How Do Non-Joint Commitments Come Into Being?
An Attempt at Cultural Naturalism

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1. Some Claims

Contemporary philosophers of collective intentions and plural subject theory exhibit a point of departure that is both ahistorical and individualistic. No one pays any attention to what kind of plural-subject structure very early human plural subjects might have had, and no one seems to think it important to analyse how non-joint commitments are formed or what it means to act outside of group-memberships. Margaret Gilbert tries to answer the question "How are joint commitments formed?" (Gilbert 2000, p. 5); Raimo Tuomela and Maj Tuomela claim to be studying the two central notions "acting as a group member" and "collective commitment" (Tuomela 2003, p. 7), and hold that such a commitment is "the state of being bound as the result of the act of committing (binding) oneself" (ibid., p. 22). I will argue that the point of departure mentioned is biased, has to be rectified, and has repercussions even on the analyses of modern plural subjects.

Now and then philosophy, like science, has to work with prototypical conceptualizations and with idealizations. This is often the case, if only implicitly, in analyses of we-intentions and we-beliefs, and I will follow suit.

According to evolutionary biology, language and language-borne commitments emerged from one or several previous pre-language herd-animal social realities inhabited by our primate ancestors. As a matter of fact, there have been, in some senses of the terms, human communities, plural subjects, we-intentions, as well as we-beliefs, which were not created by language-using beings. The problem is how to relate these phenomena to the philosophy of collective intentions and plural subject theory since, as we also know, mankind experienced no sudden mutation from being non-language primates to having full-blown language. I will argue that, in order to come to philosophical grips with this problem, a new conceptual construct – "purely traditionalistic subject" – is needed. Real communities and plural subjects that approximate it will be called *purely traditionalistic (plural) subjects*. The definition of this (first) idealization is as follows:

- A plural subject is a purely traditionalistic subject *if and only if*
  there is between the constituent individuals of the plural subject a joint commitment that they (i) are absolutely unaware of and (ii) cannot instantaneously become aware of.

In purely traditionalistic subjects, there seems to be something that can adequately be called "non-formed joint commitments". Even though it may be true that "*Forming* an intention is the central way of *committing* oneself" (Tuomela 2003, p. 22; italics added), it is

not the one and only way of *being* committed. An individual may be committed without having formed this commitment. When a man says "Here I stand, I can do no other", he may of course himself have formed an intention and a commitment, but it may also be the case that, so to speak, an intention and a commitment have formed him. Vocations and callings are not formed, even though the persons under the spell are well aware of the existence of alternatives. I will argue that the constituent individuals of purely traditionalistic subjects are living a vocation-like life, but one in which there is no awareness at all about alternatives. Also, I will argue that an individual living in a purely traditionalistic community cannot act outside of group-memberships without forming a non-joint commitment to do so. If it will be claimed that, hereby, I take the concept of "commitment" outside its border, then I will retort that concepts need not forever be tied to their traditional extension.

Many discussions of we-intentions and we-beliefs tell simplified stories about how a plurality of subjects (individuals) is transformed into a plural subject with a joint commitment. All of these stories, considered in the abstract, describe how some *autonomous individuals* (idealization) end up, through various kinds of procedures, in an implicit or explicit agreement that constrains them to be loyal parts of what I will call a *purely modern plural subject* (idealization). Such a subject is a kind of social contract subject. In spite of all these stories, it is, at least by Gilbert, required that the general analysis of we-intentions should allow for the existence of we-intentions even in cases where there are no corresponding personal intentions. Gilbert puts stress on what she calls "The Compatibility with Lack of the Corresponding Personal Intentions Criterion" (Gilbert 2000, p. 17). Without such a requirement, the analyses will deviate too much from ordinary usage. I will argue that a fourth idealization, one which is related to that of the purely traditionalistic subject, is needed in order to make philosophical sense of this requirement. It will be called *habituatedly traditionalistic (plural) subject*. The reason is that a plural subject that has come into being as a purely modern plural subject can later on by means of habit change a bit in the direction of becoming a purely traditionalistic subject. Moreover, it can oscillate between approximating a purely modern subject and a habituatedly traditionalistic subject. The latter kind of subject I define as follows:

- A plural subject is a habituatedly traditionalistic subject *if and only if* there is between the constituent individuals of the plural subject a joint commitment that they (i) are unaware of but (ii) can instantaneously become aware of.

The most obvious problem regarding these definitions of traditionalistic subjects is, I take it, to explain what it can mean to have a commitment that one is "unaware of". My explanation will emerge in sections three and four, where, by means of thought experiments, I will answer, positively, the questions:

(a) Are there linguistic *commitments* in an absolutely mono-lingual community?
(b) Are there normative *commitments* in an absolutely mono-normative community?

