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GIUSEPPE VICARI

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Collective Intentionality, Language, and Normativity

A Problem and a Possible Solution for the Analysis of Cooperation

Giuseppe Vicari

1. Introduction

Mainstream accounts of social ontology¹ converge in identifying collective intentionality and language as the fundamental mechanisms to explain social and institutional facts.

In John R. Searle's theory of social ontology, more specifically, collective intentionality accounts for social cooperation generally, while the evolution of language accounts for humans' specific ability of imposing status functions on people and objects, where the collective recognition of these status entitles their bearers to perform specific institutional functions and, more generally, to perform actions governed by desire-independent reasons (such as rights, duties, obligations, and so on). In this latter way, according to Searle, we create universities, governments, presidents, cocktail parties, and so on.

For Searle, in fact, it is only by virtue of the development of the ability to produce speech acts that the normativity built into the logical structure of the intentionality of the mind comes to have a publicly binding character – that is, this normativity becomes rationally binding for every agent who takes part to a certain social interaction, so that each agent is responsible in front of others as a member of a group.²

1. See for example SEARLE 1990, SEARLE 1995 and SEARLE 2010; GILBERT 1989, GILBERT 1996 and GILBERT 2006; TUOMELA 2007 and TUOMELA 2013.

2. See especially SEARLE 2010, 61-89. According to Francesca Di Lorenzo Ajello speech act theory is one of the arrival points, in contemporary debate, of an ancient line of thought that goes back to Aristotle's demonstration by confutation of the non-contradiction principle in *Metaphysics*, goes through Kant's analysis of the categorical imperative as built into the logical structure of practical reason, and arrives at the contemporary achievements of language pragmatics and cognitive sciences. This hypothesis holds, more specifically, that ethical, logical and institutional normativity characterizing human rationality can be reconstructed through a careful analysis

This public enactment of deontic commitments, however, seems to presuppose as its necessary condition a prelinguistic ability to cooperate governed by collective intentionality: in fact, without this ability not only agents could not engage in specific conversational transactions, but they could not even engage in the use of the public procedures for the conventionalization of speaker's meaning which is, for Searle, the crucial move for the development of language and of its constitutive deontology.³

This argument converges with some of the most recent findings of cognitive sciences on human cooperation and communication,⁴ and it allows Searle to reply to those critics who think that the primary root of human sociality must be found in conversational transactions rather than in humans' individual cognitive profile.⁵ However, it seems to me that Searle's view has a *prima facie* problem in accounting for the specific normative character of cooperation. As Margaret Gilbert remarked,⁶ in fact, if we conceive of collective intentional states as psychological states of individuals and their existence and logical structure is, as Searle claims, consistent with the constraints of traditional methodological solipsism,⁷ then how is it possible that intentional states like these can give rise to a specifically public and rationally binding normativity? Without some kind of communication, as Gilbert argues, there could be no agreement grounding the joint commitments that structure human social reality. Psychological phenomena are not sufficient, on this view, to explain human sociality. But, as Searle answers, there could be no communication without cooperation and, therefore, without a psychological, pre-communicative collective intentionality.

The hypothesis that I will argue in this paper identifies in Searle's concept of the "Background" a possible way out of this problem, where the crucial move consists in the idea that collective intentionality and language can work only against a preintentional and prerepre-

of the logical structure of the background competences governing our mind-world transactions. Cf. DI LORENZO AJELLO 2003 and DI LORENZO AJELLO 2013.

3. SEARLE 2010, 80-89.

4. See for example TOMASELLO 2008 and TREVARTHEN 1979; RAKOCZY, WARNEKEN, and TOMASELLO 2009b; BARA 2010; VICARI and ADENZATO 2014.

5. SCHMID 2009; GILBERT 2007; TOLLEFSEN 2006.

6. GILBERT 2007.

7. SEARLE 1990, 406-407.

sentational sense of the other as a potential cooperator “like me” in cooperative agency.⁸

I will argue that this prereflective and preintentional stance towards others makes sense of the specific normative constraints of cooperative action, and that this thesis accounts for some of the most recent achievements of post-classic philosophy of mind and cognitive science, which point out the “practical” and primarily situated character of the structural openness to the other of individual intentionality.⁹

2. The normative structure of cooperation

From the logical conceivability of two behaviorally identical scenarios which are totally different from the intentional point of view it directly follows, for Searle, that cooperative behavior must be analyzed in intentionalist terms, and that the plural first person form of the intentional element of cooperation is the key point to understand the difference between cooperation and the mere sum of individual behaviors.

Searle¹⁰ imagines a group of people sitting on the grass in a park who suddenly, when it begins raining, run toward a shelter. Now, it seems plausible to think that even though these people have a common goal (going to the shelter) and even though each agent knows what others are doing, this scenario is not an example of cooperation.

If, on the contrary, the same movements occurred as part of an outdoor dance show – that is, as part of a collectively accepted plan – then this scenario would exemplify cooperation.

