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Walking Together: A Paradigmatic Social Phenomenon

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If one were asked to characterize the standard concerns of contemporary philosophy of social science, two different problem areas would most likely come to mind. The first has to do with methodology broadly speaking. Key questions include: Are the methods of natural science appropriate to the study of social phenomena? Can there be a properly so-called social 'science' at all? The second problem area is a matter of ontology. Usually the question posed is a relational one. Roughly, what is the relationship between human social groups and the individual humans who are their members? Are groups simply aggregates of individuals, or what?

On the whole, those who have focused on the above questions have tended to work with a relatively inarticulate, intuitive understanding of the nature of social phenomena in general, and of social groups in particular. Though a more articulate understanding may not be required for certain purposes, one would think that it would benefit discussions of these questions. Thus it is plausible to suppose that an important task for the philosophy of social science is the detailed articulation of our central intuitive concepts of social phenomena.

In this essay I approach a concept crucial to this task, the concept of a social group or collectivity in general. I begin by focusing on something far less grand and general – the everyday concept of going for a walk together. The essay is intended to introduce some of the main ideas in my book *On Social Facts* (London, 1989) through a relatively self-contained discussion.[1]

I. A PROPOSAL ABOUT SOCIAL GROUPS

The sociologist Georg Simmel wrote:

> Sociation roughly, [the process of forming a social group] ranges all the way from the momentary getting together for a walk to founding a

> family. . .from the temporary aggregation of hotel guests to the intimate bonds of a mediaeval guild.[2]

This suggests an idea that I endorse for my own reasons, as I shall explain.

The idea is that we can discover the nature of social groups in general by investigating such small-scale temporary phenomena as going for a walk together. This idea is attractive insofar as it should be relatively easy to understand what it is to go for a walk with another person. It may also seem somewhat farfetched.

When sociologists and others give examples of social groups they tend to mention only such enduring, complex phenomena as families, guilds, armies, even nations. And, clearly, important distinctions can be drawn between such phenomena as going for a walk together and families, armies, and so on. Be that as it may, such small-scale phenomena as two people going for a walk together, having a conversation, and the like, do occasionally find their place in sociologists' lists, witness the quotation from Simmel above. As I shall argue, there is good reason for this.

I shall propose, more precisely, that analysis of our concepts of 'shared action' discovers a structure that is constitutive of social groups as such. To this extent, then, going for a walk together may be considered a paradigm of social phenomena in general.

I start by arguing for a particular account of what it is to go for a walk together. This will be the major part of the discussion. I then argue that a plausible account of social groups in general can be given in similar terms. In an essay of this length, some sketchiness is inevitable.[3]

II. GOING FOR A WALK TOGETHER: PRELIMINARIES

What is it for two people to go for a walk together? Let us start with one person who is out on a walk alone and see what minimum addition allows us to say that this person and someone else are out on a walk together.

Imagine that Sue Jones is out for a walk along Horsebarn Road on her own. Suddenly she realizes that someone else—a man in a black cloak—has begun to walk alongside her, about a foot away. His physical proximity is clearly not enough to make it the case that they are going for a walk together. It may disturb Sue precisely because they are *not* going for a walk together.

It is possible, of course, that she is glad he is there. She has recognized him. He is Jack Smith, and she wants to get to know him. She waits for him to say something. He is in the same position. Thus they could be walking along next to each other, each wanting this to continue. Is each one's possession of the goal that they continue walking alongside each other logically sufficient for their going for a walk together? I would say not. Note that it is possible that each one's possession of the goal in question is not known by either one. Sue may look worried and Jack may suspect that she would rather be alone. Jack may be

famous for his reclusiveness, leading Sue to conjecture that he is hoping she will stop and turn back. Once this possibility is made explicit it seems particularly clear that we must reject what I shall call the *weak shared personal goal analysis.* (Why I say 'weak' here will be clear shortly.)

What precisely is the problem here? One general, informal hypothesis is that giving both participants the personal goal that they walk alongside each other puts them no closer together *as far as they are concerned.*

Let us now consider the *strong shared personal goal analysis.* On this account, it is logically necessary and sufficient for a case of going for a walk together that it is *common knowledge* between Jack and Sue that each one has the goal in question. By this I mean, roughly, that each one's goal is completely out in the open as far as the two of them are concerned.[4] Such common knowledge could arise in various ways. In some contexts it may be enough for both parties to continue walking alongside each other for several minutes without any sign of discomfort. In any case, I shall now argue that even assuming that the conditions in question are fulfilled, a crucial feature of going for a walk together will be lacking. Let me first say something about the feature in question.

