

Further Elaborations on Searle's Concept of the Background of Collective Intentionality

Christoph Durt's extended abstract for the conference:
Collective Intentionality VI – Social Change

Wednesday, July 9th, 3.30 pm, John Harris Room (119 Moses Hall)

I will investigate how Intentionality comes about through the pre-intentional structures of the Background. With Wittgenstein I will argue that the pre-intentional structures of the Background are constituted by »Handlungsweisen«. These forms of behavior are collective in that they are part of cooperative behavior. The Background is not only »passively« shared, but already entails collectivity. Understanding how the Background that enables Intentionality is collective might help in understanding Collective Intentionality: The collective pre-intentional structure of the Background enables Collective Intentionality. This suggests that Collective Intentionality has to be thought of as basic: it is genuinely shared between individuals.

Searle (1978, 1990c, 1983, 1992, 1995, 2001) claims that a »Background« (as a technical term written in capital letters) is required in order to understand literal meanings and, moreover, »enables Intentional contents to work in the various ways that they do« (1995, 158). The Background »enables perceptual presentation« (1995, 132) and »enables us to relate to institutions« (1995, 139). While »enable« in the ordinary use might merely mean a necessary precondition (for Intentionality), Searle thinks of it in the much stronger sense of causation. He claims that his »hypothesis« of the Background is essential to any account of the mind, and that it has »far-reaching consequences for the classical theory of meaning and understanding« (1983, 147).

I will first consider the major functions Searle ascribes to the Background. I will then take up an important distinction Searle makes with regards to the dimension of the Background: the »deep Background« (1983, 143) and the »local Background« (1983, 144). The local Background or the total of »local cultural practices« is *not* shared by all human beings. Rather, it contains practices limited to specific cultures. The deep Background, by contrast, is »common to all normally-functioning human beings in virtue of their biological makeup« (1983, 143-4). This is a helpful preliminary definition, but it poses

some problems. I will concentrate on the question whether biological features can satisfactorily explain the commonalities of the Background. There are some biological features that are universal, but there are others that are *not*. An example of a universal biological feature is the fact *that* we have a brain. An example of non-universal biological feature is *how* the neurons of the brain are connected. While all brains share some general structure, each brain has a different specific construction. If something is biological conditioned, this does not necessarily mean it is universal – recurring to a common biology alone cannot account for all universal parts of the Background. On the other hand, a lack of a common biology does not mean there cannot be universally shared practices.

While the Background is by Searle's *definition* non-intentional, this is not always clear in his *description* of the Background. For instance, he claims that »repeated practice enables the body to take over and the rules to recede into the Background« (1995, 150). Barry Stroud (2000 [1991], 135) interprets this as meaning that rules are part of the Background. This citation from Searle might be only a slip of language, but other instances suggest there is more to it. Searle e.g. talks of »Background assumptions and practices« (1983, 145), but assumptions are usually regarded as intentional. Also »Background phenomena« (1995, 126) might be considered as intentional. E.g. for Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenology and major philosopher of intentionality, phenomena are always intentional.

My suggestion for a direction in which this apparent »contradiction« (Stroud 2000 [1991], 141) might be solved is to account for the pre-intentional structures of the Background as not fully intentional, but nevertheless collectively shared. The Background is not merely common to different subjects, but collectively shared, because it arises not solely from observation, but from activity and interaction. Searle writes that the Background contains »social practices« (1983, 147). Practices in general do not need to be individual; they at least potentially follow public rules. Specifically, *social* practices are clearly shared by people of a society. They are not bound to individuals, but are rather something that a number of people engage in.

An account of the Background as collectively shared also accords more appropriately with the accounts of the philosophers Searle refers to. Wittgenstein, Bourdieu, Hume, and Nietzsche all clearly did not think of the background (in lower case to indicate that it is not Searle's technical mean) as reducible to subjective abilities. While they have different conceptions of the background, their conceptions have in common that the background is thought of as collectively shared. E.g., for Wittgenstein the end of a justification does not consist in an ungrounded presupposition, but in an ungrounded *Handlungsweise* (cp. *ÜG* §110). Searle is right that a *Handlungsweise* is a way

of acting, and correctly translates it as ›practice‹. However, what Wittgenstein means by »Handlungsweisen« are practices that are shared with others. Potentially, each *Handlungsweise* is shared by more than one group, or even shared by all human beings – Wittgenstein's »gemeinsame menschliche Handlungsweise« (PU §206) has been interpreted in both of these ways (cp. Durt 2005a). For Wittgenstein, at the bottom of justification, there is behavior. This behavior, however, is not unstructured.

The main reason for Searle to introduce the notion of a Background of Intentionality is to avoid the infinite regress as each Intention is explained by a further Intention. This infinite regress does *not* arise from Wittgenstein's account of *Handlungsweisen*. It is true that they depend on interpretation, but they are not mere interpretations. Rather, in *Handlungsweisen* interpretation and behavior come together. Sometimes even beliefs from one's world view can provide a ›last‹ reason (they are part of the »riverbed«), but because they are intertwined with behavior, *Handlungsweisen* are especially prone to be taken as fundamental. Even though in ordinary language *Handlungsweisen* can often be described in intentional terms, they do not have to be Intentional in the full-blown technical sense. But they are pre-intentional in that they structure possible Intentionality.

That the Background is pre-intentional thus means that it is collective in the sense that its structures arise from the cooperative activities of people of a group, society, language, culture, or by all people, and in that these structures are genuinely shared. The Background might well be engrained in one's physiology or biology. But when the »body takes over« (1983, 151) that does not mean the Background is reducible to the body. In the Background it is society that determines the structure of the body, not vice versa. Searle's account of evolutionary development is compatible with a Collective Background and provides a neat way to make plausible how biological selection might come in.

This account of the Collective Background demystifies the notion of Collective Intentionality. For if the Background of Intentionality is already collectively shared, then there is no riddle about how different individuals can engage in collective behavior: We do so all the time. It is not collectivity that is derivative, but individuality. If the collectivity of the Background is preserved in Collective Intentionality, then the real question is not what makes some Intentionality collective, but rather what makes some Intentionality individual. We can look for answers to this question by investigating into what the individuality of subjects, persons, agents, and living beings consists in.