In the analytic philosophy of social reality, as represented by philosophers such as Gilbert, Tuomela, and Searle, but not by Seumas Miller, there seems at the moment to exist some kind of vague and overarching consensus about what collective intentions and plural subjects that are based on personal intentions amount to. This view will be presented in the next section in order to serve as a foil for the views put forward in the ensuing sections.

2. Walking Together

Gilberts's favourite example of a plural subject is two people taking a walk together (Gilbert 1990 and 2000). Such a subject, with its constituting joint commitment, can come into being through a dialogue like this:

– Jack, shall we take a walk?
– But Sue, isn't it raining?
– No, the sun is shining again.
– O.K., then, let's go.

After such a dialogue, Sue and Jack can intend "as a body" (Gilbert's favourite expression), intend "in the we-mode" (Tuomela's favourite expression), or have intentions with the simple content "We intend" (Searle 1995). From this, so to speak, zero point, the analysis unfolds as follows:

Sue's intentions and beliefs	Jack's intentions and beliefs
0. We intend to take a walk.	0. We intend to take a walk.
1. I (Sue) intend to do my part of our walk.	1. I (Jack) intend to do my part of our walk.
2. I believe that Jack can do his part of the walk.	2. I believe that Sue can do her part of the walk.
3. I believe there is common knowledge among me and Jack that we intend to take a walk and that each of us can do his/her part of the walk.	3. I believe there is common knowledge among me and Sue that we intend to take a walk and that each of us can do her/his part of the walk.
4. I believe we have mutual entitlements to rebuke one another for not doing what people are supposed to do when taking a walk.	4. I believe we have mutual entitlements to rebuke one another for not doing what people are supposed to do when taking a walk.

The normativity expressed by "entitlements to rebuke one another" is assumed to be neither moral nor prudential normativity, but a of a special kind; see (Gilbert 2000, chapter 4) and Searle (2001, pp. 111-113, 193-200).

Borrowing concepts from Kay Mathiesen (2002), I would like to explicate this five-partitioned analysis as follows. Sue and Jack are, each on their own, the *intentional subjects* of the two-person plural subject described. Each of them has "we" as the *subject of intention* in the 0-part of their collective intention, and each of them has "I" as the *subject of intention* in the 1-part and as the *subject of belief* in the 2-, 3-, and 4-parts of their collective intention.

What kinds of relationships do then the statements 1, 2, 3, and 4 bear to statement 0? Here, there seems to be a difference in opinion between Searle on the one hand and Gilbert and Tuomela on the other. If I may use a sociological distinction that these philosophers themselves do not employ, I would say as follows. Gilbert and Tuomela claim that in the *manifest* content "We intend to walk" *there is always a latent content* such as that described by the statements 1-4. But Searle claims that the intention "We intend to walk" can be self-sufficient, even though an intention "I intend to do my part of our walk" *may* come into existence as a secondary intention derived from the primary one (1995, pp. 24-25). This difference between the philosophers mentioned, however, is of no importance for my undertaking in this paper.

Obviously, the analysis described does not conform to "The Compatibility with Lack of the Corresponding Personal Intentions Criterion". The intentional subjects in question, Sue and Jack, do have personal intentions that are constitutive for the we-intention at hand.

3. A Thought Experiment

In the world of today, it is not uncommon that one meets people with a language so different from one's own that one does not understand a single word of what they say. In such a case one hears merely sounds, not people talking about something. In spite of the fact that one knows that the speakers are talking about something, the meanings borne by the sounds are, to begin with, as unperceivable as the farside of the moon. Let us now try to imagine what a situation like this would look like if we had no idea whatsoever that there might be languages different from our own.

Assume we belong to a tribe that has never encountered a tribe with another language. Our language is passed down from generation to generation by means of imitation without any school teaching at all. Would it then for us be possible to make the distinction, nowadays easily understood, between the meaning and the sound of a word? In my opinion, it would not be logically impossible, but it would be extremely hard. It would probably require a genius. The reason is twofold. First, meanings and sounds are very intimately fused in word-perception; from a phenomenological point of view, they constitute a *Gestalt*, i.e., we do not perceive sounds and think distinct but connected meanings. Second, we are not even directly aware of the word-Gestalts used; we simply hear what is talked about by means of the words.