Let us assume that, at some point in time, Jack and Sue are indeed going for a walk together. That is, we assume that at this juncture the relevant logical conditions are fulfilled, whatever these are precisely. Now suppose that Jack starts drawing ahead. Failing some special circumstances, it would be odd if he were not to notice this. It would, moreover, be odd for him not to make any attempt to bring them closer together. So much is true, of course, if Jack genuinely desires that they walk side by side. For if this is what he wants, he will be acting against his interests if he fails to monitor the situation relatively carefully and to act accordingly. But there is more.

If Jack and Sue are indeed going for a walk together, and Jack has apparently drawn ahead without noticing what is happening, we can imagine Sue taking action in various ways. She might call out "Jack!" with a degree of impatience. She might catch up with him and then say, somewhat critically, "You are going to have to slow down! I can't keep up with you." In both of these cases she rebukes Jack, albeit mildly. She might not do this, of course, but it seems that, again failing special circumstances, her doing so would be *in order.* In other words, it seems that in the circumstances Sue is *entitled to rebuke* Jack. We would expect both Jack and Sue to understand that she has this entitlement.

The existence of this entitlement suggests that Jack has, in effect, an *obligation* to notice and to act (an obligation Sue has also). Particular acts Jack might perform in fulfilling his obligation to rectify matters include stopping and waiting for Sue to catch up, slowing his pace, smiling encouragement, asking if she is getting tired. These are the kinds of thing we expect to find if one party realizes he has drawn ahead of the other. Though he may not be obligated to do any one of these things, he is obligated to do something along these lines. The point can also be put in terms of *rights*: each has a right to the other's attention and corrective action. We would expect those out on a walk together to *realize* that they have the obligations, and the rights, just noted.

The foregoing suggests the following test for a putative analysis of the notion of going for a walk together. Are the proposed conditions such that the participants' failure to acknowledge the noted obligations and entitlements would necessarily throw doubt on the idea that the conditions are fulfilled?

I propose that the strong shared personal goal analysis fails the above test. In a word, those who are supposedly going for a walk in the sense defined by this analysis can deny that they have the obligations and entitlements at issue without necessarily bringing the supposition into doubt. Some clarification of this claim is in order.

Suppose Jack knows that he and Sue both have as a personal goal their continuing to walk alongside one another. (We can take this to follow from the common knowledge condition.) It is possible that Jack will judge that, all else being equal, both he and Sue have a *moral duty* to see that the goal is achieved. For this way overall happiness will be maximized. It seems equally possible, however, that Jack will not see things this way. In other words, he may fail to judge that either of them has a moral duty to promote the shared personal goal. Given that this is possible, it cannot be argued that his failure to draw the moral conclusion would necessarily throw doubt on the original supposition about what Jack knew. In order for this to happen we need some premise about Jack's moral views.

The reference to moral duties raises a more general question: Must those who lack the concept of a moral duty altogether be incapable of going for a walk together? This is not particularly plausible on the face of it. Nonetheless, if I am right, people out on a walk can *for that reason* be expected to recognize certain responsibilities and rights. This suggests that the rights and obligations in question are not moral rights and obligations. I take this to mean, roughly, that they do not have their basis in facts about objective value. This is something that a satisfactory analysis should illuminate further, for it should indicate what the grounds of obligation and entitlement are in the case of going for a walk together.[5]

Morality aside, if Jack's goal is to walk alongside Sue, *prudence* obviously requires him to monitor the situation carefully and to take what action he can to keep the two of them together. Common knowledge that Jack and Sue have the same personal goal seems to add to the prudential reasons available. Let us take it that, given common knowledge, Sue will know that Jack knows that both have the goal in question. She may well, in that case, deem Jack to be both irrational and inconsiderate of her if he fails to monitor the situation, and this could lead her to stop wanting to be with him. So it can be argued that the addition of common knowledge gives Jack an extra prudential reason to pay attention to and deal with the growing distance between them. In any case, one can say that, from a prudential point of view, that is what Jack is *obliged* to do. This does not help us save a shared personal goal analysis, however.