Assuming that the two scenarios are behaviorally identical, and giving for granted that people have in both cases a common goal and mutual knowledge of what is going on, the difference must be located at the level of the intentionality of the agents. In the first case, if one asked an agent what is s/he doing, s/he would plausibly answer that «I intend to run to the shelter because it is raining». In the second case, however, s/he would answer something like «I intend to run to the shelter because we intend to perform this part of the show». In

8. SEARLE 1990, 413-415.

9. See for example GALLAGHER 2004, GALLAGHER and ZAHAVI 2007, Noë 2010, HURLEY 1998, THOMPSON 2007.

10. SEARLE 1990, 403.

other words, according to Searle, we could say that the key difference between the two scenarios is that in the second case «the individual ‘I intends’ are in a way we will need to explain derivative from the ‘we intend’s».¹¹ That is: in cooperative action the reason motivating individual action is the fact that that action is performed as part of the collective intention shared by the group.

This point can be further clarified if we introduce an anomalous event in our scenarios. Imagine that an agent running to the shelter suddenly stops and sits on the grass, under the rain. The same behavior would have sharply different consequences in the two cases: in the first one, where there is no cooperation, that behavior could have no consequence at all – at best, someone could ask him/herself whether the agent is injured or whether s/he likes being wet under the rain. But in the second case, that behavior violates the legitimate normative expectations of each agent toward the behavior of each member of the group. The agent who sits on the grass is not doing his/her part for the achievement of the collective goal – indeed, s/he could be blamed for preventing others from achieving that goal. In this case, invoking the subjective preferences of the agent as an explanation of his/her behavior would provide the *cause* of that behavior, but it would not be sufficient to *justify* it under the normative respect.¹² However, if one stops his/her contribution because s/he is injured and nobody helps him/her, s/he could have good reasons for blaming other members of the group who are not helping him/her – it would be an action which is due as a contribution to achieve the global goal.

There is, then, a specifically normative element for the assessment of cooperative action as distinct from the mere sum of individual behaviors: cooperative actions are characterized by a deontic normativity – that is, in cooperative actions individual behavior is bound by constraints that go beyond the individual preferences and desires of the agents.¹³

11. SEARLE 1990, 403.

12. See SEARLE 2001, 108-113 on the difference between merely causal explanations of action and justificatory explanations.

13. SEARLE 2001, 158-164; SEARLE 2010, 127-131.

Searle summarizes the differences among two scenarios similar to ours and the crucial role of this kind of normativity in passages like this:

There is a tremendous difference in the two cases because in the second case there is an obligation assumed by each individual member. In the first case, the individuals have no pact or promise to act in this way [...] But in the second case, there is a solemn promise made by each to all of the others.¹⁴

Why should one be rationally committed to provide one's contribution to the collective action to which one is taking part? Because, to make the point with Searle's terminology, cooperative agents have created a desire-independent reason for action by way of undertaking a public commitment: the course of action undertaken as part of a collective plan seems to be characterized by non-reversibility (the course of action cannot be interrupted based on subjective inclinations and preferences) and obligation (the agent *owes* his/her course of action to the rest of the group based on the commitment undertaken).¹⁵

As Michael Bratman¹⁶ notes, being engaged in a collective course of action means at least that the behavior of agents manifests three characteristic features: mutual responsiveness (to each other's behavior), commitment to the joint activity, and commitment to mutually support each other in the respective roles.

But even more: the specific public normativity binding every participant to collective action does not seem to be a merely "regulative" normativity (that is, a system of rules regulating a preexistent activity). Rather, the normativity seems to be a "constitutive" one, where the system of rules underlying the activity brings about that very type of activity and is conceptually inseparable from the correct description of that activity.¹⁷ This is especially clear where specifically conversa-

14. SEARLE 2010, 48.

15. SEARLE 2010, 81-82. I refer the reader to Margaret Gilbert's abovementioned works for a deep analysis of the normativity embedded in the logical structure of social reality. For a criticism of the apparent "supraindividualism" of Searle and Gilbert on this point see MILLER 2007.

16. BRATMAN 1992.

17. The classical statement of the regulative-constitutive distinction is SEARLE 1969. A recent debate on the consequences of the distinction for social ontology is in

tional cooperative activity is concerned. Searle himself has shown that the norms underlying the performance of single speech acts are constitutive of them. That a promise counts as undertaking a commitment to a future course of action, that an assertion counts as undertaking a commitment to the truth of the expressed proposition, that an order must be issued by an entitled person and that it must describe an action that could be potentially performed by the addressee are not normative structures independent of the practices realizing them. Rather, those practices cannot even be described without mentioning the normative criteria governing them.¹⁸

Paul Grice, on the other hand, shows that speakers are bound to comply with a “Cooperative Principle”: «Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged».¹⁹ Grice adds to this principle four categories of “maxims” (of quantity, quality, relation and modality) «the following of which will, in general, yield results in accordance with the cooperative principles».²⁰ The principle and the related maxims require, for example, that speakers should provide true and relevant information with the right amount and in the right way.

