

The philosophy of collective representations

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ABSTRACT

The mental and the social are ‘two sides of the same coin’. In other words, ‘social relations are internal relations’. In showing how this was the point of Wittgenstein’s discussion of the practice of ‘following a rule’, Peter Winch has made an important contribution to social philosophy.

Key words holism, institutions, representations, rules, social bond

1 COLLECTIVE REPRESENTATIONS

The first thing to say about the notion of ‘collective representation’, as introduced by Durkheim, is that it unquestionably fulfils a need. Whatever the objections of a philosophical kind one might make about the way Durkheim’s social philosophy fulfils this need, someone had to start by admitting that the need existed and had to be satisfied, one way or another.

For example, take the case of the Gregorian calendar. What could be more natural than to see in it a *representation* of successive periods of time, in a truly *collective* form, since it was not constructed by this or that individual on the basis of their own experience, but still established itself, was transmitted and was put to collective use? Nevertheless, the notion of collective representation has been challenged ever since. It has often elicited unease, for reasons it would be useful to understand.

The principal difficulty in dealing with this notion seems to be the following. Anyone speaking of collective representation invokes a distinction: just as there are individual representations, attributable to personal subjects, so too there are collective representations, for which we must posit a collective subject. The immediate and inevitable result is that we move from a logical subject of attribution to a psychological one, in the sense of a thinker who forms thoughts. If we wish to refer to collective representations, we have to posit an entity of which it can be said that it carries or possesses these representations. This entity will be a social group, or society as a whole. But an entity that possesses representations is a thinking entity, therefore a living one. It is an organized system that represents the world to itself and is animated by a mental life. We seem to be going down a well-worn path: we are constituting society as a 'large animal', a 'collective individual', a 'Leviathan'. And this is the crux of the problem. How could there be, in addition to individuals and somehow above them, another individual entity made up out of some assemblage of their persons, an entity that must have its own mental life but must also contribute to that of the members of the group? We should add that the term 'collective consciousness' which Durkheim also used, highlights the difficulty: when I use the calendar, are we to say that it is the group, and not I, which is thinking in me? When the sociologist gives collective representations the status of 'forms of consciousness' it has the effect, for the philosopher, of replacing the individual thinker by a collective thinker. It so happens that the Kantian branch of the philosophy of representation favours such an interpretation: if representations of space, time and causality are 'collective representations', this means, for neo-Kantians, that sociology wants to pursue the Copernican revolution for the benefit of society (for a particular society) and no longer for a subject expressing itself in the first person singular in the manner of the *cogito*; that is to say, in the 'I think' that must accompany all representations (as forms of possible consciousness).

2 A REVOLUTION IN PHILOSOPHY

Winch wrote in 1958 that if there had been a philosophical revolution in recent years (meaning the post-war years), it was the one Wittgenstein provoked by showing in the *Philosophical Investigations* that notions involved in the philosophy of mind remained obscure or problematical so long as they were not put back into their proper context, that of human social relations (Winch, 1958: 40). According to Winch, this was what the famous but still enigmatic aphorism pointed out: 'What has to be accepted, the given, is – so one could say – forms of life' (Wittgenstein, 1953: 226e).

The implications of this philosophical revolution are immense. Can one claim they have been followed up since 1958? Nothing could be less sure.

Wittgenstein's book has achieved classic status and the secondary literature on his work is considerable. And yet one cannot help noticing that the main emphasis has rarely been put where Winch placed it. If one had to characterize in a single word the general tendency of commentaries, one could say that, for the most part, Wittgenstein's readers recognized clearly that his arguments in the *Philosophical Investigations* had radical critical consequences for the 'philosophy of psychology'. But it appears that these readers got no farther than a set of paradoxes, incoherent remarks and impossibilities, without managing to get to the diagnosis itself: if the philosophical speculations on the origin and structure of psychological concepts became aberrant, it is because it was thought possible to cut mind¹ off from society. In summary, readers recognized clearly the impossibility of attributing to an individual a mental life that had been granted to that individual alone (thus an incommunicable mental life). But they recoiled before the nevertheless direct consequence of this impossibility: the mental and the social, as Winch wrote, are 'two different sides of the same coin' (123).² In this respect, it can be said that Winch's work *The Idea of a Social Science* is a contemporary classic, not just a classic of the 1960s.