As is well known, H. L. A. Hart has stressed a conceptual distinction between 'being obliged' and 'having an obligation'.[6] It is clear that there is a significant distinction here. The distinction at its broadest is between a feature generated by prudential considerations, whatever we call it, and a feature

differently derived. In the first case, we argue for the feature simply by noting what a person wants, and how he must act in order to get that thing. In the second case, such premises are insufficient. It seems clear that in the case of going for a walk we are dealing with an obligation of the latter kind. In this case, I have not only argued for the presence of an obligation—prior to that, I argued for an entitlement to rebuke. These features appear to be closely connected: *the obligation is such that Jack's failure to perform entitles Sue to rebuke him.* But in the case of the feature stemming from prudential considerations only, which Hart refers to as 'being obliged', there is no such tight connection between the feature and an entitlement to rebuke.

Supposing only the fulfillment of the conditions of the strong shared goal analysis, is there any basis for inferring that Sue is now entitled, all else being equal, to rebuke Jack for carelessly drawing ahead? On the contrary, fulfillment of these conditions does not seem to entitle her to interact with him in any way at all. By this I mean, roughly, that it does not by itself—without special ancillary premises—generate a right of some kind to interact with him. If this is so, one can infer, of course, that the right kind of obligation has not been generated either, by whatever means.

Someone in Sue's position may well feel herself to be in the following fix. She would like to call out to attract Jack's attention. Indeed, she would like to put the kind of pressure on him an appropriate rebuke would produce. But she does not feel entitled to behave in these ways. Quite generally, she does not feel entitled to *interfere* with his actions in any way. More precisely, she does not feel that the existence of such an entitlement has been *established* between them.[7]

In various places Charles Taylor has suggested that when there is common knowledge of some fact between two persons this does not yet make it what he calls 'entre nous' between them: according to Taylor it is not at this point 'in public space'. Meanwhile Taylor indicates that once the fact in question has been communicated, particularly by the use of language, it will be 'entre nous', 'in public space'. This suggests that it is worth seeing if there could be a difference for our purposes between the general common knowledge case and a case involving linguistic communication. What if, rather than simply positing common knowledge of the shared personal goal, from whatever source, we suppose it to be common knowledge that each has *told* the other that he or she has the goal in question?[8]

Here things are a little delicate, since more may be conveyed than is actually said, and more or less may be accomplished depending on the circumstances. But let us suppose in this instance that each is taking the other purely at face value, and this is common knowledge. (Perhaps it is common knowledge that they are members of the Literalists, or of the G. E. Moore Society.) Suppose, then, that Jack says, somewhat quaintly, "My goal right now is to go on walking in your company." Sue replies, "And my goal is to go on walking in your company!" In spite of this change in the situation, the crucial element needed to establish that the parties are out on a walk together seems to be missing. As before, each is safe in the knowledge that the other party will (if prudent) do

what he or she can to ensure that the shared personal goal is reached. But, as before, neither one seems to have to conclude that any one has any obligations to the other to perform satisfactorily, or that anyone is entitled to rebuke the other for not doing what they can to reach the goal.

This is true even if each has averred: "I intend to do all I can to achieve my goal. For instance, if you draw ahead without noticing, I plan to call out to catch your attention. Given your own goal, this should help me attain mine." This does not seem crucially to change things. In the case now envisaged Jack will, if you like, be 'entitled to expect' that Sue will call after him if he unknowingly draws ahead, and Sue will be 'entitled to expect' that he will not be surprised at her doing so. This might make her less timid about doing these things. But here, saying that they are 'entitled to expect' these things is just another way of saying that their evidence is such that they can infer that performance will take place, all else being equal. No one yet seems to have the right type of *obligation to perform* or the corresponding *entitlements to rebuke* and so on. (Is a rebuke in order at all? This depends on whether one is entitled to complain about violations of *one's beliefs about what will be done.* Presumably Jack might in fact complain in such a way as this: "I believed you would alert me, so I was less concerned to monitor the situation!" Here I suggest the implicit appeal would be to moral considerations. Jack might add: "You *should have realized* that I might rely on you." Given a case of genuine walking together, however, he could afford to be much more peremptory, appealing to an *established understanding*: "Why didn't you alert me!?")

