Being a Community and Being in Community

On Hans Bernhard Schmid's study of we-intentionality

HANS BERNHARD SCHMID: *Wir-Intentionalität. Kritik des ontologischen Individualismus und Rekonstruktion der Gemeinschaft*, Alber: Freiburg im Breisgau/München 2005 (= Alber-Reihe Praktische Philosophie; 75), 485 Seiten, ISBN 3-495-48175-3, EUR 48,--.

There are not many books that discuss in depth both the true interpretation of Heidegger's *Dasein* and the paradoxes of the prisoners' dilemma. The study to be reviewed here is of this kind, and in this Hans Bernhard Schmid's book on collective intentionality – or, as he calls it in the title, "we-intentionality" – is a truly remarkable work. In his "critique of the ontological individualism and reconstruction of community" (thus the programmatic subtitle), Schmid brings together discussions from quite different corners, thus bridging the gulfs that more than often yawn between different philosophical schools. One of these corners is the discussion in recent analytic philosophy on collective agency and collective intentionality that is connected with philosophers like Bratman, Gilbert, Searle, or Tuomela. Another corner is the discussion between phenomenological thinkers in the Husserl circle of the first half of the twentieth century, on how individual subjects merge to live in communities. And a third strand in his study stems from sociological thinkers, like Weber, Parsons and Luhmann.

Schmid starts off with rehearsing the results of analytical studies of the personal pronoun "we": There are situations in which it would be presumptive and inappropriate to use "we" instead of "you and me" – presumably, because in this situations the use of "we" implicitly presupposes the existence of a community where there is none. And there are situations where it would be inappropriate not to use "we", because it would be insulting to pass over the community in silence, when it in fact exists. In the remainder of the book Schmid tries to make explicit these implicit rules of application that govern our use of the personal pronoun of the first person plural as a guide to the question: when does a group or community (*Gruppe* or *Gemeinschaft*) exist? (19) Thus, for Schmid, the application conditions of "we" are a heuristic device to uncover which "objects" (*Gegenstände*) correspond to this personal pronoun (15). In this pursuit, his main opponent obviously is individualism, which denies that there are any collective entities over and above the individual agents. This is a claim that has a strong grip both on contemporary philosophy and on modern sociology, as well within the hermeneutic Weberian style and within the economic model of behaviour, that presupposes only individual utility-maximising *homines oeconomici*. In the light of Occam's razor, individualism clearly has the credit of ontological parsimony (41).

Schmid argues, however, that individualism falls short of explaining the social phenomena that surround us. His argument to this effect proceeds in the following four major steps:

1. Communities are a matter of intentions: First he shows that mere observable features like spatial vicinity, density of interaction and the fitting together of individual behaviour do not allow to distinguish between two persons acting together and two persons acting individually in a synchronised way (§ 1). In order to tell a collective action from simultaneous individual actions, we have to refer to the participants' intentions. This is obvious in cases of "hidden sociality", where, like in a drama performance or in a case of complicity between two pickpockets, people try hard to give the appearance of non-collective action where, as a matter of fact, there is highly sophisticated co-operation (54-57).

2. Communities are a matter of non-reflexive and non-topical we-attitudes: Having said this, Schmid makes it clear that he understands the term "intention" in quite a broad way. He does not want to restrict himself to action intentions (as most of the discussion in analytic philosophy), nor only to perceptive intentional relations (as most of the phenomenological discussion does), but wants to account for both of them and, in addition, also for emotive intentionality (48-49). He thus wants to account for practic, cognitive and affective intentionality. Furthermore, he denies any commitment to view intentions as conscious mental states of individuals (45-46). In fact, he goes on to argue that for a community to exist it is neither necessary nor sufficient that the participants have a *reflexiv-thematisches Wir-Bewußtsein* of their membership, i.e. that they reciprocally believe that they and the others are members of the group in question: I do not become a member of a group by believing to be a member of this group. And I may become a member of a group without reflecting about this and thus without forming an appropriate belief. What is sufficient, or so Schmid claims, is a *nichtreflexiv-unthematisches Wir-Bewußtsein* (99). I do not need to reflect on my membership to be a member and the group need not be topical in my or the other members' thoughts in order to exist. Indeed, or so Schmid goes on, the non-reflective and non-topical we-attitude is a necessary pre-condition for the reflective and topical we-consciousness. It is, however, debatable whether a "non-reflective and non-topical we-consciousness" is not a contradiction in terms, and at other places Schmid does in fact say that the original we is not an object of a consciousness at all, like, e.g., on p. 103: "Das ursprüngliche 'Wir' ist kein 'Gegenstand' eines Bewußtseins."