The question of the status of collective representations is given a new prominence by it. One cannot any longer ask whether such and such a form of representation (for example, the concept of space or of causality) belongs to an individual consciousness or a collective consciousness. But one can ask oneself in what social world people can form such a concept. And then reverse the question: what concepts does one have to possess for such a social relation to establish itself?

3 MIND IS PART OF SOCIETY

One might have supposed that the sociologists who followed in Durkheim's footsteps would have accepted more easily than the neo-Kantian or neo-Humean philosophers the idea according to which conceptual relations are not separable from social relations. In fact, nothing of the sort occurred. The sociologists themselves had difficulty maintaining this position, despite the fact that it appeared to be required as the very foundation of their discipline.

In a study of Marcel Mauss's thought, Louis Dumont denounced as a mistake the project of modelling social science on natural science (Dumont, 1986). Sociologists inspired by positivism imagine that in order to be scientific they must bow to the rules of what they call the 'naturalist method': scientific work would then consist of collecting data, preferably quantified, and of seeking correlations between the data. According to Dumont, such sociologists were making not only an error of method, but a philosophical error too, for they were wrong about the place of *mind* in the order of things:

'we are told that we must be content to study the data without wondering about its coherence or trying to discover its coherence, as if our mind were not a part of the society in a deeper way than it is part of nature' (Dumont, 1986). The convergence with the position developed by Winch is striking: it is in the end the very same thing to believe that the study of mind belongs to natural science (as if the mind were not a part of society) and to believe that social science above all seeks 'correlations' or 'mechanisms' and not intellectual coherence; in other words that it is a causal science rather than a study of meaningful relations³ between the elements of a system.

For Dumont, studying a social system is studying a form of mind. Thus the Indian caste system is a 'state of mind' before it is a social arrangement. It is worth quoting the remarkable passage where the author strongly underlines how the study of a social system resists everything that might constitute a simple analysis of correlations between mutually external data:

Finally, far more than a 'group' in the ordinary sense, the caste is a *state of mind*, a state of mind which is expressed by the emergence, in various situations, of groups of various orders generally called 'castes'. This is why the whole should not be seen by starting from the notion of the 'element', in terms of which it would be known through the number and nature of the constituent 'elements', but by starting from the notion of the 'system' in terms of which certain fixed principles govern the arrangement of fluid and fluctuating 'elements'. (Dumont, 1970: 34)

One might say that this remark bears on a very special system, that of castes. But this is not what Dumont intends, since he refers later to Evans-Pritchard's study of the Nuer, where he brings out the same idea, calling it 'segmentation': the groups do not exist in themselves as substantial entities, but define themselves in relation to each other and appear and disappear according to the kind of situation in which one finds oneself (Dumont, 1970). In the lexicon of social anthropology, the definition of social entities (groups) has to occur in a holistic mode (starting from a principle of differentiation and within an all-embracing system). The Wittgensteinian philosopher will present this same idea as a requirement for contextual determination of the content of the ideas:

The relation between idea and context is an internal one. The idea gets its meaning from the role it plays in the system. It is nonsensical to take several systems of ideas, find an element in each which can be expressed in the same verbal form, and then claim to have discovered an idea which is common to all the system. (Winch, 1958: 197)

We are not analysing atomic elements that might enter, with their intrinsic properties, into different molecular configurations. We are analysing a system by studying how it organizes itself. By virtue of the correlation between the

social and the mental, the same holistic requirement applies to the study of social life and the study of systems of ideas or 'ideologies'.