So far, then, three accounts of going for a walk together appear insufficient. I focused on the strong shared personal goal analysis, requiring common knowledge that it is each party's personal goal that the two of them walk along side by side. In such a situation reasons of morality generally, prudence, or, indeed, of 'care' could prompt each person to monitor the actions of the other and to do what they could to ensure that the goal each pursued was reached. I argued that, nonetheless, in this situation certain key obligations and entitlements fail to be generated. As long as people are out on a walk together, they will understand that each has an *obligation* to do what he or she can to achieve the relevant goal. Moreover, each one is *entitled* to rebuke the other for failure to fulfill this obligation. It is doubtful whether the core obligations and entitlements in question are moral obligations and entitlements. At the same time, they are not merely a matter of prudence or self-interest. Importantly, they seem to be a direct function of the fact of going for a walk together. Thus, though certain 'external' factors or considerations may lead to their being ignored, they are 'still there'. How might these various judgments about going for a walk together plausibly be accounted for?

III. GOING FOR A WALK TOGETHER: OUTLINE OF AN ACCOUNT

Suppose Jack Smith coughs to attract Sue's attention, and then asks if she is Sue Jones and would she mind if he joins her? "No," Sue says, "that would be

nice. I should like some company." This is probably enough to produce a case of going for a walk together. Once the exchange has taken place, both parties will be entitled to assume that the attitudes and actions appropriate to their going for a walk together are in place.

What were the crucial elements in this transaction? I suggest, as an initial characterization, that each party has made it clear to the other that he is willing to *join forces* with the other in accepting the goal that they walk in one another's company. There are other ways of putting the point. I might have said that each has manifested his willingness to bring it about that the goal in question be accepted *by himself and the other, jointly.* For now, let me sum up by conjecturing that in order to go for a walk together each of the parties must express willingness to constitute with the other a *plural subject of the goal* that they walk along in one another's company. 'Plural subject' is a technical term of my own, whose meaning will be more carefully specified shortly.

I conjecture, further, that once this willingness to form the plural subject of the goal in question has been expressed on both sides, in conditions of common knowledge, the foundation has been laid for each person to pursue the goal *in his or her capacity as the constituent of a plural subject* of that goal. Thus we can consider that each one's expression of willingness to walk with the other, in conditions of common knowledge, is logically sufficient for them to be plural subjects of the relevant goal, and hence to go for a walk together.

If that is right, then once all this has happened, the relevant obligations and entitlements will be in place, and we can expect the parties to know this. Let me now argue that this will be so, provided that we construe the notion of plural subjecthood in a particular way. As it turns out, the way I (independently) want to put things bears a striking resemblance to the language of some classic political theorists.

Let me first say what I want to say about plural subjecthood. When a goal has a plural subject, each of a number of persons (two or more) has, in effect, offered his will to be part of a pool of wills which is dedicated, as one, to that goal. It is common knowledge that, when each has done this in conditions of common knowledge, the pool will have been set up. Thus what is achieved is a binding together of a set of individual wills so as to constitute a single, 'plural will' dedicated to a particular goal.

The precise mechanism by which this binding is understood to take place is rather special. The individual wills are bound *simultaneously and interdependently.* Thus we do not have, here, an 'exchange of promises' such that each person unilaterally binds himself to the goal in question, leaving himself beholden for release to someone else upon whom, through this particular transaction, he has no claim. Nor is it that one person in effect says: "You may regard me as committed once *you* have made a commitment" leaving it up to the other person to make an initial unilateral commitment. Rather, each person expresses a special form of *conditional commitment* such that (as is understood) only when *everyone* has done similarly is *anyone* committed. Thus all wills are bound simultaneously and interdependently. The character of each one's commitment is

then as follows: no one can release himself from the commitment; each is obligated to all the others for performance; each is (thus) entitled to performance from the rest. This, I believe, is what is achieved in interchanges such as the one in my example, where Jack asks if he may join Sue, and Sue says that he may. Once this transaction has occurred, then all else being equal, the commitments in question are in place.

How can we best describe the content of the commitment? I have said very generally that the pool of wills is dedicated, as one, to the relevant goal. This, though vague perhaps, is the guiding idea. Other ways of putting it: each must act as would the parts of a single person or subject of action in pursuit of the goal. Or: they are to act as members of a single body, the body comprising the two of them. As we have already seen, in a concrete case one's sense of the range of responsibilities and rights becomes relatively precise.

