

## *Collective Intentionality, Methodological Solipsism, and Current Neurosciences.*

Many philosophers (Bruno Celano, John McDowell, Jürgen Habermas, Alex Viskovatoff among the others) argue that Searle's theories of individual and collective intentionality would suffer from a contradiction between the methodological constraint of solipsism and the necessary recognition of a social element structuring individual minds.

The first element (solipsism) is a methodological requirement: any account of Intentionality "must be given independently of any presupposition as to whether or not the agent is, in fact, getting things right with his or her Intentional states" (Searle, 1991, p. 291). This requirement is grounded on Searle's biological naturalism, which states that the brain is causally sufficient to produce mental states.

The second element is described by Searle's theory of the Background: a prehistoric hunter, unlike Hilary Clinton, cannot have the desire "I want to be President of the USA" even if he and Clinton had type-identical brain states, because the hunter lacks the right institutional context and the right kind of preintentional mental skills enabling him to produce that kind of mental state.

A similar contradiction would affect Searle's thesis that "we intentions", although rooted in individual brains, are irreducible to "I intentions" plus mutual beliefs, where Searle would not satisfactorily reconcile methodological solipsism with the irreducibility thesis. How could our minds be collectively structured (for example, acting on the basis of desire-independent reasons) if our ontological status is not different, in principle, from that of a brain in a vat?

The objection is in both cases the same: we would have to make a choice between

1. methodological solipsism (Habermas, 1991; McDowell 1991; Viskovatoff, 2001), with the consequent possible risk of an ontological, Cartesian solipsism with skeptical consequences, or
2. a "collective mind" (Celano, 2003), with the loss of the essential connection between mind and individuality as we can find it in Hegel's philosophy or, more recently, in Clark's and Chalmers' "extended mind model" (Clark and Chalmers, 2002).

Part of my aim is to shift the burden of proof, showing that the dilemma in which the critics want to put Searle's theory is grounded on an out-of-date Cartesian picture of subjectivity as a "thing" independent of its (social and natural) environment. This picture is precisely the source of the fact that if one says that mind is a biological phenomenon rooted in the biological makeup of individual organisms, then it seems that collective intentionality and the Background sense of the other as a partner in collective action (Searle, 1995) are not enough to describe the social element which is constitutive of individual minds, or that they are not coherent with the subjectivity of mind.

On the contrary, I argue that we have empirical evidence from contemporary neurosciences that this picture is false. The brain is an autonomous system modulated by the interactions with its environment: we are not "locked" in our skulls, rather the causal basis of what we are is inside our skulls and the apparatus of collective intentionality and Background describes the social element constitutive of what we are.

At present I foresee at least two test-cases to argue for this thesis:

1. the case of Phineas Gage (Damasio, 1994). Victim of a brain damage, Phineas Gage changed his personality so radically that he was no longer capable of acting on desire-independent reasons – that kind of reasons that we have when the apparatus of collective intentionality works properly together with other higher-level and typically human cognitive processes. Here a damage to the causal basis of rationality, collective intentionality and

emotions is sufficient to change the structure of Gage's mind notwithstanding that the social setting surrounding him remained the same.

2. mirror neurons. Some particular neurons of the motor cortex fire in purely perceptual situations, but also when we perform a certain action and when we see others performing the same kind of action. The recent work made by Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia (2006) looks at these neurons as the biological source of the understanding of others' movements as actions – that is, as meaningful bodily movements underlain by mental states as their internal causes. The brain has in itself, in other words, the apparatus to recognize other people as other loci of consciousness and intentionality.

My claim is that Searle's theory explains these facts better than its rivals: we need real social interaction to act on desire-independent reasons, but collective intentionality is a condition of possibility of this interaction and of our having these reasons, and its individual, embodied nature explains Gage's case. On the other side the concept of Background fits the fact that individuals have the biological basis to recognize other people as loci of agency, and therefore as (potential or actual) partners in collective action, where we can consider this recognition as the basis of sociality.

### (Partial) References

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