4 SOCIAL RELATIONS ARE INTERNAL RELATIONS

In what way are concepts and social relations 'two sides of the same coin'? Another way of putting it is to say that social relations are internal relations. We shall therefore discuss the thesis of 'the internality of social relations' (129).

It will perhaps be said that the thesis is based on a flagrant confusion between logic and reality. An internal relation is a relation between two descriptions or between two concepts; for example, the act of giving orders. There is indeed an internal relation between the concept of an order and that of obeying (cf.: 124–5): giving an *order* is saying what has to be done to *obey*. But one might add that between individual existences there can only be external relations. It is certainly true that I cannot order the door to open by saying 'Open Sesame' (because the door is not capable of obeying). It is equally true that I cannot obey by doing something that nobody has ordered me to do. These are conceptual necessities that express internal relations. Yet such internal relations do not bring about the existence of someone to obey me if I want to give orders, nor cause there to be someone to give me orders if I wish to obey. They do not make it possible for me, by giving an order, to produce obedient behaviour in others and to make my interlocutor into an agent who is subordinate to my will. In reality, once an order is given, the question of whether it is followed by its execution remains empirical.

This thesis will therefore be reproached for turning sociology into logic. It will moreover be said that individuals are not ideas or propositions: they do not therefore have internal relations, but have personal relations instead, over which they have full control. The thesis will be said to be guilty of 'intellectualism', and of assimilating social relations within symbolic relations, in the sense of relations between symbols (128).

The interest of this objection is in the way it brings out the prejudged question that lies at the origin of the misapprehension: *social relations are thought to be defined between individuals*. The social bond is pictured as a sort of mortar binding the bricks of the social edifice that individuals constitute. This is a mistake. The social bond between master and servant is not a bond between one individual and another but an oppositional bond between two complementary statuses. By definition, the concept of the individual excludes dependence with respect to another individual existence. To say 'individuality' is in effect to say, as the above objection makes plain, externality of relations. Or, putting it another way, in logical terms: the concept of an individual

invites us to use an extensional language, that is, a kind of language in which we can identify stable and independent elements, as Dumont said, but in which it is not possible to identify the parts of a whole on the basis of a system of relations constitutive of their own terms.

What is impossible is therefore not that Peter the master should exist without Paul the servant also existing, but rather that Peter should have the status of master without anyone having the status of servant (Paul or any another person). Similarly, one can set oneself up as an antique dealer or a psychoanalyst: it is not necessary that there be customers for this to happen. Supply does not suffice to create demand (meaning the existence of customers). Nevertheless, there are two impossibilities that make manifest the internal relationship between the seller and the buyer: it is not possible for the dealer to have sold something if nobody has bought anything from him, and it is not possible for someone to set herself up as an antique dealer or a psychoanalyst in a society lacking the required notions of commercial dealing in antiques or the psychoanalytical cure. Such notions are therefore exactly what we conventionally call collective representations.

One might object that these notions had to be invented. Before being collective, they were individual. This is the classic question of the origin of institutions.

5 THE SOCIAL BOND

Margaret Gilbert's book *On Social Facts* contains the most rigorous discussion yet, to my knowledge, of the ideas constituting what Winch called 'the revolution in philosophy'. Her book aims at finding a middle way between the Nietzschean individualism of Max Weber and the Wittgensteinian holism of Winch. Going against Weber, she wants to defend the possibility of referring, in a language that is respectable from a theoretical point of view, to social groups, understood as entities that act, will, and have beliefs and attitudes. Against Wittgenstein, she wishes to defend the traditional thesis (traditional in modern thought, at least) of a priority of individual thought over social life. 'Thought is prior to society' (Gilbert, 1989: 58). She sets this thesis, which she describes as 'intentionalist', in opposition to Winch's: 'Meaningful behaviour must be social' (Winch quoted in Gilbert, 1989: 59).