The above account of what it is to become a participant in a plural subject can be used to throw light on, and is to that extent supported by, a semantic phenomenon involving the pronoun 'we'. (Since noticing this I have found that Wilfrid Sellars has remarked on it previously.[9])

It seems that premises of the form 'We seek goal *G*' license certain inferences about action. Thus, Sue's premise "We seek to walk along side by side" in conjunction with the premises "Jack is drawing ahead" and "The best way I can help achieve our goal is to tell Jack to slow up" seems sufficient to determine that (all else being equal) Sue should tell Jack to slow up. In other words we would expect Sue, if rational and accepting the premises, to act accordingly. Intuitively, I suggest, the conclusion follows from the premises without any kind of decomposition of the 'We' premise giving some 'I' premise about, say, Sue's personal goals.[10] Accepting this, how can we explain it? It turns out that the hypothesis that 'we' refers to a plural subject in the sense just elaborated gives us a satisfying account.

If 'we' refers to a plural subject of a goal, it refers to a pool of wills dedicated *as one* to that goal. In Sue's case, her use of 'we' refers to a pool of wills of which her own is a member. She understands her will to be bound in the service of the pool's established inclination. Hence she understands herself to be bound to perform what will best serve the goal in question. This gives her a (quite strong) reason to act accordingly. No reference to her own goals is necessary to effect the inference to this conclusion. For a premise about 'our goal' is as effective as one about 'my goal' in establishing a reason for action for a participating individual. In sum, then, the account of a plural subject in terms of a pool of wills dedicated as one to a given end, in conjunction with the assumption that 'we' refers to a plural subject of which the speaker is a part, plausibly explains the apparent inferences from an undecomposed 'we' premise.

Now, those out on a walk would quite appropriately refer to one another as 'we', at least in relation to their walk. They would quite appropriately say such things as "Shall we stop here?" "Shall we go through the woods?"[11] And inferences of the sort noted will seem appropriate at various junctures. This supports the idea that those out on a walk form a plural subject in the sense in question. For this assumption provides a satisfactory explanation of these uses of 'we'.

I have argued that going for a walk together with another person involves participating in an activity of a special kind, one whose goal is the goal of a plural subject, as opposed to the shared personal goal of the participants. Alternatively, going for a walk involves an 'our goal' as opposed to two or more 'my goals'. I take it that there are many activities of this kind, which may be referred to as 'shared', 'joint', or 'collective' action. Examples will include traveling together, eating together, dancing together, investigating the murder together, and so on.[12]

IV. SOCIAL GROUPS IN GENERAL

What has all this to do with social groups? To say it quickly, in my view, human social groups are plural subjects. That is, in order to form a social group, it is both logically necessary and logically sufficient that a set of human beings constitute a plural subject. Clearly this is a thesis about a concept, namely, our intuitive concept of a social group. The data includes, among other things, the open-ended lists of so-called social groups made by sociologists and others. These are not entirely unambiguous, but I believe the plural subject account gives them a plausible and compelling rationale.

Some immediate clarification of this thesis is in order. I have argued that those out on a walk together constitute the plural subject of a particular goal, roughly, the goal that they walk along side by side for a certain roughly specified period. Let us say that a given set of people have a 'joint', 'collective', or (in a strong sense) 'shared' goal when they are the plural subject of a goal. Now, some situations, which seem definitely to involve a social group, seem not to involve any joint goal in the appropriate sense. Witness, for instance, the committee imagined by John Updike in his story "Minutes of the Last Meeting" whose members are quite unclear about what general charge, if any, their committee has. Committees do standardly have some sort of goal, it is true. But what about families? We are not talking here about the useful effects family life may have, such as the satisfaction of individual needs for psychological intimacy. I do not find it obvious that, in constituting a family, a set of persons must have a *joint goal* or goals.

Suppose that we assume for the sake of argument that it is *not* the case that all social groups must have a joint goal. This does not, in any case, refute the claim that social groups are plural subjects. For the general, fundamental concept of a plural subject is not only embedded in our shared action concept, it can also be found, for instance, in our concept of a shared or collective belief and in the concept of a shared or collective principle.