3. We-attitudes are irreducible: Many analytical philosophers have tried to reduce joint phenomena to individual phenomena and common knowledge of them, where common knowledge is represented by a cascade of infinitely iterated beliefs of the form:

I believe that you believe that p and
you believe that I believe that p and

I believe that you believe that I believe that p and
you believe that I believe that you believe that p and
I believe that you believe that I believe that you believe that p and
you believe that I believe that you believe that I believe that p
and so on *ad infinitum.*

Schmid rejects all analyses that involve such infinite belief cascades. First, our finite minds are not capable of grasping an absolute infinity of beliefs. Second, such belief cascades presuppose a "propositionally differentiated language" (116). But already toddlers and animals can have joint experiences, joint thoughts, joint sensations, and also perform joint actions. Thus, community does not presuppose a propositionally structured language and can thus do without such a belief-cascade. Moreover, the "meta-institution" of language already presupposes some kind of community, and can thus not constitute community. To be sure, there are attempts to free the common knowledge approach from the commitment to infinite minds, like the suggestion that we do not believe the infinite cascade ourselves, but think about fictive counterparts with an infinite mental capacity. Schmid, however, also rejects these suggestions, because one can have the ability for joint action without developing the ability to grasp idealisations like such a "smooth reasoner counterpart" (131).

Schmid goes on to argue that if we do have common knowledge, we may form an arbitrary number of iterated beliefs (141-3), but that any finite number of these iterated beliefs falls short of establishing common knowledge (143-4). Schmid also rejects the idea that joint action is constituted by the contributory actions of the individuals, because the concept of a contributory action already presupposes the concept of the joint action (§ 5): The individual contributions are "we-derivative" (188). He thus suggests to turn the previous approaches upside down: Common knowledge yields iterated beliefs, not the other way round (144), and joint intentions give way to individual contributory intentions, not the other way round. This is the "Copernican revolution" that Schmid suggests for social ontology: to accept that joint experiences are not reducible to individual experiences (140). Hence, Schmid claims that there is irreducible jointness and an irreducible *Miteinandersein* or *gemeinsames Dasein*. He even ridicules social ontological "orthodoxy" that wants to have "collective intentionality without genuine collectivity" (217). Thus it is no wonder that Schmid dislikes the term "collective intentionality", because – according the etymology of the word – a collection comes into existing by putting together – i.e. by collecting – previously unconnected individuals. Instead, Schmid prefers the term "common intentionality" (*gemeinsame Intentionalität*, 240) or, witness the title, "we-intentionality".

4. We-attitudes are an intersubjective-relational phenomenon: Schmid is perfectly aware of the fact that most contemporary philosophers embrace reductionist positions in social ontology because they do not want to be committed to something like a "collective subject" or a "group mind" (145), as they think that such conceptions are, as

Searle puts it, “perfectly dreadful metaphysical excrescences” and “at best mysterious and at worst incoherent” (quoted on p. 189). But Schmid argues that the spooky conception of a collective subject makes only sense on the background of individualism, or, more precisely, if one accepts the individualistic premise that an intention needs exactly one individual subject as its bearer. Therefore, the collective subject is an “individualistic fiction” (233) and a “Cartesian illusion” (235). As Schmid himself rejects the individualistic premise, he is no longer urged to postulate a collective subject for collective intentions. Its role can be taken over by systems of interrelated individuals, i.e. by a community, by a *gemeinsames Dasein.*

Schmid sees “social ontological orthodoxy” in a double-bind situation (221): On the one hand, these philosophers reject individualism, because they want to deal with social phenomena. On the other hand they need individualism as a stronghold against collective subjects and group-minds. One could solve this problem, Schmid goes on, by distinguishing different brands of individualism. If an ascription of an intention has the structure “... have the attitude that ... intend that ... do F” there are three possibilities to choose between an “I” and a “we” to fill the gaps. The position which Schmid calls subjective individualism claims that only individuals can be the subjects or bearers of intentions, thus that we can only fill in an “I” in the first gap. Formal individualism, as Schmid calls it, on the other hand, claims that intentions must always be of the “I intend” form, thus only an “I” can go into the second gap. (For sake of completeness, we can add a third kind of individualism, content individualism, that claims that the content of the intention must be an action of the first person singular, and that hence only an “I” fits the third gap. Given the other kinds of individualism, content individualism can be corroborated by the own-agency-principle, which is the claim that anyone can only intend his own actions.) Having said this, Schmid characterises Searle’s theory of we-intentionality as the attempt to give up formal individualism (and content individualism) while still holding to subjective individualism, because in Searle’s picture it is the individual mind that is the bearer of we-intentions like “We intend that we do F”. In contrast to this, Bratman’s theory of shared intentionality is characterised as the attempt to give up subjective individualism while sticking to formal individualism (but not to content individualism). In Bratman’s picture, a shared intention is held by a system of interrelated individuals, each of which has an intentional attitude like “I intend that we do F”.