Assume next that one day we do meet another tribe that speaks a different language. On this occasion, and for some time to come, the other language does not appear to us as a language at all. Why? Answer: it is impossible to learn new languages instantly. This being so, the other tribe will wrongly appear to be uttering merely sounds on a par with the sounds of animals. (It is noteworthy that the Greek word for foreigner, 'barbarian', originally meant someone who merely babbles, i.e., someone who does not really have a language.) Furthermore, in this situation we are not even able to *think* that the sounds of the other tribe may be connected to meanings that exist in our own language. In order for us to be able to think that the sounds we hear may carry *for us unperceivable* but otherwise quite ordinary meanings, we have to have recourse to the distinction between meanings and sounds which we so far have been unable to construe.

In the situation envisaged, we are of course also unable to form an intention to say something in another language. Trivially, we cannot form a prior intention about something of which we are unable to think. Therefore, together with all the other members of our tribe, we are (i) *jointly committed to the existing language, but we are absolutely unaware of this commitment*. Furthermore, since, as remarked, one cannot learn a new language instantaneously, we are also (ii) unable instantaneously to become aware of our commitment. Therefore, we belong to a linguistically purely traditionalistic subject.

Metaphorically, one might say that there is in the imagined situation both a we-intention to the effect that we intend to speak our traditional language, and a we-belief that there is only one language in the world. But this way of speaking must not be turned into the true analysis of linguistically purely traditionalistic subjects. It would wrongly turn a linguistically unreflective community into a reflective one.

4. Keeping a proper distance together

In the way now explained in which communities may be absolutely mono-lingual, they may be absolutely mono-normative, too. In such a community, the members do not only act in conformity with one single system of norms; they cannot even think of alternative norms. An absolutely mono-normative community needs neither a power centre nor a charismatic leader to put its norms to work. In one sense of Max Weber's concept of traditional conduct

("traditionales Handeln"), it does not even need tradition as an authority that creates conformity; i.e., it needs no explicit rule saying: "We shall always do things the ways we have always done them". This is the reason why I call such plural subjects *purely* traditionalistic. The conduct of the community is for its members the way things always have been done, are done, and will be done, because this conduct appears as the one and only natural order. There is in such a community no need whatsoever to state that this is the way things *ought to* be done. According to this analysis, there are two kinds of tradition: reflective, and unreflective (pure). As far as I know, this distinction has not been thoroughly discussed in modern sociology.

The norms of an unreflective tradition are passed down from generation to generation by means of imitation and a kind of correction of wrong-doings that is regarded neither as sanction nor as punishment. It is like teaching/helping children to walk, talk, and eat in the way that people walk, talk, and eat.

Some decades ago, I lived with such absolutely unreflective normativity about what distance I ought to keep from other people in different kinds of social situations, but then studies by social psychologists made me, and most other culturally interested people, reflectively aware of these culturally bound norms. Let us nonetheless assume that Sue and Jack have not become aware of this specific kind of normativity. That is, they are always jointly keeping a proper distance without doing this by means of a collective intention of the kind explicated in plural subject theory. In the situation now envisaged, Sue and Jack altogether lack personal intentions and beliefs about sharing the proper distance keeping that they in fact share. Therefore, if we shall compare this sharing (with its lack of intentions and beliefs) with that of sharing the walk (with its personal intentions and beliefs), we have to describe Sue and Jack from a third-person perspective. We then get the following:

Sue's intentions and beliefs	Jack's intentions and beliefs
0. Sue has no manifest intention to keep a proper distance.	0. Jack has no manifest intention to keep a proper distance.
1. Sue has no latent intention to do her part of the distance keeping.	1. Jack has no latent intention to do his part of the distance keeping.
2. Sue has no latent belief that Jack can do his part of the distance keeping.	2. Jack has no latent belief that Sue can do her part of the distance keeping.
3. Sue has no latent beliefs that there is common knowledge among her and Jack that they intend to keep a proper distance and that each of them can do their part of it.	3. Jack has no latent beliefs that there is common knowledge among her and Jack that they intend to keep a proper distance and that each of them can do their part of it.
4. Spontaneously, Sue may feel uncomfortable about the distance that Jack occasionally wants to keep.	4. Spontaneously, Jack may feel uncomfortable about the distance that Sue occasionally wants to keep.

Note that point 4 here contains a counterpart to the non-moral and non-prudential normativity spoken of in point 4 in the first table.

In this second table, no personal intentions and beliefs whatsoever are mentioned. Is then this kind of distance keeping a case of mere mechanical interaction? No, it is not. Entities in mere mechanical interaction cannot possibly, because of their lack of language, discover their interaction and try to change it. But Sue and Jack can. They are not, however, able to discover this *immediately*, since they lack an idea of such kinds of culture-bound behaviour. It makes no sense to speak about commitments among cog-wheels that are rotating together, but it makes good sense in the case of Sue and Jack keeping proper distances together. Their social

interaction is neither mechanical nor reflective, it is unreflective; and it contains impersonal joint commitments. Sue and Jack make up a very small purely traditionalistic plural subject for distance keeping.

