
be quite unrealistic, at least for such simple actions. Someone who is not able to enter
into such simple cooperations and to do his part for such reasons simply does not
belong to “us” – that is, to the circle of the “capable”. (Maybe she is a child or an
idiot). However, this rejection is self-refuting. Arguing with normality-arguments in
fact simultaneously undermines the two-person-model and individualism itself,
because it refers to an impersonal we that is settled before any particular cooperation. It
refers, again, to fully socialized persons. However, socialization presupposes sociality;
and individualism forbids such a common ground as precondition for (the explana-
tion of) cooperation.

Even for the simplest cooperations the participants have to master some funda-
mental conceptual differences, especially the categorial framework of action itself.
Entering into cooperation presupposes at least mastering the difference between the
natural course of events and those changes that are caused by intentional agents.
Such knowledge is acquired by social learning. The ability to judge, whether people
do something or whether they are subjected to what happens anyway, rests on practi-
cial knowledge, on some familiarity with the difference between what persons nor-
mally can do and what persons normally are not able to do, that is, it requires practi-
cial knowledge on action-types and common practices and the corresponding norm-
ative point of view.

Every particular we-intention to do X has conditions of fulfilment that are
independent from present individual intentions, particular mutual beliefs, agreements
and their genesis. These fulfilment-conditions primarily refer to the common ways,
procedures and norms of doing a (generic) action of the type X, which are acknowledged
by a community, the members of which are the participants of the particular cooperations (or rather the actualisation of a cooperative action-type). So, action-types are presupposed by every particular cooperation as well as by individual actions. This means: By performing an intentional joint action x, we (you and I) actualize or instantiate a culturally pre-given action-type X, which gives our action form and identity. Or to put it another way: Our agreement, our joint goal, our subplans etc., generally: the form and the success of any cooperation depend on its accordance with common practices and underlie a common practice of judgement even in the most simple cases. This claim can be argued along the lines of Wittgenstein’s private-language-argument.

4. The private action argument

I propose to interpret Wittgenstein’s private language argument as an action-theoretical argument, even with respect to collective intentions and actions. Subsequently I will give a rough outline of the “private-action-argument”, as I will call it. My claim is that the difficulties sketched above rest on the model of action that individuates actions by intentions (of the agents involved). The central point is that private intentions, and hence the private determination of the sense of a behaviour as an action, as presupposed by individualism, are impossible.

Wittgenstein discusses the case of a diary-writer, say Privatus, who makes a certain entry, say E, whenever he has a certain sensation. The meaning of the E-entry shall be just this certain sensation and is determined solely by private ostensive definition. That is, the meaning is determined by the mental states of the diary-writer – quite similar to the identification of behaviour as an action by the intention of the agent. Ex hypothesi, mental states are not accessible to others. Now the argument is that, given these premises, there is no determined sensation at all. Why? Because the determination of a sensation as a certain sensation, that is, as this and not as that sensation, presupposes the reference to a certain type of sensation, which must be anchored in a common practice of speaking and judging. Hence, one cannot speak in this case of a language at all, because an expression has meaning only if its use makes a practical difference (for example it imposes the speaker on justification or settles a decision). But the E-entries do not do that; they do not make a difference. The problem is that the concept of error or mistake could not be applied, because there are no possibilities of correction. This means that any sensation is compatible with the E-entries. Privatus has by definition exclusive sovereignty of interpretation – he simply cannot be wrong, because there is no determination at all, no control of correctness and success. Nothing is excluded. But this is incompatible with the concept of language. Language follows rules; the use of a linguistic expression can be right or wrong. Hence, a private language is impossible, because an isolated person cannot dispose of the criteria of compliance with rules.