However, as Grice notes, this analysis can be extended to cooperative action generally exactly because conversation is a specific form of cooperative agency.²¹ Grice, in fact, leverages upon the consideration that our conversational transactions «do not normally consist of a succession of disconnected remarks, and it would not be rational if they did». They are, rather, «characteristically, to some degree at least, cooperative efforts».²² And Grice characterizes both conversational and

DI LUCIA 2003, while DI LORENZO AJELLO 2013 has systematically shown how Searle’s scheme of constitutive rules of speech acts can be extended to understand the logical structure of institutional acts.

18. SEARLE 1969, chp. 3 *passim* and SEARLE 2010 for a more recent statement; cf. DI LORENZO AJELLO 2001 and DI LORENZO AJELLO 2003 for the contextualization of this proposal in contemporary debate.

19. GRICE 1989, 26.

20. GRICE 1989.

21. Cf. SEARLE 1969, which argues for the hypothesis that speaking a language is a form of rule-governed intentional behavior.

22. GRICE 1989, 26.

cooperative behavior as «purposive, indeed rational».²³ He imagines two agents cooperating to repair a broken car. The specific contribution of each agent to the joint task can be criticized, for example, if the agent does not provide the right tools for repairing the car (quality), if s/he provides too many or very few tools (quantity), if the contribution is irrelevant to the task (relation) or if the contribution is not provided in the right way (modality). Engaging in a cooperative activity to achieve a common goal means *ipso facto*, then, being subject to rational assessment of one's actions in front of others based on the same criteria of quality, quantity, relation and modality governing conversational interactions. These criteria, however, are not added to the activities,²⁴ rather they are part of the correct description of those practices: as Francesca Di Lorenzo Ajello notes, then, the idea that speech acts,²⁵ conversational transactions²⁶ and communicative interactions²⁷ are based on implicit norms which are also constitutive of those activities allows us not only to overcome the traditional normative-descriptive dichotomy,²⁸ but also to understand how, more generally, every partner in cooperative action is *ipso facto* bound to take part to a critical, rational activity of self-regulation of one's contribution with respect to various types of normative criteria.²⁹

23. GRICE 1989, 28.

24. There is some debate on whether the Cooperative principle and related maxims should be regarded as constitutive or regulative rules. Grice himself noted that the maxims are too specific to information-conveying conversational purposes, so that they would not fit other kinds of conversations. Also, after regarding their normative power as grounded in some kind of quasi-contractual agreement, he seemed to notice that the normative force indeed derives from the mere fact that people take part to conversations in order to reach common goals, so that there could not be conversation without some kind of Cooperative principle. Grice himself did not settle the issue, but his views have been widely criticized by Searle, who does not regard Grice's Principle and maxims as providing the constitutive rules of conversations in the same way that Searle's analysis has provided the constitutive rules of individual speech acts. Daniel Vanderveken, on the contrary, has developed a deep analysis that generalizes Grice's norms to all kinds of conversational interactions. See GRICE 1989, 28-30; SEARLE 2002; VANDERVEKEN 2013.

25. SEARLE 1969.

26. GRICE 1989.

27. HABERMAS 1984 and HABERMAS 1990.

28. DI LORENZO AJELLO 2003.

29. DI LORENZO AJELLO 2013.

3. The normativity of cooperation between language and collective intentionality

Now, since we-intentions underlie cooperative action generally one could perhaps say that the existence of a we-intention commits every participant to a joint action to undertake a course of action that can be normatively assessed according to the specific normative criteria of cooperative agency. On this view, then, language enacts in the public space of reasons a normative structure which is already built into the logical structure of the intentionality of the mind.

This line of argument, however, does not seem to sit comfortably in Searle's analysis of we-intentions. For Searle, in fact, a we-intention is, like any other intentional state, entirely caused by and realized in individual brains, and therefore its existence and logical structure are independent of the actual arrangements of states of affairs in the world. And, more specifically for collective intentions, these latter are independent of the actual existence of other people cooperating with the agent at issue.

Searle writes:

Anything we say about collective intentionality [...] must be consistent with the fact that the structure of any individual's intentionality has to be independent of the fact of whether or not he is getting things right [...] One way to put this constraint is to say that 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.³⁰

Even though a we-intention is, for Searle, logically irreducible to a set of I-intentional states,³¹ it cannot but be an individual state – that is, an intentional state realized in the individual head of a specific agent: «If we are cleaning the yard together, then in my head I have the thought, 'We are cleaning the yard together' and in your head you have the thought, 'We are cleaning the yard together'». ³²

30. SEARLE 1990, 406-407.

31. See SEARLE 1990; SEARLE 1995; SEARLE 2010.

32. SEARLE 2010, 47.

The problem, then, is as follows. If a we-intention is a psychological state of the individual participants to cooperative interactions, how can it give rise to a specifically public and deontic normativity?