Leaving Sue and Jack behind, let us next assume that we are members of an absolutely mono-normative tribe. What would in such a situation our reactions be like if we happen to meet another tribe that has norms which partly contradict ours. Since, according to the assumptions made, we are not aware that we act in conformity with one of several possible norm systems, we are not aware of the existence of norms at all. Therefore, it is impossible for us to apprehend immediately the norms of the other tribe as norms. This, in turn, means that when the behaviour of the other tribe violates our norms it appears to us either

(i)   as unacceptable for both our tribe and theirs, or
(ii)   as being acceptable for their tribe but not for ours.

In the first case, we apprehend the members of the other tribe as beings of somewhat the same kind as we are, and in the second case we apprehend them as beings of some other, perhaps animal-like, kind of beings. Probably, after some time, a new view will start to emerge. It will gradually become clear that the people in the other tribe are similar to us, and that our tribe acts according to one rule system and that the other tribe acts according to another. In the same way as an absolutely mono-lingual community may gradually realize that there are different languages, an absolutely mono-normative community may gradually realize that there are different norm systems. When we gain this insight a third alternative arises. We may start to regard the odd behaviour of the other tribe

(iii)   as being *perhaps* acceptable both for their tribe and ours.

When the third possibility has become visible, our tribe is no longer an absolutely mono-normative community. And this is true even if we retain all our norms. We can now *think* that there are other rule systems than our own. But before our tribe met the other tribe, we were, together with all our fellow tribesmen, *jointly absolutely committed to the existing norms without being aware of it*. We belonged to a normatively purely traditionalistic subject. Using one of Searle's terms, one might say that all our normative abilities were "background abilities" (Searle 1995, chapter 6). We behaved *as if* we had a conscious we-intention to act according to our traditional norms as well as a conscious we-belief that there is only one norm system in the world. But there were no such conscious intentions or beliefs. Thinking that there were would falsely turn normatively unreflective plural subjects into reflective plural subjects.

Hopefully, these thought experiments make it clear what it can mean for the individuals in a plural subject to have a joint commitment that they are absolutely unaware of. The joint commitments of a purely traditionalistic subject contain *invisible* normativity. However, I would like to add some more words about the distinction between mechanical interaction and unreflective social interaction that I have employed.

Philosophy and science do not only sometimes have to work with idealizations. In some situations, even metaphors can be necessary. I think that we today are in such a situation when we try to understand the emergence of human societies. Therefore, I will allow myself to speak of our primate ancestors as if their brains were some kind of programmed and partly re-programmable computers; advanced computers that have systems which can represent both cognitions and conations.

A herd of primates that lacks an ordinary language may be looked upon as a network of interacting computers that are dependent upon the network for their functioning. When a baby primate is born and connected to the network (i.e., taken care of), it already contains some general programs, but it also contains many possibilities for allowing new programs to be installed (associative clue: we are biologically born with a general program that allows us to be programmed into the language of our social family). Some programs have such a character

that it is almost impossible to uninstall them (associative clue: think of a person's character traits), others are easily exchangeable (think of dress fashion), and some programs are more easily installed during a specific developmental period (think of language learning). Such a herd of primates is not an aggregate of computer-individuals; it is a functional unity constituted by mechanically interacting computer-individuals. In about the same way as the body of a single primate contains an autonomous nervous system, a herd primate community may be said to contain an autonomous network system.

When modern oral-verbal language arose, it arose in primates belonging to an autonomous network system. In such a system, there are no commitments and unreflective social interactions, there is only a very advanced kind of mechanical interaction. The concept of "commitment" has a border.

5. The Claims Revisited

What now about the following claims made in section one?
1. contemporary plural subject theory is ahistorial;
2. contemporary plural subject theory neglects the possible existence of non-joint commitments;
3. contemporary plural subject theory cannot explain how its analyses are consistent with the fact that a lot of collective intentions lack constituting personal intentions.

About 1:

In the spectrum between yellow and red there is orange. This might be good to know even for someone interested only in yellow and red. Analogously, in the history of mankind, between non-normative primate functional unities and modern plural subjects, there were purely traditionalistic plural subjects. This might be good to know even for those who are interested only in modern groups and societies, but who are well aware of the fact that once upon a time there were only pre-linguistic primate communities. The idealization of purely traditionalistic subjects widens the perspective, prevents false and anachronistic generalizations, and provides for the kind of considerations that follow.

