

BOOK REVIEW

Nikos Psarros, Katinka Schulte Ostermann (Eds.),
'Facets of Sociality'

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This volume edited by two German philosophers brings together papers presented at a workshop at the University of Leipzig in 2004 on holistic and antireductionist approaches to social phenomena. The editors themselves have arranged the papers into three parts with the headings "Social Ontology" (seven papers), "Collective Actions" (six papers) and "Epistemic Holism" (three papers). Both editors and many of the authors are (or have been in the past) affiliated with the University of Leipzig. Thus the volume is more than a document of a particular conference, but presents in many of its contributions an approach to social phenomena current among philosophers at this institution.

The volume starts off with a paper by Barry Smith defending the existence of the institutional reality of, for instance, contracts, property, debts, and (in part electronic) money. According to Smith, institutional entities are "quasi-abstract", in that they are neither physical nor mental, but "at the same time [...] tied to time and history" (6). Smith also claims that such entities have an existence beyond the "domain of records and representations" (3) and that "[d]ebts depend for their existence on representations" (8). More precision would have been helpful here: Presumably, they depend on representations to come into existence, but not to persist through time; and they do not depend on representations of themselves but of other things.

Smith's paper (now nearly verbatim reprinted in Smith/Mark/Ehrlich 2008) is followed by a response by Nikos Psarros. Psarros claims that the

“generic forms of social objects exist as long as the corresponding common action type does not fall into oblivion” (29) – something we would obviously not claim about natural types like dinosaurs – and that “we are not necessarily aware of all the social objects, generic or realized, [...] although ontologically speaking they exist independently of our knowledge of them” (30-1). What are we to make of this? Also, Psarros commits a category mistake when he talks about “a higher order common action that has the structure of a state, a family, a tribe or an institution” (27) – the latter being obvious cases of endurers or continuants, existing as a whole at any time of their history, while actions have temporal parts and are thus perdurers or occurrents.

In his paper “From Individual Mind to Forms of Human Practice” (85-115), Pirmin Stekeler-Weithofer claims that one already takes part in a joint action when controlling the correctness of one’s piano-playing (105), and that the content of communicative acts “is no thing in my brain”, but “is given in a joint practice”: “It exists in a sense between us not in us” (114). From this perspective, the social aspects totally absorbs the individual, and thus Jakob Lingaard in his reply (117-133) rightly complains that within such a framework “it will be difficult to see how my intention to throw a rock can figure as an antecedent in the causal story about the broken window” (125).

Maybe this problem can be solved by Frank Kannetzky’s more detailed suggestion, who argues for a point quite similar to the conclusion of his academic teacher Stekeler-Weithofer (209-242). He suggests distinguishing between two levels of collectivity: the a-level of particular actions or particular co-operations, and the b-level of action types and intentions to perform actions of certain types. Kannetzky uses a generalization of Wittgenstein’s private language argument (which he calls “the private action argument”) to show that b-level items always presuppose a certain kind of community. Oxymoronically and with an allusion to Heidegger’s *Man* (233), Kannetzky terms this kind of community an “impersonal we-group”, meaning “a we-group which transcends personal groups and which is not determined with respect to (the number of) its concrete members” (232). While Kannetzky regards social phenomena to be reducible to individual phenomena on the a-level, he takes the social to be basic on the b-level. As he takes this level to be the more basic one, he concludes that “in the end ‘I’ is to be explained in terms of ‘We’” (239).

Kannetzky’s claims are, in turn, discussed in Boris Henning’s “Social Facts Explained and Presupposed” (243-263), who rightly remarks that an “Heideggerian *Man* [...] is impersonal to a degree that it does not have

participants at all”; it “is not really a collective” (254) nor “a plural subject in the sense that it comes into being by an agreement of individuals to ‘join forces’” (256). Therefore, what ‘one’, *das Man*, ‘does’, Henning argues, “is not a kind of joint action” (256). Thus the reference to such impersonal social phenomena can be used in an account of joint actions without any danger of circularity.

A shortcoming of the book is its diverse and loose terminology. In particular, authors use as central a term as “joint action” at will in their contributions. Some authors, like Wolfgang Detel (“Mental Causation and the Notion of Action”, 51-83) and Raimo Tuomela (“Joint Action”, 169-207), conceive of joint actions as a special kind of collective actions (51 n. 1; 169). As we have seen, Stekeler-Weithofer gives the term a very wide extension, whereas Psarros restricts the term to those cases in which all participants are physically present “at the location of the action” and “the realizing actions are of the same type” (26).

Besides the contributions already mentioned, the volume contains papers by Arto Siitonen (on Carnap’s Constitution of Cultural Objects; 33-49), Ingvar Johansson (on non-joint commitments; 135-149), Margaret Gilbert (153-168), Richard Raatzsch (265-285), Hans Bernhard Schmid (287-305), Deborah Tollefsen (309-329), Lars Lundsten (who compares Searle’s and Ingarden’s approaches to non-physical reality; 331-354), and Bert Österman (355-368). The volume will be helpful to anyone arguing for or against holism and antireductionism in social philosophy in general, and to anyone who wants to learn about Social Ontology ‘Saxonian style’ in particular.