In fact, as Searle argues, mental states do not create public, deontic commitments. Searle acknowledges, indeed, that individual intentional states commit the agent who has them to follow certain norms that are constitutive of those states, but he also holds that the normativity of language, exactly qua public normativity, is much stronger than the normativity of mental states. An agent endowed with prelinguistic intentional capacities is thereby committed to the recognition of what satisfies or frustrates the conditions stated in the content of the intentional state. However, the commitment of a speaker expressing his/her beliefs through an assertion is, as a public commitment, much stronger than the commitment of belief:

If the privately held belief turns out to be false I need only revise it. But in the case of the statement, I am committed not only to revision in the case of falsehood, but I am committed to being able to provide reasons for the original statement, I am committed to sincerity in making it, and I can be held publicly responsible if it turns out to be false.³³

Of course, intentional states as such are constitutively governed by rational criteria of assessment:

[I]f you think about matters from the point of view of sweaty biological beasts like ourselves, normativity is pretty much anywhere. The world does indeed consist of facts that are largely independent of us, but once you start representing those facts, with either direction of fit, you already have norms, and those norms are binding on the agent. All intentionality has a normative structure. If an animal has a belief, the belief is subject to the norms of truth, rationality, and consistency. If an animal has intentions, those intentions can succeed or fail. If an animal has perceptions, those perceptions either succeed or fail in giving it accurate information about the world [...] From the point of view of the animal, there is no escape from normativity. The bare representation of an *is* gives the animal an *ought*. What is special about human animals is not normativity, but rather the

33. SEARLE 2010, 82.

human ability to create, through the use of language, a *public* set of commitments.³⁴

As Searle writes in the above-cited passage, the point is not that with language you get normativity, but rather that with language you get a *public* normativity in the full sense: «Language is the basic form of public deontology, and I am claiming that in the full sense that involves the public assumption of irreversible obligations, there is no such deontology without language».³⁵

Clearly, for Searle language allows us to go from mere personal commitments to the conditions of satisfaction of individual intentional states to public, deontic reasons as they can be found in conversational interactions and institutional actions more generally. In fact, as he writes, when a speaker uses public procedures for the conventionalization of the speaker's meaning, s/he is thereby committed to the creation of a set of deontic, public commitments:

We will not understand an essential feature of language if we do not see that it necessarily involves social commitments, and that the necessity of these social commitments derives from the social character of the communication situation, the conventional character of the device used, and the intentionality of speaker meaning [...] If a speaker intentionally conveys information to a hearer using socially accepted conventions for the purpose of producing a belief in the hearer about a state of affairs in the world, then the speaker is committed to the truth of his utterance.³⁶

There is, however, a more basic reason why language is in part constitutive of institutional reality: the logical form of the structure of institutional reality is identical with the form of a specific class of speech acts, the so-called "Declarations".³⁷ When a barman utters the words «This is your beer» while giving you the drink he is not simply describing a fact, nor he is trying to change an independently existing fact. Rather, he is creating the fact that that drink is now yours simply by way of representing that fact as already existing. In this case the

34. SEARLE 2001, 183.

35. SEARLE 2010, 82.

36. SEARLE 2010, 80.

37. SEARLE 1973.

relationships among language, semantics and ontology are different from standard cases where we issue speech acts aimed at matching (assertions) or changing (promises, orders) an independently existing reality. Declarations, in fact, do not presuppose an independently existing reality because, in this case, the representation of the fact is constitutive of the fact itself.³⁸

This mechanism has no analogue in the domain of mental representations. Mental representations can have either a mind-to-world direction of fit (i.e., a belief is true or false depending on whether its content fits states of affairs in the world) or a world-to-mind direction of fit (i.e., a desire is fulfilled or frustrated depending on whether states of affairs in the world fit the content of the desire). A Declaration, on the contrary, changes the world so that it fits the representational content (and it has, therefore, the world-to-word direction of fit), but it does so by way of representing the world as already being in that way (and so it has the word-to-mind direction of fit). And the reason why there are no mental representation with double direction of fit is that a Declaration can achieve its goal only through the public acceptance of its content. An agent, then, «can represent states of affairs that do not exist but which can be brought into existence by getting a community to accept a certain class of speech acts».³⁹

This means, therefore, that this effect can be achieved only by way of leveraging upon the public procedures for the conventionalization of the speaker's meaning, since without this dimension of public acceptance a Declaration could never function as such.

If we go back to the issue of how collective intentionality could ground collective behavior and its normativity we could be tempted to say, then, that the members of a group can cooperate because they have the right we-intention, and that they have the right we-intention because they have reached some kind of agreement through appropriate conversational interactions leading to public commitments. This argumentative line would account, as Gilbert says,⁴⁰ for the ordinary usage of action sentences such as «we intend to do such and such» and for their specific normative value. Searle himself regards this account

38. See SEARLE 2010, 13, 85 ff., 114.

39. SEARLE 2010, 85.

40. GILBERT 2007.

as «a reasonable assumption for most theoretical purposes»,⁴¹ and his analysis seems to support this point to the extent that it identifies language as the crucial cognitive ability allowing humans to develop a cognitive profile structured by deontic commitments.