About 2:

An impulse to act in a certain way is distinct from a personal decision to act independently of other people's views. To act on a personal impulse is to act more or less spontaneously, i.e., to act without any prior considerations. To act as an individualist, on the other hand, is to stick to a pre-determined course of action independently of what others think. In modern society, it is rather easy to be an individualist since much is allowed and, moreover, many decisions are expected, sometimes even required, to be wholly individualist. But, we can now ask: What is required in order for an individual in a purely traditionalistic subject to act as an individualist? Impulses constitute no problem. Of course, even individuals in an absolutely mono-normative community can have impulses to act, and also do act, contrary to the invisible normativity at hand. What they cannot do, however, is claim that such actions ought not to be corrected.

When individual autonomous subjects create a joint commitment and a plural subject, they create bonds and lessen the social distance between them that existed previously. As far as I can see, if one of the non-autonomous individual subjects of a purely traditionalistic community wants to act as an individualist, then he or she has to lessen already existing bonds and create a social distance where hitherto there has been none. Such a non-autonomous individual has to *form* a non-joint commitment in about the same sense of "to form" as autonomous individuals can form joint commitments.

Note that it need not be an individual that in this way starts to distance himself from a hitherto purely traditionalistic subject. It can just as well, or with even higher probability, be a sub-group that performs such a feat. Searle makes a god point about we-intentions when he says that many I-intentions and corresponding I-actions are derived from and are logically secondary to we-intentions and collective actions (1995, pp. 24-25). If I am the only violinist in a small chamber music group, then I intend to play and do play the violin as *part of our intention and our playing*. Exactly the same might be said if I am playing the violin in a symphony orchestra. However, in the latter case one might (but need not) also have a we-intention that is derived from another and more basic we-intention. It might be the case that in the string section *we intend* to play and play the strings as part of *the whole orchestra's intention and playing*. Both the following kinds of intentions are derived intentions:

- I intend to do my part of our collective doing of *A*;
- We (sub-group) intend to do our part of our (the whole group) collective doing of *A*.

An individual can, so to speak, be the centre of several concentric we-intentions. I think that it is much easier for such a "sub-we" to start to distance itself from a purely traditionalistic subject than it is for a single individual to do the same.

About 3:

A purely modern plural subject, i.e., a group that has arisen by means of an implicit or explicit agreement among autonomous individuals, may very well with time forget the origin of the group-constituting commitments and norms, but nonetheless out of habit continue to conform to them. Such a group is not a purely traditionalistic subject since: (i) the group is not absolutely unaware of its origin, this is only for the time being not remembered, and (ii) the group may more or less instantaneously become aware of the origin. That is, the group conforms to the definition of a *habituatedly* traditionalistic plural subject. However, even in such a plural subject the constituting commitments and norms are invisible. If I may use, again, the computer metaphor, I would say that the individuals of a habituatedly traditionalistic subject have, through habit, programmed themselves into a normatively non-reflective state.

Explicitly, according to Gilbert, and implicitly according to many other analytic philosophers of collective intentions, a group can have a we-intention to do *A* even if no member of the group has consciously either the intention "We will do *A*" or the intention "I will do A_n as my part of our doing *A*". Usually, as in Gilbert (2000, p. 17-18), this view is defended only by means of examples that show that such cases in fact exist. No explanations are given. Sometimes, even Gilbert seems to forget this requirement. Only the little word "roughly" frees her from contradiction when she writes: "One cannot be subject to a joint commitment without having the concept of a joint commitment and having exercised it. A joint commitment is created when, *roughly* [italics added], each of the parties has expressed his or her willingness to be party to it in conditions of common knowledge" (Gilbert 2000, p. 40). According to the views I have put forward, this is not at all true for the individuals in a purely traditionalistic subject – they may completely lack concepts for joint commitments – and it is only partly true for the individuals in a habituatedly traditionalistic plural subject. The latter individuals must once upon a time have had a concept for a joint commitment, but at he moment they need not have it since the reflective joint commitment in question is forgotten. Also, of course, they may switch between remembering and not remembering it.

Obviously, there are in modern societies habituatedly traditionalistic plural subjects. Therefore, there is in plural subject theory need for a requirement such as Gilbert's "The Compatibility with Lack of the Corresponding Personal Intentions Criterion". However, in order to conform to such a requirement, the by now traditional analyses of Gilbert, Searle, and

Tuomela have to be complemented by an analytical construct such as that of "habituatedly traditionalistic plural subject" here proposed.

Acknowledgements

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