In my view, the scope of Wittgenstein’s argument is not restricted to meaning-theoretical considerations, but it is rather an action-theoretical argument, not only because language use is a kind of action. A deeper reason is the strong analogy be-

37 Wittgenstein 1953, §§243ff. and 258.
tween the private definition of meaning and the individual determination of an action via private intention according to the present standard model of action. As mentioned above, the latter claims that an action is identified and individuated by the agent’s intention. Now, the agent of the standard model of action is just in the position of Privatus – only I can know my intentions with complete certainty, you cannot. Therefore, the argument holds for this concept of action, too. The mere desire or wish, the mere believe of intending, the mere subjective sense of action without an objective framework of good reasons and public control does not exclude anything. As discussed above, if actions are individuated by intentions, then any intention is compatible with any behaviour, that is, any behaviour can be seen as (any) action – it’s just a question of interpretation. Now, according to the individualistic concept of action, intentions are a matter of the individual mind, they are, in the end, private. Hence, the agent’s belief that his behaviour fulfils his intentions cannot be refuted, because, according to the mentioned concept of intention and action, there are no other criteria or controls of success than the subjective ones.

However, is there not still the reverse case, which seemingly could be used as an objection against the claim of congruence of intention and action within the individualistic framework? The agent might think that he does not do what he intended to do, resulting in not doing what he intended. Therefore, it seems possible – at least ex negativo – to describe a difference between intention and action even under individualistic premises. But again the question arises: Which agent-independent criteria could allow realizing a failure or mistake? How can, without external criteria, the stability of intention be guaranteed so that it can be used as a measure of fulfilling or missing the intention at all?

Generally, without external criteria it would be senseless to speak here of right and wrong. The agent cannot be wrong if his intentions and beliefs are the only criteria. And he cannot be right without the possibility to be wrong. But then, the intention does not make a difference with respect to the identification of the action. Without reference to a common action-type and without public, i.e. external, forms of control and judgement, one cannot even speak of a certain intention at all, because its fulfilment conditions are not settled. But, if the intention cannot be determined as this or that certain intention, if there is only a vague feeling of privation or satisfaction without any instrumental structure of possible actions (which, again, belong to common practices), then it can neither be fulfilled nor frustrated. The fulfilment of an intention, therefore, is only possible within a framework of public practice, control and judgement. Having an intention makes sense only within such a collective framework.

The “private-action-argument” shows that private action, as defined by the standard model of action, is impossible, because Privatus could not have any criteria of the fulfilment of his intentions. Mistakes are thus impossible and there is no action at all, since the possibility of mistake belongs to the concept of action.

Actions as content of possible intentions are as such in need of criteria for their success. Such criteria, however, must be independent from mere subjective feelings and beliefs – otherwise they would be pointless, since they would vary with their objects. This holds also for collective intentions and beliefs of a particular we-group. Even if we (you and I) agree on the success of our action, we may be wrong with
respect to the fulfilment-conditions of its common action-type, or with respect to public evaluation and control. A joint evaluation of the joint activity \( x \) as successful or failed (or as being an activity of the type \( X \) and not of type \( Y \) at all) is possible only in the light of commonly accepted paradigms (or exemplifications) of the action-type \( X \). Therefore, the reference to action-types or common practice belongs essentially to intentional activity. Thus, a particular we-group according to the (extended) two-person-model necessarily has to take an 'external' perspective in order to evaluate its own actions. But what could it mean for a we-group to take such a “third-person-point-of-view”? I propose to regard it as the normative and reflexive stance that we, you and I, can take only as members of an impersonal we-group, that is, of a we-group which transcends personal groups and which is not determined with respect to (the number of) its concrete members. An impersonal we-group stands for a complex of interrelated action-types and practice-forms (or a “form of life” in the Wittgensteinian sense). The members of such an impersonal we-group share practices, paradigms, routines, customs, institutions etc. and evaluate and sanction their actions in the light of the corresponding norms and rules. Now, if the private-action-argument shows that the determination and identification of an action by individual intention is impossible, then it shows for just this reason that the reduction program of individualism must fail, even if collective intention and action could be reduced to individual ones – simply because individual intention and action already presuppose forms of collectivity and cooperation.

5. Levels of collectivity and the notion of impersonal we-groups

I do not deny the two-person-model, but I think it is essentially incomplete and therefore inadequate, and with it the individualism, on which it relies. It neglects the

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38 Generally, generic action-types must be adopted, and usually they are learned by paradigms of how to do an action of that type. At the same time this is a way of changing them and their leading norms, because such exemplifications have to be collectively accepted as, more or less relevant and suitable, exemplifications in order to serve as paradigms. (Note that exemplification is not mere illustration.) The other side are cases of doubt and borderline cases. Accepting a borderline case as exemplification of a generic action-type might change that action-type itself. This way generic action-types are kept moving in a community, depending on the joint practice of judgement and evaluations of that group. Their stability results from the fact that such judgements and evaluations are passed in the light of cultural traditions. Socialisation is essentially the process of adopting the competences necessary in order to take part in this practice of judgement.