Searle, however, has also argued that this account would be necessarily incomplete. Communication, in fact, requires as its necessary condition a prelinguistic form of collective intentionality: «there is a ground-floor form of collective intentionality, one that exists prior to the exercise of language and which makes the use of language possible at all [...] you have to have a prelinguistic form of collective intentionality on which the linguistic forms are built, and you have to have the collective intentionality of the conversation in order to make the commitment».⁴²

The very evolution of public procedures for the conventionalization of speaker's meaning, which in Searle's account is the crucial step for the evolution of language and of its deontology, requires the existence of a prelinguistic collective intentionality allowing agents to cooperate for the use of those procedures. But I would say even more: the use of these procedures already presupposes the ability to cooperate under specific public normative criteria, since even though the procedures, qua conventional, are arbitrarily chosen by a community, there is a correct and an incorrect way of using them.

On the one hand, then, Searle's account seems to claim that the specific commitments of cooperative action derive from the deontology necessarily involved in the use of language. On the other hand, however, conversational interactions and the very development of language seem to require that every agent is capable of regarding him/herself as publicly bound to comply with the norms governing the public use of linguistic procedures. But since a collective intention is nothing but a psychological state realized in the head of an individual (of course, a *sui generis* individual state realized in the first person plural form), then it seems that it cannot be the source of the specific normativity built into the logical structure of human cooperation.

41. SEARLE 2010, 49.

42. SEARLE 2010, 50.

4. The Background sense of the other as a potential cooperator

One way of facing this issue which is, I think, coherent with Searle's theoretical proposal, is to point out that both collective intentionality and language do not "create" *ex novo* human sociality. The human mental architecture, even before the development of language and of the actual occurrence of we-intentional states, is already intersubjectively structured: language and collective intentionality leverage upon this preexisting sense of sociality and of community to give rise to specific cooperative interactions.

The goal of Searle's social ontology, then, if my reading hypothesis is correct, is not to show how a set of mutually, structurally isolated minds can be «put together» in interaction by collective intentionality and language. Rather, collective intentionality and language enact in the public space of reasons an intersubjectivity which is already built into the logical structure of our mental skills. So, for example, Searle claims that

I am convinced that the category of 'other people' plays a special role in the *structure* of our conscious experiences, a role unlike that of objects and states of affairs; and I believe that this capacity for assigning a special status to other loci of consciousness is biologically based and is a Background presupposition for all forms of collective intentionality [...].⁴³

Actually, some recent developments in cognitive science and philosophy of mind have provided a possible alternative to the traditional individualist, Cartesian view of the mind, articulating this theoretical alternative around the conceptual pair of the "embodiment" and "embedding" of mental processes. According to these theories, the non-neural body and the environment are not just sources of input or networks of tools for the use of an intrinsically mindful and "intelligent" brain. Rather, mental phenomena emerge in complex interacting systems distributed among brain, body, and environment, where these latter are all equally responsible of the specific cognitive profile of the human mind.⁴⁴

43. SEARLE 1992, 127–128.

44. This formulation is sufficiently wide to cover different versions of this hypothesis, from sensorimotor views (HURLEY 1998; NOË 2004) to neofunctionalism (CLARK

That Searle's view of the mind can be interpreted as one of the crucial steps of the development of the conception of mind as embodied and embedded can be shown, as Di Lorenzo Ajello notes,⁴⁵ by way of pointing out the crucial role played by the context-dependence of the mental in Searle's philosophy of mind and, more specifically, by the concepts of Network and Background:

An Intentional state only determines its conditions of satisfaction – and thus only is the state that it is—given its position in a *Network* of other Intentional states and against a *Background* of practices and preintentional assumptions that are neither themselves Intentional states, nor are they parts of the conditions of satisfaction of Intentional states. To see this, consider the following example. Suppose there was a particular moment at which Jimmy Carter first formed the desire to run for the Presidency of the United States, and suppose further that this Intentional state was realized according to everybody's favorite theories of the ontology of the mental [...] he had a certain neural configuration in a certain part of his brain which realized his desire [...] Now suppose further that exactly these same type-identical realizations of the mental state occurred in the mind and brain of a Pleistocene man living in a hunter-gatherer society of thousands of years ago. He had a type-identical neural configuration to that which corresponded to Carter's desire [...] All the same, however type-identical the two realizations might be, the Pleistocene man's mental state could not have been the desire to run for the Presidency of the United States. Why not? Well, to put it as an understatement, the circumstances were not appropriate.⁴⁶

Of course, in Searle's view mental states are caused by and realized in individual brains, but as Searle's example clearly shows, mental states always occur in specific circumstances enabling the determination of specific conditions of satisfaction for specific intentional states. These circumstances are given both by the entire Network of the intentional states of an agent, which determines holistically the conditions of satisfaction of each single intentional state, and by the set

2008) to enactivism (THOMPSON 2007). For a critical discussion cf. ROBBINS and AYEDE 2009; VICARI 2011 and, with specific reference to social cognition, VICARI 2013.