We should note, before going any further, that Gilbert presents as a question of logical *priority* what is in reality a question of *correlation*. In Gilbert's version, the supporter of the sociological thesis requires *first of all* that there be participation in a group by the individual for there to be any question, *subsequently*, of an intellectual life for this individual. Now in Winch's version, the dependence also works in the other direction: there can be no participation

in a group (involving a type of social life, not animal life) without possession of the necessary concepts. There can therefore be no question of granting the possibility of a society without language and subsequently seeing appear, in the midst of social interactions, language and intellectual thought. We can thus ask ourselves whether Gilbert lent enough attention to the idea, central to Winch's holism, of an internality of social relations.

The strong point of Gilbert's analysis is to have shown that many social philosophers work with a wholly unsatisfactory notion of the social. She shows how, in Weber, just as today with the theory of conventions (in David Lewis's sense), we stop short of a concept of social relations. Her inaugural example lets us immediately put the emphasis on the essential issue. It is the case of two people who decide to go on a walk together. What distinguishes these two people from two walkers who find themselves following the same path but who are both (at the same place and at the same time) going for a walk by themselves? Weber's conceptual apparatus does not allow one to say in what way the first case is social, whereas the second is not really social. Indeed, for Weber it would suffice that the two walkers take note of each other during their walk (so as not to get in each other's way) for both of them to take part in a social act. Weber does not require that they have a project, and therefore the idea of going for a walk together. In fact, Weber's individualism forbids him from speaking of a group of two people who might be the collective subject – Gilbert says the 'plural subject' – of a single walk, the one these people are going on together.

Gilbert also showed how the discussion between exegetes of Wittgenstein on the concept of 'following a rule' generally leaves on one side the theme of the social bond. For example, one posits an agent A whose behaviour presents a element of regularity. One then posits an observer B who asks whether A be following a private rule. The question is then asked whether it is possible that A be behaving according to a 'private' rule which, in principle, B could not discern and adopt as part of his own set of rules. There is no need to go any further in the discussion of such an example to see that no social bond is posited between A and B. In other words, the discussion bears on the public character of rules, not on their social character. The only society which could be involved here is a society of mankind: but such a society is an ideal society, requiring no special social bond between members of the human species (Gilbert, 1989: 129).

6 THE PLURAL SUBJECT

It is noteworthy that the example Gilbert focuses on should be that of a *collective* action, by which I mean an action signified by a verb one could also use to describe what a solitary agent does, and which becomes the verb for a

collective act by the addition of the word 'together'. Two people set out on a walk, and they not only depart together (materially), but they go on a walk together (intentionally).

If Gilbert had started from the example of two people going to a ball together (to dance the tango) or going to a tennis club together (to play against each other) the analysis would doubtless have been different. In a game of tennis one cannot confuse the pair of agents made up of the two adversaries and a 'plural' player; that is to say, the collective agent formed by the two players who make up a team (in a doubles match). It is interesting to ask why Gilbert highlighted *collective action* at the expense of what appears to be the archetype of *social action*: the kind that demands the cooperation of two *partners* (depending on the situation, each of the partners may be singular or plural).

Gilbert's aim is to put her finger on a difference between two cases which, seen from the outside, are going to appear so close as to be imperceptible: two people who find themselves walking in the same place at the same time and who are thus materially together (without having intended it), and two people who are on a walk together in the sense that they want to go together. In one case, there will be no society, but there will be a Weberian 'sociality'. In the other, there will be a group equipped with its own will.

Having posed what is in the end the classic problem of knowing how a society can be distinguished from a simple mass of individuals, Gilbert gave modern philosophy's reply. What makes the difference is the will to be social and the consciousness each has of having that same will. The foundation of society is thus found in a *cogitamus*, in a collective consciousness that expresses itself in the plural, saying 'we'. Thus Gilbert starts from Durkheim but stops short of where Durkheim begins. She starts from Durkheim's philosophical problem, which was how to grasp the distinctive feature of the social, in other words the reason for speaking of 'collective representations' and not just 'individual representations'. She recognizes, like Durkheim, that the social phenomenon has to be grasped as an intellectual or mental phenomenon. Certainly, Durkheim did not manage to free himself from the representationalist philosophy he had learned from his masters, and he continued to speak of a 'collective consciousness', something that placed him in the tradition of theorists of the *cogito*. Yet he sought to define the social as irreducible to a simple meeting of individual intentions, and this is why he spoke first of obligation as the mark of the social, then of the institution playing the same role of distinctive feature.