39 Otherwise the problem of private language and private action would occur on the level of collectives (qua plural subjects) again, bringing about the problem of collective decisionism or voluntarism, that is, the problem that all a particular group decides concerning its own matters is right and appropriate per definition. In other words: There wouldn't be a difference between right and wrong with respect to collective commitments and decisions any more. (This seems a problem of holistic accounts like Brandom’s scorekeeping-game on the level of particular groups.) Such a normative difference depends on the existence of types or ideal forms of (not behind) acting and thinking, which can serve as criteria due to their relative independence from the concrete actualisations.

40 Even in case an individual opposes collective practices and its norms, the individual usually appeals to other common practices and norms, respectively, rather than to mere idiosyncratic positions, feelings etc., that is, he appeals to impersonal instances, not to “private” beliefs and intentions. Personal reasons have to be tied on impersonal instances. Someone who cannot present reasons, which are potentially universal or generally acceptable in the light of the norms of an impersonal we-group, does not present either a reason or a critique at all.
presence of generic action-types that indicate *impersonal we-groups* ("das Man", the community) and their customs, norms and cultural traditions as the constitutive background of any particular cooperation; i.e. individualism is blind to the possibility conditions of particular cooperations: cooperation presupposes already *socialized individuals* or persons, that is, individuals who have adopted the action-types, cultural practices and common norms of their community, and who are able to make their decisions in the light and on the background of these practices. Only so they are able to have intentions at all and to enter into cooperation for just this reason. Both, impersonal we-groups and socialized individuals, belong to the large-scale-phenomena that, according to the individualistic program, were supposed to be explained by the paradigm of small-scale-cooperation, that is, by the two-person-model within the framework of individualism. If Wittgenstein's argument and its generalization for the notion of intention are correct, then, in the end, intentionality as well as the notion of intention belong to the matter that have to be explained rather than to the philosophical explanation itself. They are part of the explanandum of social philosophy rather than part of its explanans.  

Nevertheless, the analyses of small-scale-cooperation mentioned above are not useless: They elucidate various aspects of particular cooperations of particular persons within the framework of *generic* action-types, i.e. within the socio-cultural and institutional framework of a community. However, the adequacy of the two-person-model presupposes sociality including social institutions and socialization instead of explaining it. Therefore this model cannot be the explanatory basis of social philosophy. The explanatory power of individualism relies on the tacit assumption of a kind of collectivity that cannot be reduced to the mere interaction of isolated, self-sufficient individuals. The individualistic approach seems plausible just because we actually do not have a concept of isolated, self-sufficient individuals; rather we tacitly underlie a concept of persons, i.e. socialized individuals, and assume that social interactions are among persons, when speaking about their interactions. There are always collective notions behind the scenes, because individuals and collectives are inseparably linked to each other.

In rough outlines, a more adequate approach to collectivity could be the following: 

*First*, I suggest to distinguish ideally ("idealtypisch") between different levels of cooperation and the corresponding intentions:

a) particular cooperations and the corresponding particular we-intentions, that is, the level of particular (personal) we-groups (as explained by the two-person-model within the (b)-framework), and

b) the commonly shared practices or *action-types* and the corresponding *generic intentions*, that make up the level of a culture as a historically evolved (and therefore to some degree contingent) *impersonal we-group* consisting of typically *socialized individuals*, i.e. persons.

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41 It should be kept in mind that intentionality in a full-fledged sense, which is relevant here, does not collapse into mere directedness of behaviour. The latter, as a categorical quality of life, cannot suffice to determine actions and social practices. This is obvious in case of conventional action.

42 See Psarros 2005 on autarky.

43 Note that the notion of impersonal we-group is not a sociological notion. The existence of an
Second, I suggest to conceptualize collective intention and action, or in general: collectivity, as a triadic relation between you, me and the impersonal we-group we both are members of, instead of a dyadic relation between you and me. Or to put it in another way: I suggest to embed the two-person-model into a larger, predominant frame. (Of course, this move changes the character of the two-person-model.)