As both options have their shortcomings, Schmid’s solution is to combine them: we have to give up both subjective and formal individualism (and then the own-agency-principle gives us a reason to dismiss content individualism as well). Thus for Schmid, it’s *we* who have to say “we”.

This is the gist of the first part of Schmid’s study, the “Overcoming of the Cartesian Brainwashing”, which is the “individualistic bias” towards the first person singular (217). Though the second part of the book is entitled as “Reconstruction of the Community”, it is not so much a systematic development of Schmid’s own view. Rather,

Schmid connects the results of the first part with three quite different fields: (a) with Heideggerian terminology, (b) with rational decision theory, and (c) with the analysis of envy.

(a) In Heidegger, there are several terms for social ontological phenomena: There is the *Mitdasein*, the *Man* and, notoriously, the *Volk*. It is not the case that Schmid subscribes to all of Heidegger's social ontological teachings. To the contrary, Schmid is very critical with many Heideggerian tenets. It is only the analysis of the *Dasein*, of human existence, and this only in one peculiar interpretation, that he wants to use to clarify his own account. Given the Mumbo Jumbo of Heideggerian terminology, I am not sure whether this is very helpful for his purpose. But the discussion has in any case its offspin for the ontology of artefacts, for Schmid distinguishes between two kinds of artefacts (or *Zeug*): While some artefacts are "only constituted by social norms", like "bank notes, traffic signs or holy water", others are not, like "hammers, bridges or remedies". And while it is nonsense to ask "Is this printed paper *really* legal tender or does it in our community only *count* as such?" (261), it makes perfect sense – and is a sign of prudence – to ask "Is this preparation x *really* a remedy or does it *only count as such according to the norms of our medical science*?" (262; italics in the original).

(b) Second, Schmid connects his theory of *Miteinandersein* with rational decision theory. It is a blatant shortcoming of orthodox decision theory that, according to it, its individual utility maximisers fail to co-operate both in prisoners' dilemma situations and in co-ordination games, whereas in a pre-theoretic sense it would be very rational to do so. Decision theorists have tried to solve this problem by referring to the salience of one alternative over the others (like Thomas Schelling or David Lewis) or by referring to the "principle of co-ordination" (like David Gauthier), which states that rational agents should perform "that action which has the best equilibrium as one of its possible outcomes" (quoted on p. 364), if there is such an equilibrium and if they consider all other agents to be rational. But neither of these suggestions is rational for a standard *homo oeconomicus*. As salience is very much a cultural matter and can be judged about only with reference to groups, Schmid suggests that a "rationality beyond foolishness" is "only possible for humans that *are with each other*" ("welche *miteinander sind*"), i.e. "humans whose rationality is not restricted to the optimisation of the individual expected utility, but covers also the dimension of the 'fitting together' of individual decisions to contribute to a joint choice" (389). This kind of rationality does not relate causes (i.e. decisions) with their effects (i.e. the consequences of actions), but parts to wholes: It relates individual contributions to joint actions (385). Schmid's suggestion seems to be very promising, indeed, though, in the end, it is not really new: His rationality of togetherness is, in effect, the rationality of the *homo sociologicus*, who knows about his roles and positions in society and about social conventions and institutions – from linguistic rules to constitutional laws – and acts accordingly.

(c) Last, but not least, Schmid uncovers a social dimension of the purportedly "lonely emotion" of envy, which some, like Jon Elster, claim to be the "cement of

society" (§ 18). Already Hesiod and Aristotle observed that we envy only people that are similar to us. But, as Schmid points out, it is not similarity as such, that is at stake here, but the fact that the envied person belongs to a reference group that is relevant for the envier. For envy is caused by the negative result of a status check relative to a relevant reference group. It is the reference group that determines both whom we envy and for what we envy them. Thus, Schmid concludes, envy is a deeply social phenomenon. While I appreciate this analysis, I do not understand why Schmid denies that we feel envy as individual selves (438). Envy may have social causes (and it may be impossible for socially unrelated individuals to feel envy) – but it is still the individual that has this emotion, even if it is an individual embedded in an abundance of social relations.