There is no place here carefully to develop and defend detailed analyses of these particular concepts, but let us look at them briefly in action. Suppose that while they are out on their walk, Jack says: "What terrific weather!" and Sue concurs. If they subsequently run across Jill, a mutual friend, and she says "Whew! It's hot!" Sue could reply "Do you think so? *We* think it's great." It appears, in other words, that the previous interchanges between Jack and Sue

will count as having established a view that they may properly refer to as 'ours'. My contention is that, more precisely, they are now members of the plural subject of a view. This carries with it a set of obligations similar to those involved with a shared goal. Roughly, they must endeavor to appear to be 'of one mind'—as we say—in relation to this view.

Similarly, Sue and Jack may constitute themselves the plural subject of a principle of action. Suppose that at each choice point, Jack tells Sue to choose where they will turn. After a while she chooses automatically, and Jack follows her lead. At a certain fork in the road, however, Jack seems to be 'taking the reins'. Sue says, with some amusement, "I thought I was supposed to make the decisions!" and Jack apologizes. Given some such scenario, we shall be able to say that Jack and Sue have come to constitute the plural subject of a principle of action. In this case the principle is a simple 'fiat', which means, I would say, that there is now a *social convention* in this particular population. (Sue's utterance might have been tendentious, but as long as Jack goes along with it, the right attitudes will have been expressed, and thus by these acts themselves a plural subject will have been constituted.[13])

Plural subjecthood, then, extends not only to goals but also, at least, to beliefs and principles of action. On my account of social groups, in order to constitute a social group people must constitute a plural subject *of some kind.* And *any* plural subject is a social group. This makes the account less restrictive. Updike's committee probably has many collective beliefs and principles, as do most families, whether or not they lack any clear collective goal.

My claim in this paper has been that if we are looking for the key to social groups we can find what we want in the phenomenon of going for a walk together. This claim can now be articulated as follows: it turns out that in order to go for a walk together two persons must constitute a plural subject. The key to social groups is the concept of a plural subject. For social groups are plural subjects. In the space that remains let me briefly attempt to back up this view of social groups.

Evidently, those who form a plural subject of whatever kind may properly refer to themselves as 'us' or 'we', to 'our goal' 'our belief', and so on. This supports the idea of a connection between plural subjecthood and social groups. 'We' is often used to emphasize or create a sense of group membership. Political rhetoric abounds with such phrases as 'We Americans' and 'We trade unionists'. And compare Tonto's reply to the Lone Ranger: '*We*, white man?'

Mention of politics may raise a doubt. Is the analysis too broad? In groups such as nations, clubs, and even families political questions are endemic. It may not be immediately clear that such issues can arise in such a small-scale enterprise as going for a walk. And so one might wonder if we can really have a social group here. Further thought resolves this doubt. Those out on a walk have many problems to solve. For instance, for how long should they walk and where will they go? Will they talk, and if so, what about? Both collective decisions and joint principles are likely to result. One may always question whether such decisions and principles have been arrived at in a fair way

and whether their content is acceptable. Is Jack forcing conversation on Sue? Is Sue forcing her slow pace on Jack? Are Sue's interests likely to be ignored, the way things are currently arranged? Clearly, then, even going for a walk together has a political dimension.

It is, indeed, rather striking that the language I have felt it most appropriate to use in describing the constitution of plural subjects closely resembles some key passages in classic works of political theory.

Early in *The Social Contract,* discussing when we have an association as opposed to a mere aggregate of people, Rousseau writes:

> Since men cannot engender new forces, but merely unite and direct existing ones, they have no other means of maintaining themselves but to form by aggregation a sum of forces. . .so that their forces are directed by means of a single moving power and made to act in concert.[14]

This is relatively obscure, and I do not claim, or need to claim, that I am certain what Rousseau had in mind. However, it and several other passages in the book clearly bear some resemblance to what I want to say about plural subjects.

So also does this, from Hobbes, who argues that in order to generate a commonwealth human beings must

> conferre all their power and strength upon one Man, or upon one Assembly of men, that may reduce all their Wills, by plurality of voices, unto one Will. . .this is a reall Unitie of them all, in one and the same Person. . . .[15]

Hobbes includes as a possibility that the 'one Person' in whom all are unified is an 'Assembly of Men'. In principle, this could presumably be the assembly of all the people. This does not seem such a far cry from the idea of people conditionally committing their wills to common goals or views, the goals, it could be said, of a single person, that person they together constitute. Consider also what Hobbes says about the mechanism that generates the "reall Unitie": "A reall Unitie of them all, in one and the same Person, made by Covenant of every man with every man, in such manner, as if every man should say to every man, *I Authorise and give up my Right of Governing my selfe, to this Man, or to this Assembly of men, on this condition, that thou give up thy Right to him, and Authorise all his Actions in like manner.*"[16]

These analogies with past accounts of association and commonwealth, though neither necessary nor conclusive for my argument, do lend a degree of support to the idea of linking social groups in general with plural subjects. Though Hobbes and Rousseau were concerned with whole nations, it can be argued that the essentials of the mechanism they envisaged is involved even in such phenomena as two people going for a walk together.

