

Collective Intentionality and Methodological Individualism

Abstract: In 2008, there are at least two anniversaries to commemorate for those interested in the structure of collective intentionality. First, it was twenty years ago that Raimo Tuomela's and Kaarlo Miller's seminal paper on We-Intentions appeared, a contribution that proved to be of tremendous influence even on those philosophers of collective intentionality who disagreed with the proposed line of analysis. The second anniversary is the centenary of methodological individualism, as it was in 1908 that Joseph Alois Schumpeter coined the term. In this paper, I examine some aspects of the relation between the theory of collective intentionality and methodological individualism. Most philosophers of collective intentionality endorse methodological individualism, yet there seems to be no agreement as to what precisely that entails. This paper revisits the historical origin of the doctrine to make some systematic points. My claim is that we should carefully distinguish three versions of individualism that are lumped together under the label "Methodological Individualism", only one of which seems to be unproblematic. I argue that unpacking methodological individualism will lead us to a better understanding of the role of influence in joint action, and of the sense in which intentional states can be shared.

I.

In the philosophy of social science, the label "Methodological individualism" has been a great success. In various contexts, it has been with us ever since Schumpeter coined the term in a ten pages chapter of his *Das Wesen und der Hauptinhalt der theoretischen Nationalökonomie* (1908). Heated debates on the issue have kept coming up, usually in cycles of about twenty years or so. In each round, the controversy had a somewhat different focus. Issues as varied as the limits of social planning, the relation between individual action and social structure, and the use of collectivity concepts in social explanation have been discussed under that title. Without doubt, all of these are serious issues. Yet it seems that the right way to celebrate the centenary of methodological individualism and to contribute to the next cycle of debate would be finally to come back to the heart of the matter. At its historical heart, methodological individualism is a precept about what (or whom) to regard as an *agent*. Schumpeter's teacher Max Weber puts the central precept of methodological individualism as follows: only individuals, i.e. no collectives, should be seen as agents. Much ink has been spilled about what reasons Weber might have for his claim. I argue that his basic worry is with the *intelligibility of indi-*

vidual behavior. Within his interpretive approach to social phenomena, Weber is strongly committed to the view that *each individual's behavior should be interpreted as his or her own action*. I label this view “behavioral individualism”. Weber seems to think that behavioral individualism is incompatible with the assumption of collective agents, because collective agency would somehow displace, compromise or impair the agency of participating individuals.

II.

I argue that Weber's and Schumpeter's commitment to the own agency of individuals is *correct* and is indeed the sound core of methodological individualism. Yet there are at least two problems with methodological individualism. First, the assumption that behavioral individualism is incompatible with a robust notion of collective agency rests on a mistake. Collective agency does not displace individual agency. Second, methodological individualists tend to mix up behavioral individualism with two further individualisms. The first is what I propose to call *volitional* individualism, according to which the interpretation of an individual's behavior should always bottom out in that individual's own volitions, or pro-attitudes. I argue that behavioral individualism does not imply volitional individualism, and that there are substantial reasons for doubt as to the truth of volitional individualism. Among other sources, these reasons for doubt come from recent findings concerning the link between empathy and cooperation, and from psychological research on action under the influence of authority. Dropping volitional individualism will help us to understand more ways in which some individual's volitions and pro-attitudes can be used to make sense of another individual's behavior in the interpretation of social action. This issue is not alien to the theory of collective intentionality, as recent debates on Michael Bratman's account show rather vividly.

III.

The second claim that is usually mixed up with behavioral individualism is what I propose to call *intentional* individualism, according to which only *individual* pro-attitudes are fit candidates to make sense of an individual's behavior. Intentional individualism excludes a strong conception of *intentional commonality*, i.e. the view that intentional states can be shared in the simple straightforward sense of the word in which such things as cakes or cars can be shared: one (token) cake, many pieces, one (token) intentional state, many participating individuals. Philosophers of collective intentionality usually reject intentional commonality. This forces them to adopt a *distributive* conception, according to which intentional states cannot

literally be shared, and according to which each participating individual has his or her own intentional states only. I argue that so far, no distributive conception of collective intentionality has been successful in avoiding the objection of circularity.

An important reason why intentional individualism is usually accepted is that it is not sufficiently distinguished from behavioral individualism. I argue that behavioral individualism does not imply intentional individualism. I show that intentional commonality does not compromise the own agency of the participating individuals. Thus I suggest to reject intentional individualism, which will lead to a more straightforward view of collective intentionality.

Some concluding remarks concern the history of methodological individualism. Up until now, it has not been noted that in the paper in which he introduced the term into English language (1909), Schumpeter himself argues that genuine teamwork cannot be captured within the framework of methodological individualism, as teamwork is motivated in “social wants” which are not held by “each individual separately”, but “by all individuals acting together, consciously and jointly”. Together with the arguments developed in this paper, this might remind philosophers of collective intentionality to be more careful in their endorsement of methodological individualism.