

Paper title: Rules, Collective Intentionality, Identity and Social Ontology

Abstract:

Amartya Sen (2002) argues that cooperation can only be understood by positing a type of rule-following behavior that can be (and often is) out of phase with the pursuit of individual goals, contrarily to mainstream game theory analysis, which explains cooperation as the outcome of the interaction of agents who permanently pursue their individual goals. However, Sen does not explicitly address the ontological preconditions for cooperative social behavior, although he has an implicit conception of social reality, and of the more general properties of the social realm.

Explicitly ontological contributions often work at a higher level of abstraction than Sen, describing not only social entities like ‘social rules’, but also the more general properties of those entities and of the social realm. Authors like John Searle (1995) or Tony Lawson (2003) have developed an explicit social ontology perspective, concerned with the more general properties of the social realm. I will argue that the social ontology perspective of Searle and Lawson can be very useful in order to elaborate and clarify Sen’s conception of social reality at a more general level.

In particular, I will argue that Searle’s notion of collective intentionality and his thesis of the Background can help explaining the conditions of possibility for the type of social behavior Sen describes, and also propose that a conception where social rules are ontologically irreducible to (albeit emergent from) human agency, in line with the transformational model of social activity Lawson endorses, can solve some possible inconsistencies between Sen’s approach and Searle’s notion of collective intentionality.

Sen argues that we often act in terms of our strategy (the strategy of a community with which we identify ourselves), as opposed to permanently engaging in individualistic self-goal pursuit. Sen’s argument presupposes Searle’s idea of doing something together (sharing beliefs, desires and intentions when acting in accordance with given rules of behavior), following a social strategy – as opposed to an individual strategy. Collective intentionality can then be seen as a condition of possibility of Sen’s notion of ‘identity’ with a community. Collective intentionality enables the existence of a ‘collective’ identity, which in turn provides the basis for the formation of social structures.

Sen's (2002) conception leads to the rejection of explanations of social rules and social structures where these are entirely derived from (or explained only in terms of) individual interplay of self-goal seeking agents. However, if one wants to adopt Sen's viewpoint, one can not argue that social structures determine human agency or are reified in any sense, for Sen argues that freedom of choice and reasoned scrutiny of goals and values are essential features of human behavior. I will argue that Tony Lawson's transformational conception of social activity, where cooperation exists because agents draw upon an ontologically distinct social structure they continuously reproduce and/or transform, renders Sen's suggestion that fixed rules are often taken for granted compatible with Sen's view of rationality and freedom, and with Searle's notion of collective intentionality.

Another condition of possibility for the type of social behavior Sen describes is Searle's notion of the 'Background', which is the causal structure, or the set of capacities, that enables continuous activity without the need of permanent reflection. The Background is a condition of possibility of rule following behavior, which can be causally sensitive to specific forms of rules without containing representations of those rules. Although Searle (1995) notes that we do not know much about the neurophysiological basis for social and ethical behavior, recent developments in neuroscience have begun to shed some light on this issue, and favor Searle's hypothesis that collective intentionality is a biologically primitive phenomenon.

Authors like Gallese, Keysers and Rizzolatti (2004) noted how we have a disposition to simulate somatic sensorial states in our body when we observe other people in particular situations, and designate this capacity as 'empathy'. Neurologist António Damásio (2003) suggests that empathy occurs because when observing another person in a given situation, the prefrontal and pre-motor cortex send direct signals to the somatic sensorial regions that map our body state (where the insular cortex seems to play a crucial role), mapping the action or emotion that the other person displays as if it were our own. Research on empathy has also benefited from the study of animal behavior by authors like Frans de Waal (2003), further suggesting a biological basis for social cognition processes. These developments in neuroscience, and their relation to Searle's notion of collective intentionality and the thesis of the Background, will also be discussed in this paper.

Section 1 contains an introduction concerning the role social ontology can play in the social sciences and in Sen's analysis. Section 2 scrutinizes the nature of Sen's

contribution. Section 3 examines Sen's critique of game theory analysis. In section 4 I argue that Searle's notion of collective intentionality is essential to Sen's critique, and to Sen's idea of 'collective' identity. In section 5 the implications of Searle's thesis of the Background for Sen's account of social behavior are discussed, and Section 6 revises some neurobiological evidence and discusses its implications to Searle's notion of collective intentionality and to the thesis of the Background. In section 7 I identify a possible tension between Sen's work and Searle's notion of collective intentionality, and in section 8 I suggest the transformational model of social activity Lawson endorses as a solution to such tension. Some concluding remarks are then made in section 9.

Keywords: social ontology, social rules, identity, collective intentionality, Background, empathy.

JEL classifications: B41, C7, Z13

References for the abstract:

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