Georg Simmel himself regarded the two-person group or 'dyad' as importantly different from larger groups. Something he stresses is that, in a dyad, each person knows that without him or her in particular the group will cease to exist. As long as there are at least three people, the group can survive the loss of

any given person. People in a dyad, then, may feel less as if the group is something 'over and above' the individual members. One can accept this and related observations without having to reject the idea that a dyad can be counted as a fully fledged social group. It can simply be regarded as a social group with a special character.[17]

So much for the worry that, in embracing temporary dyads the plural subject account of special groups is too broad. One might also wonder if the account is too narrow. Let me briefly address two worries on that score.

First, it might be questioned whether there really is some jointly accepted principle, belief, or goal, in every social group. Consider the United States of America. Does every American constitute a plural subject with every other American? Let me answer this with another question: Is the United States of America a paradigmatic social group? By this I mean, does the population of the United States clearly satisfy the conditions for being a social group in a more than rough and ready way? Unless it does, a negative answer to the original question will not throw doubt on the plural subject account of groups. It is true that people often put nations in a list of social groups. And the United States of America is generally deemed to be a nation. But it is not obvious that all of the populations we are comfortable to think of as nations must be paradigmatic social groups.

The second worry I address concerns a type of population that has been the focus of much theorizing. Someone might ask, what of economic classes, such as the so-called blue-collar workers in a certain society? These are surely not always plural subjects. This I think is true, but I would not count that against the plural subject account. Usually the informal lists of social groups given by sociologists and others do not include economic classes as such. And the importance of such classes does not imply that they ought to be thought of as social groups. In sum, I do not think there is a problem in an account of social groups that may, in the event, not bring all actual economic classes within its scope. Of course, if a given class does constitute a plural subject then it will be counted a group according to this account. And recall that a plural subject may do no more than accept a certain credo.

In the end, I do not want to argue about a label. I have argued that those out on a walk together form a plural subject, and that there is some reason to suppose that our concept of a social group—that concept by virtue of which we list families, guilds, tribes, 'and so on' together—is the concept of a plural subject. In any case, I would argue that the concept of a plural subject is a key concept for the description of human social life. It informs and directs a great deal of that life, in nations, clubs, families, and even in the taking of walks.

POSTSCRIPT

There is no space here to enquire as to the implications of my argument for those methodological and ontological concerns mentioned in the preamble to this paper. It is clear, however, that once the centrality of plural subjects to the

human social world is agreed upon, new and quite specific questions of methodology and ontology become salient.[18]

NOTES

1. Given this expository intention, I shall not attempt to survey the literature in this area or to compare or contrast my views with those of others. One who has for some while been discussing the nature of such phenomena as going for a walk together in a detailed way is Raimo Tuomela, whose work first came to my attention after my own analysis had been developed. See Tuomela, *A Theory of Social Action* (Dordrecht, 1984), and "Social Action," in *Social Action*, edited by G. Seebass and R. Tuomela (Dordrecht, 1985), 103–27, and elsewhere. I take Tuomela's conclusions to be significantly different from my own. In particular he does not ascribe to the phenomena the special type of intrinsic normativity I take to be central. There will not be space for any detailed comparison of our accounts here.

2. Georg Simmel, *On Individuality and Social Forms* (Chicago, 1971), 24. Original German publication, 1908. My attention was recently drawn to this particular passage by the quotation in Walter Wallace, "Towards a Disciplinary Matrix in Sociology," in *Handbook of Sociology*, edited by Neil J. Smelser (Berkeley, 1988), 33.

'Sociation' is a translation of the German *Vergesellschaftung*. "The process of forming a social group" is a more cumbersome but familiar-sounding rendering.