45. See DI LORENZO AJELLO 2001, especially chp. 3 *passim*.

46. SEARLE 1983, 19–20.

of non-representational and preintentional abilities, skills, dispositions and capacities constituting the Background.

The technical notion of “Background” comes from speech acts theory⁴⁷ and it can be spelled out as follows:

The Background is a set of nonrepresentational mental capacities that enable all representing to take place. Intentional states only have the conditions of satisfaction that they do, and they only are the states that they are, against a Background of abilities that are not themselves Intentional states. In order that I can now have the Intentional states that I do I must have certain kinds of know-how: I must know how to do things, but the kinds of «know-how» in question are not, in these cases, forms of «knowing that».⁴⁸

The general hypothesis of the Background holds that every intentional state is enabled to determine conditions of satisfaction only if the agent has some relevant preintentional capacities regarding how things are in the world and how to act in the world. Some of these skills are a part of our «deep Background» – that is, they are embodied in our biological structure as human beings (such as the implicit awareness of our motor potentialities) – while others are a part of our “local Background” – that is, they are the result of our embedding in social and cultural relationships in a certain environment (i.e., knowing how to play baseball). Even though the brain is the causal basis of mental phenomena, even a simple intention such as «to go to the refrigerator and get a bottle of beer to drink» requires the possession and exercise of biological and cultural skills regarding, for example, «standing, walking, opening doors, pouring and drinking» where there is no «sharp dividing line» between skills regarding «how things are» and «how I do things».⁴⁹ The possession of these skills derives from the fact that «each one of us is a biological and social being in a world of other biological and social beings, surrounded by artifacts and natural objects», so that «the Background is indeed derived» from the entire

47. See SEARLE 1973.

48. SEARLE 1983, 143.

49. SEARLE 1983, 143-144

congeries of relations which each biological-social being has to the world around itself». ⁵⁰

But if the hypothesis of the Background plays the crucial role, in Searle's thought, to show how individual minds are originally structured by the practical organism-environment relationships, this concept can play an equally significant role in showing how the normativity of cooperation can have deeper roots than the ones provided by language and collective intentionality.

For Searle, in fact, collective intentionality can work to enable collective cooperative action only in virtue of «preintentional Background mental capacities that are not themselves representational». ⁵¹

Cooperative agents, in other words, “presuppose” or «give it for granted» «that the others are agents like yourself, that they have a similar awareness of you as an agent like themselves, and that these awarenesses coalesce into a sense of *us* as possible or actual collective agents». ⁵²

Social groups, Searle argues, are always «ready for action» even though they are not always actually engaged in cooperative behavior nor they are always planning to do so. However every agent can, in every moment, address someone and ask him/her what time is it while having an expectation of getting an answer. A necessary condition for this phenomenon is that every agent «regards the other as an agent and as a candidate to form a collective agent» ⁵³: actually, it wouldn't make sense having a collective intention to push a car together with a stone or a tree, nor it would make sense addressing a coffee machine with a funny joke.

50. SEARLE 1983, 154. Though there is a conceptual distinction between the Network as a set of representational intentional states and the Background as a set of nonrepresentational abilities, skills and dispositions, in more recent studies Searle has come to regard the Network, when it works unconsciously, as the biologically based Background disposition of the brain to produce conscious intentional states. Fully developing the potentialities of the hypothesis of the Background, then, Searle came to give up the picture of the mind as an “inventory” of conscious and unconscious representations and came to regard the mind as a set of embodied, embedded skills, abilities and dispositions playing a crucial role in structuring the organism-environment interactions. On these points see SEARLE 1992 and SEARLE 2011, cf. VICARI 2008.

51. SEARLE 1990, 401.

52. SEARLE 1990, 414.

53. SEARLE 1990, 414.

This is the reason why, as Searle argues, while saying that collective intentionality augments this preintentional sense of others, and while saying that social behavior and conversation play a key role in the construction of society is also correct, saying that these phenomena are the “foundation” of society is wrong, since each one of these phenomena presupposes a «form of society»⁵⁴ and «some level of sense of community»⁵⁵ as one of their necessary conditions.

From this point of view, then, Searle’s position is very close to the views of supporters of the embodied-embedded theory of mind, such as Alva Noë: the phenomenon of understanding others seems to take place at the prereflective level of embodied, embedded skills, and an analysis of it in intentional terms would simply misunderstand the way it works in real life.