On the other hand, Gilbert herself underlines how, in defining the social group as the plural subject of the awareness of being a group of those who want to be that group, she can conceive that a group be anarchic. She therefore supposes that a group can exist without language or institutions or customs or an order superior to the individual: 'Given the details of the

conceptual scheme outlined here . . . groups can in principle exist without having any conventions, laws, customs, traditions, or social rules of their own' (Gilbert, 1989: 415).

In this kind of perspective, a model for the emergence of a common language (or of some kind of social institution) is provided by the scene of a deliberating assembly adopting a convention. We decide to use the term 'red' for a certain colour (Gilbert, 1989: 390).⁴ Or we decide to employ a certain piece of metal as a monetary sign. In conformity with the whole tradition of the philosophers of the *cogito* and the *cogitamus* Gilbert accentuates the 'we', the self-positioning of the plural subject. Yet the thesis of the internality of social relations obliges us to ask who is being addressed by the collective subject who says 'we'. If we had to follow the contractualist model evoked by Gilbert herself, we would have to reply that it was the plural collective subject ('we decide to adopt this or that rule') addressing the distributed plural subject ('each of us is henceforth subject to this rule'). Yet the essential feature of a rule is that it is valid for all future cases. The real meaning of the rule about the word 'red' is that *you*, whoever you may be, must respect it in order to speak to one of us in *our* language. In the same way, the real import of the rule about the monetary sign is that the money will be accepted, not by the circle of society members who adopt it today, but elsewhere and later: by introducing this money, we choose a way of accumulating monetary reserves today, so as to be able to buy goods and services later, from suppliers who are not included in today's 'plural subject' because they have not yet been born. In other words, the meaning of money is in the creation of a social bond between generations, not in a contract between individuals. In short, the essence of an institutional rule is that it is always *pre-established* and not *established*: it is not for those present that it is adopted, but for the future, for the generations to come, for people who will have to accept it as an already operative rule.

7 THE ORIGIN OF INSTITUTIONS

For institutions to emerge, philosophers provide themselves with a collective subject, and it is by means of the will of this subject that a convention is introduced. Since institutions are conventional rules, not natural regulatory mechanisms, it is necessary for them to be created by man: we must therefore go back to a first convention (an implicit one at least), thus to something like a social contract.

It is noteworthy that Rousseau does not see things this way. It is certainly the case that in the *Contrat Social* he poses the problem of authority in genealogical terms. Picking up a familiar theme, he writes that we have to go back to a 'first convention' (*Contrat Social*, I, Ch. 5). However, we observe

that Chapter 6, which provides the formula for the social pact, adopts a normative approach, asking the question 'What should the pact be?' It is set neither in a narrative mode nor an explicitly fictional one asking how might things have happened. Rousseau takes care not to explain how individuals might have discovered the formula of the social pact, explained it to each other and signified to each other that they were adopting it together. In fact, Rousseau never believed in the possibility of individuals assembling and forming a society by means of a simple discussion (cf. II, Ch. 7, on the necessity for a people to be established by a quasi-'divine' legislator).

When we get down to it, all the difficulties involved in such a genesis of the institution are already evident in Rousseau's famous text on the origin of property. The second part of the 'Discourse on the Origins and Foundations of Inequality Among Men', starts thus: 'The first man who, having enclosed a piece of ground, to whom it occurred to say *this is mine*, and found people sufficiently simple to believe him, was the true founder of civil society' (Rousseau, 1997: 161).