Simmel prefers to talk of 'sociation', a continuous process or event, as opposed to 'society' or 'social group', which have less dynamic connotations. See Simmel: ". . .society, as its life is constantly being realised. . .is something individuals do and suffer. To be true to this fundamental character of it, one should properly speak, not of society, but of sociation" (*Fundamental Problems of Sociology*, in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, translated and edited by K. H. Wolff (New York, 1969), 10. See also Wolff's note on his translation, p. lxiii.

3. For a more detailed discussion, see *On Social Facts*, especially chap. 4.

4. 'Common knowledge' is a technical term from David Lewis, *Convention* (Cambridge, Mass., 1969). See also Schiffer, *Meaning* (Oxford, 1972), on 'mutual knowledge'. Exactly how to define it is somewhat moot. See for instance David Lewis, "Languages and Language," in *Language, Mind, and Knowledge, Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, vol. 7, edited by K. Gunderson (Minneapolis, 1975); Jan Heal, "Common Knowledge," *Philosophical Quarterly* 28 (1978). See also *On Social Facts*.

5. I am connecting these and related points to the problem of political obligation in my *Social Ontology and Political Obligation*, in progress.

6. See H. L. A. Hart, *The Concept of Law* (Oxford, 1961).

7. Even once an entitlement of the right kind has been established between parties, one may not feel able to make use of this. Sue may be loth to assert herself in certain ways even when she is, and recognizes that she is, entitled to do so. She might be reluctant to call Jack in a rebuking way if she knows that he has an aversion to criticism, of whatever kind, and is likely to flare up at her. Such circumstances may well provide enough motivation to inhibit action to which one knows one is entitled.

When it is understood that no entitlement of the relevant kind has been established, this will tend to act as a *break* on action. This does not, of course, rule out the possibility of impulsive action, or action one justifies in terms of beliefs about moral rights.

8. Possibly closest to Taylor's paradigm would be the case where Jack says "Obviously you and I have as a goal our walking along in one another's company!" and Sue endorses this. That is, the fact of the shared personal goal is communicated in a single statement. My conclusion on the case in the text seems to stand for this case also. I would agree with Taylor that in interactions of the sort at issue here an important type of change in the situation occurs. As I would put it, Jack and Sue can now be said *jointly to accept* the view that they both have as a goal their walking in one another's company. For what I take this to amount to,

see below and also Gilbert, "Modelling Collective Belief," *Synthese* 73 (1987): 185–201, and *On Social Facts*, chap 5.

9. See, for instance, Sellars, "Imperatives, Intentions, and the Logic of 'Ought'," in *Morality and the Language of Conduct*, edited by G. Nakhnikian and H.-N. Castaneda (Detroit, 1963).

10. For further defense of this idea, see *On Social Facts*, chap. 7. In particular, I argue against the fairly popular view that all reasoning rationally productive of action *must* include a reference to the agent's personal desires.

11. I have argued elsewhere that 'Shall we do *A*' is not *always* correctly said of a given speaker and hearer. See *On Social Facts*, pp. 175ff.

12. A caveat: the phrases used in this area can be somewhat ambiguous. 'Together' can mean little more than 'in close proximity' and such phrases as 'traveling together' may occasionally be intended accordingly. The head of a spy ring might say to a colleague "Kim and Don will be traveling together on Friday" meaning only that they will be on the same train and so on. He might add "Kim doesn't know Don will be there. I want Don to keep an eye on him." Standardly, though, traveling together is used of those who are engaged in the special kind of activity at issue in this section.

13. For more on social conventions in the sense at issue here, see *On Social Facts*, chap. 6, especially pp. 373ff. For some discussion of David Lewis's influential (and quite different) account, see my "Game Theory and Convention," *Synthese* 46 (1981):44–93; "Notes on the Concept of a Social Convention," *New Literary History* (1983):225–51; *On Social Facts*, chap. 6, and "Rationality, Coordination, and Convention," forthcoming in *Synthese*.

14. J. J. Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (Indianapolis, 1983), Bk. I, chap. 6, p. 23.

15. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (New York, 1982), Part II, chap. 17, p. 227.

16. Ibid., original emphasis.

17. Cf. Simmel, "Quantitative Aspects of the Group," in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, ". . .the simplest sociological formation. . .that which operates between two elements. . . itself is a sociation" (p. 122).

18. For a discussion of the debate between 'individualism' and 'holism' given that social groups are plural subjects, see *On Social Facts*, chap. 7.

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