Shaun Gallagher, for example, holds that «our primary and usual way of being in the world is pragmatic interaction (characterized by action, involvement, and interaction based on environmental and contextual factors), rather than mentalistic or conceptual contemplation (characterized as explanation or prediction based on mental contents)»,⁵⁶ while «explanation and prediction are specialized and relatively rare modes of understanding others».⁵⁷ The most fundamental way to understand others would be, from this point of view, «something like evaluative understanding about what someone means»⁵⁸: the action of others, as well as mine, may be motivated «in part by the fact that the situation is just such that this is the action that is called for. In such cases, an action is not caused by a well-formed mental state, but is motivated by some aspect of the situation, as I experience and evaluate it.»⁵⁹

According to this view, which owes so much, overtly, to the phenomenological tradition,⁶⁰ understanding others would require first

54. SEARLE 1990, 415.

55. SEARLE 1990, 414.

56. GALLAGHER 2004, 212. For similar views cf. Noë 2010; GALLAGHER and ZAHAVI 2007; THOMPSON 2007.

57. THOMPSON 2007.

58. THOMPSON 2007.

59. GALLAGHER 2004, 213.

60. Gallagher, Zahavi, Noë and Thompson specifically refer, as sources of their theories, to MERLEAU-PONTY 1962 embodied view of perception, to the theories of

and foremost pragmatic competences in the various interaction contexts among subjects of experience.

So, as Gallagher says,

Before we are in a position to form a theory about someone, or to simulate what the other person believes or desires, we already have specific pretheoretical knowledge about how people behave in particular contexts [...] Before we are in a position to explain or predict the behavior of others, to mentalize or mind-read, to theorize or simulate, we are already in a position to interact with and to understand others in terms of their gestures, intentions, and emotions, and in terms of what they see, what they do or pretend to do with objects, and how they act toward ourselves and others in the pragmatically contextualized activities of everyday life.⁶¹

The point is, then, that higher-level mental processes can work only against the «massively hermeneutic background» that «derives from embodied practices in second-person interactions with others long before we reach the age of theoretical reason».⁶²

Though sometimes we are really engaged in a theoretical stance towards others, our sociality is primarily due to our embodied, embedded, direct experience of the lived body of self and other as the main factor for the construction of interpersonal relationships. We are primarily bodyreaders, and only then (and only sometimes) mindreaders.

We could think, indeed, that the reason why cooperation is constitutively governed by a specific kind of public normativity (as it can be formalized in terms of Grice's Cooperative Principle or of Searle's constitutive rules of speech acts) depends first and foremost on the fact that every agent has an embodied, embedded, pragmatically shaped preunderstanding of the other not only as another intentional agent, but also as a potential candidate to cooperative action like him/herself. This sense of the other, in fact, allows to perform one's interactions with others against the background expectations of cooperation on the part of the other. One can legitimately expect, for example, even though in a prereflective, pretheoretical way, that the other will do

empathy in SCHELER 1954 and STEIN 1989, and to the necessarily situated character of human mind and agency in HEIDEGGER 1968.

61. GALLAGHER 2004, 230.

62. GALLAGHER 2004, 230.

his/her part in a joint task, that s/he will do it in a way that is appropriate to the context, that s/he will not interrupt his/her contribution in an unjustified way. And we might have these expectations just because certain actions are required by the context to potentially cooperative agents like us.

Of course, Michael Tomasello, Hannes Rakoczy and colleagues have shown that children are able, from 1 year on, to engage in cooperative, normatively structured behavior culminating in their ability to take part to pretend games and role games from 2 years old, when language learning and use is well on its way. But these abilities, as they also argue, leverage upon preexisting cognitive and practical skills, such as the early ability for imitation and the evolving capacity to take part in joint attentional scenes.⁶³

Colwyn Trevarthen (1979), on the other hand, had already distinguished the abilities of “primary intersubjectivity”, allowing children to interact with others based on their abilities in perceiving others’ intentionality at the level of embodied sensorimotor coupling, from “secondary intersubjectivity”, allowing self-other-world interactions that make objects and states of affairs meaningful. In both cases, however, these abilities are grounded on an implicit, pretheoretical awareness of «a common bodily intentionality that is shared across the perceiving subject and the perceived other».⁶⁴

Trevarthen has specifically shown, for example, that prelinguistic children less than 1 year old already show frustration when caretakers interrupt interactions with them for no apparent reason. Phenomena like these are mainly based on perceptuomotor attuning with others

63. Cf. TOMASELLO 2008; RAKOCZY, WARNEKEN, and TOMASELLO 2009a and RAKOCZY, WARNEKEN, and TOMASELLO 2009b, WYMAN, RAKOCZY, and TOMASELLO 2009, RAKOCZY and TOMASELLO 2007. On neonate ability in imitating reliably and flexibly others’ facial expressions see Meltzoff 2002. Evidence on the role of mirror neurons has shed new light on these early, practical understanding of others in interaction, and THOMPSON 2007 (chp. 13 *passim*) summarized current empirical evidence on human embodied intersubjectivity within his phenomenologically inspired enactive view of cognition. On mirror neurons and their role in developing an intentional attunement with others and an embodied sense of self see RIZZOLATTI and SINIGAGLIA 2008; IACOBONI, MOLNAR-SZAKACS, et al. 2005; GALLESE and SINIGAGLIA 2010.