This scene portraying the foundation of social relations has a legendary flavour. This is because Rousseau tried to represent, in a narrative mode, the act by means of which an unbridgeable gulf was nevertheless crossed. On the one hand he underlines the *discontinuity* between the two states of humanity (the state of Nature and the state of Society). On the other hand, he depicts a founder capable of getting us to pass along a *continuous* road from one state to the other. However, this founder does not feature as an extraordinary character, such as a 'divine legislator' (and is thus differentiated from the founder invoked in the *Contrat social*), being presented more as a sorcerer's apprentice who acted without knowing what he was doing.

The difficulty of this scene is of an intellectual kind: it bears on how we understand the declaration 'This is mine' and on the possibility, even, of the first man to have claimed the exclusive right to a piece of land being understood by the people he addresses. This difficulty appears inherent in the choice of the words Rousseau lends him. The impostor says 'This is mine' as if it were a fact concerning him (the way he might have said 'This fish was fished by me'). Looking at it one way, the hero of this scene decides, *on his own authority*, that something belongs to him (and were such a thing possible, his declaration would be no more than a simple notification intended to inform the others about the status of the land). But looking at it another way, the hero has accomplished nothing and has appropriated nothing so long as he has not found people simple enough 'to believe him', thereby recognizing as his the property he pretended to attribute to himself. For the people around him it was therefore not so much a matter of believing him as of recognizing the validity of an act that brought into being a new status for the land.

It is clear that the important thing in this scene is not the claim made by the impostor but the fact that he finds people ready to believe him. This is

what gives the scene as a whole its fabled quality. If the people had not understood a word of what the impostor was saying to them, he would have been speaking in a vacuum and would not have succeeded in turning the designated land into private property under his own personal domination. But one might add, in the spirit of Wittgenstein, that had the impostor not been able to count on his neighbours understanding him, he would also have been incapable of *having the intention* of appropriating the land for himself, that is, of getting the others to recognize his exclusive domination over the land in question. In order to have the intention of being recognized as a proprietor by one's neighbours, one has to use concepts that the neighbours use.

Now this is just how Rousseau too reasons. For we read a little lower down that humanity's exit from Nature had become inevitable. Indeed, it is not possible that the notion of property emerged at a random moment, but only after much progress made it necessary:

... for this idea of property, depending as it does on many prior ideas which could only arise successively, did not take shape all at once in man's mind: Much progress had to have been made, industry and enlightenment acquired, transmitted, and increased from one age to the next, before this last stage of the state of Nature was reached. (Rousseau, 1997: 161)

What is Rousseau saying here, if not that the person claimed as the 'founder' of social relations could found nothing if the idea were not already there? In other words, property can only be founded (by an explicit act leading to an act of recognition) because it has already entered into minds and customs. It would be impossible to inaugurate this or that property right, for example 'authors' rights' or everyone's right to their own 'image', in a society incapable of understanding what was meant.

To use the word property is to posit a social relation between a proprietor and, say, a tenant, or between the proprietor of one piece of land and the proprietor of a neighbouring piece of land, some kind of relation therefore between the status of proprietor and another status. The idea of property is consequently a 'collective representation', for this idea and the social relation between the complementary statuses it incarnates are indeed like 'two different sides of the same coin'.

NOTES

- 1 We should make it clear once and for all that 'mind' (*esprit*) is used throughout this discussion in the Latin sense of *mens*, that is, the intellect. An example of the mental would not therefore be, for example, the sensation of pain, rather the concept of a painful sensation.

- 2 Citations without author's name or date refer to Winch (1958).
- 3 'Meaningful relations' (*relations de sens*) is the way a practitioner of structural analysis (such as Dumont) will describe relations whose terms can be constituted only within a totality. In the lexicon of the tradition to which Winch adheres, one would say 'internal relations' (*relations internes*).
- 4 One can find the same attempt to engender institutions from the decisions of a collective subject in Searle's book on the construction of social reality (Searle, 1995).

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