My last remark indicates that many passages in Schmid's book are in want of more clarity. For example, he often talks about joint experiences, joint emotions or similar joint phenomena. But he just claims that they exist without further illuminating their nature. As I have sketched, he denies that collective intentions have individual or collective bearers. For him, collective intentions are "something wherein individuals *divide themselves*" (233) – a description that is at best metaphorical, and Schmid's italisation of the words do not make them clearer but rather more mysterious: I know how to divide a cake, but how can I divide myself? In addition, there are some social phenomena that speak in favour of collective individuals: juridical persons, like states or companies, are in many respects on a par with natural persons. They can own property, buy and sell goods and enter contractual relations. Thus, they can act and can have intentions. But such intentions can indeed be ascribed to a state or a company as a collective individual and they need not to be shared by citizens or employees. This and other passages (especially in § 2) suggest that Schmid, on his quest for a single account fitting all phenomena, neglects whole ranges of social entities and does not seriously consider the option that there may be groups and communities of quite different kinds and different making.

Typical in this setting is the immunisation move to pick out some social entities as "real" groups while dismissing others, mostly without giving explicit criteria for this decision. Moreover, Schmid connects this with biological metaphors. To speak about "living" and "dead" communities exhibits a certain romanticism about groups. E.g., Schmid warns us of "the temptation to resort to the old rigid reflexive we-identities, for which there is since long no living intentional we-being" (103). The language of "living" and "dead" easily connects with the language of "real": "Real" groups are "alive", while "dead" groups are not "real" groups. However, I do not share this romanticism about groups. While there may be some groups that fit the metaphor of a "living" group, I think it is wrong to suppose that all groups are of this kind, nor do I think they should be such. Families, neighbourhoods, universities, ethnic groups and states are not supposed to exhibit the same kind or amount of liveliness or organic unity, that is hinted at in the biological metaphors.

One example of a "dead" group that Schmid discusses (though without explicitly calling it thus) is a circle of friends that reunites after decades of separation (93-4). Schmid cites this example in order to demonstrate that it is not sufficient for the existence of a group or community that its members mutually consider themselves to be members of this group. For the members of this circle of old friends do consider themselves and each other to be a member of this circle, but when they finally reunite after many years of separation, they have alienated themselves from one another. They are unable to have a conversation with each other, and even their common past is interpreted quite differently by each of them. Schmid concludes: "Not even the common past connects them any longer." This is not true. In a way, the old friends are still united by the objective fact of their common past, even if they now do not share their subjective understanding of this objective past. Schmid concludes further: It now becomes obvious that "since their last meeting the group has suddenly ceased to exist". But Schmid does not spell out the criteria that he takes to govern the existence of a group. He cannot take actual interactions among the group members to be necessary for a group's existence, for then no group could ever reunite; it would rather be a new group composed out of the same members. Instead of actual interactions, Schmid could take the members' dispositions for interaction to be constitutive of a group. This criterion would fit Schmid's claim that the group has ceased to exist in between their meetings. It would, however, not fit to Schmid's claim that the group "suddenly" ceased to exist, because the disposition for interaction probably did not "suddenly" disappear, but gradually faded out, making the corruption of the group a gradual process. Moreover, this criterion seems to let in too many groups, for a disposition for interaction may be among individuals that are total strangers. I regularly get help when I am standing alone with a pram at a flight of stairs. Many individuals have the disposition to carry the pram together with me down the stairs. Do I form a group with any of the potential helpers even before I meet them at the staircase? Or do all of these potential helpers together with me and other desperate parents, without knowing, form the huge group of anonymous pram-users and potential pram-carriers? Any of these two options would imply a quite heavy ontological investment, because *these* groups have no relevance whatsoever when none of their members are interacting with each other. Again, I wished Schmid would be more clear at this point and actually spelled out which is the option of his choice.