64. GALLAGHER and ZAHAVI 2007, 188.

rather than on theoretical reasoning, providing prelinguistic children with a structural co-perception of self and other in social interactions.

Understanding the other and interacting cooperatively with him or her seems to be, then, a form of practice normatively structured by a sense of the other as a potential cooperator. And this seems to be true already at a very early stage of the ontogenesis, before the development of language and before the development of an explicit conception of the other as a «representational system» endowed with his/her own autonomous perspective on a common world.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of the normative structure of cooperative agency seems to involve, at first sight, a dilemma. Does this structure depend on collective intentionality as the mentalistic component of cooperation, or does it depend on the conversational transactions allowing agents to undertake joint, rationally binding commitments?

On the one hand, it seems that only with language one could develop a deontic, publicly binding normativity, since only with language one can have the logical structure of Declarations and one can, therefore, create desire-independent reasons grounded on the collective acceptance of certain status.

On the other hand, we should consider not only, as Grice and Searle do, that issuing speech acts is already a specific form of cooperative action, but also that the ability to interact with others in a normatively structured way is a requirement of the use of the public procedures for the conventionalization of speaker's meaning.

In this paper I argued for the hypothesis that the preintentional sense of the other as a potential cooperator is firstly responsible for the normative structure of our cooperative interactions.⁶⁵

65. In this way I have further developed, or provided a further application of DI LORENZO AJELLO 2001 thesis that the concept of Background allows Searle's philosophy of mind to avoid convincingly the risk of solipsism. Di Lorenzo Ajello explicitly frames the historical role of Searle's proposal within the line of thought that, from Aristotle to phenomenology through the late Wittgenstein has led to contemporary postclassic philosophy of mind and cognitive sciences. I also refer the reader to my VICARI 2008 and VICARI 2011 for an analysis of Searle's internalism with respect to externalism in semantics and cognitive science.

This sense of other, of which cognitive sciences are currently revealing the developmental dynamics and the actual implementation in the individual neurocognitive architecture, is of course, as Searle claims,⁶⁶ “augmented” both by collective intentionality and by conversational interactions, but it is not “constituted” by these abilities, which are located, of course, at a level of complexity higher than mere sensorimotor coupling of self, other and world in which our preintentional sense of self and other seems to be rooted.

But what does it mean that language and collective intentionality “augment” our Background sense of the other as a potential cooperator? Searle does not develop further this suggestion, but a plausible hypothesis is that the crucial novelty of language consists not only in enabling representations endowed with a double direction of fit, but also in providing the possibility of “externalizing” certain logical relationships and ideas in the public space of reasons, thereby allowing collective critical reflection and the individuation of higher-order logical relationships and implications.⁶⁷

With language, in other words, we would have, among other things, the possibility of conceptualizing and making explicit our prereflective sense of the other, and thereby we would also have the possibility of treating «the other as cooperator» as a status (in Searle’s sense) to which certain functions and related deontologies are attached.

And one implication of this operation can consist in the possibility not only of criticizing rationally and explicitly others’ contributions to cooperative action, but also to criticize one’s own interpretations of others’ contributions.

So, to take Grice’s example of repairing a broken car together, I expect that my partner will contribute to our activity in a way appropriate to the context in which that activity takes place. But if s/he suddenly begins to tell jokes and funny tales that interrupt our work, then I could legitimately criticize him/her because s/he is violating my expectations of a rational cooperation: I expect that the contribution of my partner is coherent with our common goal and that s/he provides

66. SEARLE 1990, 413.

67. See CLARK 2003 and CLARK 2008.

a relevant contribution through the right means, in the right quantity and in the right way.⁶⁸

However, my preintentional sense of the other as a potential cooperator «like me» could lead me to a different interpretation of what is going on. Perhaps my partner is not simply lazy or irrational. Maybe s/he has noted my bad mood caused by the broken car, and since s/he thinks that a nervous person cannot work well, s/he concluded that some humor could be his/her contribution to our work.

Of course, this interpretation (like the first one) could misunderstand the actual situation. But the point is that if I look at my partner's behavior from the point of view of the (now explicit) Background presupposition that the other is an at least potentially cooperative agent like me, then I have at least one reason binding me to provide interpretations of his/her behavior that are coherent with his/her status of «cooperator».⁶⁹

Giuseppe Vicari
giuseppe.vicari@unipa.it

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68. Notice that I am here applying the Cooperative principle and related maxims, as Grice already suggested, to the analysis of cooperative agency.

69. This could be the analogue, in the domain of cooperative behavior, of the phenomenon that Grice called "conversational implicature", whereby the overt violation of the implicit norms of cooperation on the part of one of the participants is interpreted by the others as being still in accordance with the cooperative principle and, therefore, as a contribution to the joint activity at issue.

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