Third, and in consequence, I suggest interpreting the variables for agents, intentions and actions of the (a)-level definitions according to the two-person-model within the range of (b)-level objects. Note: That does not mean that a ‘third realm’ exists behind our practices. Rather (b)-level objects exist as the forms of our practices, that is, as their normative dimension of right/wrong and appropriate/inappropriate. This normative dimension of action is reproduced (and sometimes changed) within our actions and reactions, by our judgements and comments and by our actual sanctions. By determining the possible contents of individual intentions, and as an instance of control of success, the impersonal we-group is a condition of the possibility of intentions and actions.

Finally, I propose to accept circularity – understood as self-reference and reflexivity – as a central feature of collectivity and culture. Sociality is what socialized individuals produce and reproduce in their daily life, in cooperations and routines, that is, by actualisations of practice-forms and action-types and their acceptance or acknowledgment. There are no other sources of culture, sociality and their changes. Factual traditions and the very practice of forming and passing on these traditions are constitutive for social life. Or the other way round: Social life and life in sociality produce their own conditions including the individual (or better: personal) competences that are relevant for having intentions and performing actions at all.

I think the outlined approach to collectivity could help to resolve some of the current debates on cooperation. A first case is the problem of the irreducibility of the We. As mentioned above, this thesis leads into a dilemma: How can one claim the irreducibility of the We as a condition of cooperation on the one hand, and analysing it in terms of individual intention, action and decision, that is, reducing it, on the other hand? The puzzle can be resolved, if we relate the irreducibility-thesis to the impersonal we-groups, that is, to the common background consisting of action-types, institutions, generic intentions etc. that agents must share in order to cooperate, and relate the reducibility-thesis to particular cooperations in presence of that background. A paradigmatic example might be communication. Though every participant may pursue his or her goals, they cooperate just because of the form of their individual actions, and it makes much sense to describe their actions as “doing my part of X” or to speak of a “plural subject” or a “we”, even if they had not a intention directed toward any collectivity. Despite the fact that only individuals can make a move in communication, say uttering something, an individual performance can be qualified as communicative act only because of its accordance with generic action-

impersonal we-group does not depend on a certain number of members, although there is no impersonal we-group without members – a culture or form of life (in the Wittgensteinian meaning) can become extinct with its bearers or by a breakdown of tradition and cultural heritage. Vice versa, being a member of an impersonal we-group, obviously, depends (in contrast to a particular personal we-group) on the pre-existence of that impersonal we-group.
types or a social practice and the corresponding ascription of intentions to the speaker. Hence, the attempt to explain communication based on individual utterances would be for logical reasons a hopeless enterprise; successful communication would remain mysterious and it would end with radical scepticism concerning the mere possibility of understanding. Nevertheless, it makes good sense to describe a particular piece of communication by means of the intentions and actions of the participants, provided the common practice of communication is already understood.

Another debate concerns the role of moral norms in cooperation. I think that M. Gilbert is right when she claims that the obligations of going for a walk together are not moral obligations, but result from joint commitment. However, without the background of general impersonal norms of cooperation, that is, moral norms, the notion of joint commitment and obligation is void. It presupposes the recognition of the other as a subject, that is, not to treat him as mere object of my action, i.e. to take account of his interests to some degree – and this is, at least minimal, moral point of view that cannot be grounded in particular cooperations, but is one of their prerequisites. Thus, my proposal is to explain the material content of particular obligations by referring to joint commitments to generic actions on the one hand, the form of obligation itself, on the other hand, by referring to morality as a corpus of common norms of cooperation that are in force in a community.

The puzzle of ‘mind reading’ can be solved in a similar way. As the capability of recognizing, understanding and predicting other’s intentions and actions, mind reading is a necessary condition of cooperation. (In particular the notion of mutual belief relies on the assumption of mind reading.) But with respect to the assumption of individualism, mind reading must be a complete mystery. Given that intentions are mental states of an individual, an assumption that culminates in the brain-in-vat constraint, mind reading is impossible, or at least its results are not subjected to any control. The ability to understand other’s intentions and actions can be explained by presuming that socialized individuals are familiar with common practices and their norms that determine the content of possible intentions. Under this condition the common simulation-model of understanding other’s behavior (as certain action) makes sense, because the reference to action-types viz. practice-forms gives the simulation a point of comparison, or as one could say, it determines lines of projection.