The old friends in this example are still able to use the plural pronoun "we". It is not ungrammatical to say something like "We no longer have anything to talk about" or "We have nothing in common". Schmid could say that there is no real group or community that corresponds to these utterings of "we". But why? One reason would be that the "we" is used only distributively, because then, as Schmid says, it refers to a mere aggregate of individuals (15). However, "we" in these phrases is, in fact, not used distributively. In "We are F", "we" is used distributively, if and only if – given that "We are F" is true – the predicate "F" can also truly be attributed to me and any other

individual that is included in the “we”. But “We no longer have anything to talk about” cannot be rendered as “I have nothing to talk about and you have nothing to talk about and he has nothing to talk about” or the like. Because anyone of us may have lots of topics to talk about, but just no topic that would catch the ear of the others. And, obviously, “to have nothing in common” is a relational phrase, that out of grammatical reasons cannot be predicated of a single individual like me or you or her. The distinction between the distributive and collective use of plural phrases in general is a grammatical or logical, but not an ontological matter. And sometimes, like in “We drank a glass of wine”, it is not possible to tell from the sentence alone whether the “we” is used distributively or collectively. We need to know how many glasses haven been drunken by you and me on this occasion: If only one glass, the “we” is used collectively; and the “we” is used distributively, if two glasses have been drunken. For then, the phrase could be rendered as “You drank a glass of wine and I drank a glass of wine”. What we do not need to know for the choice between the distributive or collective use of “we” is whether you and me are an “arbitrary aggregate of individuals” (15) or a small community, like a loving couple or a pair of best friends.

The phenomenon of dissidence – i.e. the possibility to say something like “We are discussing, but not me” (162) – leads Schmid to call an individual’s involvement in a group’s joint activity not a factual, but a normative matter. In this, he is inspired by Jay Rosenberg, who says that we should expect members of certain groups to act, think or feel in certain ways (170). On the other hand, it is the core idea of democracy that a group’s attitudes should accommodate the attitudes of the group members (171). Thus there is a “double normativity of the relation between individual intending and joint acting” (177). In his discussion of normativity, however, Schmid oscillates between two kinds of norms. His talk about “expectation” (170) and “the normal case” (178) reminds of norms with predictive powers, while his use of phrases like “it ought to be the case” (“es *sollte* so sein”, 178; italics in the original) suggests norms with prescriptive power. Here we have still another occasion to wish more clarity.

By way of praise, I could indicate that Schmid uses lively and detailed examples both from the belles-lettres and of his own making, that he discusses the views of authors from so many different schools, and that he does not deal with a lot of naughty details that he deems to be irrelevant. By way of criticism, I could point out just the same: To skip over details means often to skip over philosophical problems, as my wishes for clarification illustrate. And while it is true that Schmid’s examples are lively, they are at times more elaborated and verbose than necessary. And when showing around his reader in the labyrinth of previous theories of the social, he acquaints his reader with the views of lots of different thinkers, from Karl Marx to Karol Wojtyla. But too often he cites these views only with a negative intention: to show that they do not lead anywhere, that they are blind alleys. But as usual with labyrinths, the huge amount of blind alleys distracts the reader from seeing the way leading out of the labyrinth.

What is worse is that Schmid gets lost in this labyrinth himself and forgets about his original question. He does not develop an ontological theory of social entities like groups and communities that have humans as members, but rather something like an anthropological theory of human togetherness. When closing the first part of his book, he sums up his results saying that "gemeinsame Intentionalität ist qua relationales Phänomen, was wenn nicht Gesellschaft, so doch Gemeinschaft in einem ontologischen Sinn *ist*" (236-7). As I understand him, Schmid wants to say that a community (and maybe also a society) is a relational phenomenon involving common intentionality. But "community" or "group" are not relational terms; they are not terms for abstract entities at all, but rather for concrete entities. To be sure, there are relational predicates that fit the context here, e.g. something like "... has community with ..." or "... has something in common with ...". But the abstract entities that relate to these terms are clearly distinct from concrete entities like groups and communities, nor do they constitute these concrete entities, at least not when taken alone. For most humans probably have something in common with nearly any other human, even more so in the present age of globalisation. Thus, such relations constitute a single web of community around the earth. This web may have some holes or may be more densely woven at some places than at others and it may have fuzzy fringes. But many groups and communities are not only much smaller than what is covered by this global web of community, many groups do also have clear cut boundaries. It seems that Schmid has lost track of his initial question during the course of his investigation: While he starts off with the question what it is to be a community, his theory answers much better the question what it means to have something in common with others. To be sure, Schmid's study is a valuable contribution to an anthropological theory of human sociality. But his initial ontological question – when does a group exist – is still without an answer.

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