Also the problem of common criteria of the appropriateness and correctness of actions and of the joint control of success of an action by a particular we-group disappears, if we presume a group-spanning public instance of control and evaluation concerning the realization of generic action-types that give particular actions their form and identity, even in case of collective action. The particular we-group or its members are not the normative instance itself, but participators of such a common normative instance. They do not have to invent criteria each time, but apply common ones. This way the problem of collective decisionism can be avoided.

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46 The simulation theory of understanding intention and action is discussed in Kannetzky 2004.
47 This kind of decisionism seems to be a problem also of “holistic” accounts like Brandom’s in “Making it explicit: What are the criteria of scorekeeping in a language game? – A possible answer is that the scorekeepers judge actions in the light of practices and its norms that are ‘pre-given’ to
6. Summary and conclusions

Dilemmas show up within a certain discourse and indicate inconsistencies in its conceptual framework. In the case of the dilemmas of collectivity, I suspect that they are generated by the underlying framework of individualism and, as an essential part of it, the standard concept of intention and action. My proposal is to regard the dilemmas and inconsistencies of the theory of collectivity as a kind of falsification of these basic assumptions. Especially the standard concept of intention and action neglects that intention and action are themselves social phenomena, and it pays little or no attention to the fact that being an agent (or a person) is a socially defined normative status, something that is not naturally given or innate to us. So, the circularity in the individualistic approaches does not (or not only) consist of the fact that (more complex) collective actions are explained by (tacit reference to) collective actions or fully socialised individuals, but it is a circularity of another, namely a conceptual kind: The explanation of cooperation, even in the most simple cases, which shall be the conceptual basis of more complex “collectives” of all sorts, presupposes concepts that are meaningful only by referring to sociality.

The private action argument shows ex negativo that the reference to an impersonal we-group, to action-types and practice-forms is constitutive for intentions and actions as such. Therefore, the concept of the individual and its mind (as a kind of monad) cannot constitute a proper conceptual framework of intention and action, but only the notion of person (qua socialized individual), social practice and impersonal we-groups. The question, then, is not whether one should accept or not the notions of impersonal we-group, action-types, practice forms etc., but how such forms exist as forms of our actions.

If we understand the socio-cultural nature of intention and action, the problem of collectivity as posed in modern social philosophy disappears, namely the ontological problem of collective intention, simply because not only collective intentionality and action presuppose a socio-cultural framework, but even the individual ones do. Consequently, the separation between theories of individual intention and action and theories of collective intention and action, which are based on the former, become obsolete. Of course, a lot of interesting practical problems of collective action and cooperation remain open, for example concerning collective planning on the background of different knowledge and aims, the fairness of certain forms of division of labour, the question of how new forms of collectivity and action come into being etc. After all, the question of collectivity as posed before the background of individualism seems to be misleading. The condition for an alternative approach to collectivity and collective intention is to reject a ‘cartesian’ view on intentions, the misunderstanding that intentions are a special, non-physical kind of “thing” that one can “have” exclusively, that is, that intentions are mental states of individuals, and

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48 Note that all days’ speech about intentions and having an intention and its actual role in cooperation and communication is not the aim of my considerations, but the philosophical doctrine of intention
to acknowledge the socio-cultural constitution of human intentionality, not as a merely external condition that varies the direction and concrete content of a somehow naturally pregiven individual intentionality and capacity of action, but as its core.

One has to acknowledge that humans are “cooperative beings” as such, i.e. that their actions and intentions remain essentially unintelligible without regarding their relation to other people, their common ways of action, and their cultural traditions, that is, without regarding their incorporation into impersonal we-groups and common practices. The initial claim of this paper, namely that alternative approaches to collectivity have to meet the individualistic intuitions, that is, our everyday life intuitions concerning intention and action, can be satisfied by an individualism of non self-sufficient, already socialized, enculturated individuals. This, however, reverses the direction of the analysis of collective intention and action: Individual intention and action is to be explained in terms of common social practice – in the end “I” is to be explained in terms of “We”.

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