

Review - The Philosophy of Sociality

Written by James Wakefield

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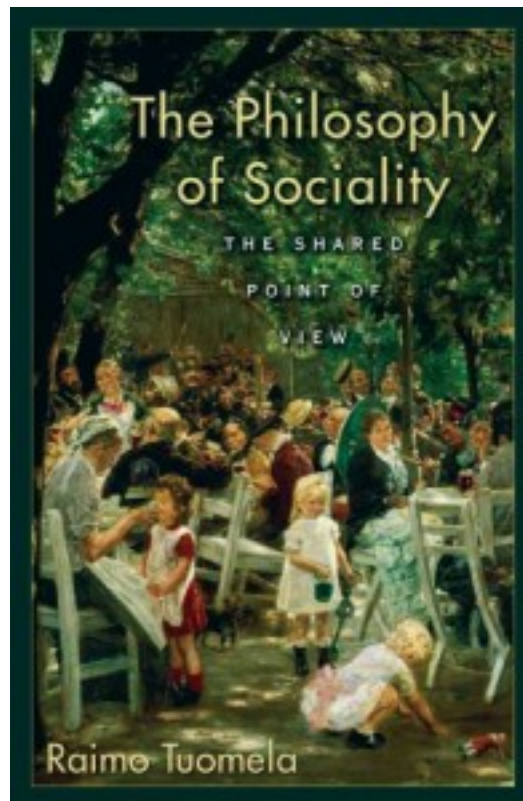
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JAMES WAKEFIELD, SEP 6 2012

The Philosophy of Sociality: The Shared Point of View

By: Raimo Tuomela

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.



Raimo Tuomela's *The Philosophy of Sociality* (hereafter *PoS*) is the latest instalment in the author's on-going project of explicating the idea of *us*, or the concept of the social group as agent. This idea is at once familiar and strangely elusive. In ordinary language we can say that a group has properties and can perform actions, hold attitudes, and possess aims. Much has been written about the question of how groups are related to their members, and whether the 'we' that pulls a long rope taut (for example) is an entity distinct from the 'you' that pulls one end and the 'I' that pulls the other. The notion that group membership is a constitutive feature of personhood has arisen in various guises in the history of philosophy, often accompanying the complaint that to treat persons only as individuals is to misrepresent some important part of their identities. It is not clear where this idea leads, and it is certainly susceptible to abuse where groups are treated as reified abstractions with characteristics defined by the prejudices and preferences of their describers. Authors wary of ambiguity and misleading generalisation have often avoided close engagement with the concept.

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Tuomela's rather neat solution to this problem is to abandon the idea that a group is a special and artificial kind of entity 'over and above' its constitutive members. Instead he posits two 'modes' in which persons can think and act as group members. These are the 'we-mode' and the 'I-mode,' which cover, respectively, instances of 'a group thinking and acting as one agent' and 'some agents acting and interacting, perhaps in concert, in pursuit of their (possibly private) goals.' [p.4] In both cases persons behave in mutually beneficial ways, such as (to adapt one of Tuomela's examples) when a groundskeeper maintains a beautiful garden and thereby contributes to the beauty of the street in which the garden is situated, and, by extension, to the community's general aim of making the neighbourhood an attractive place to live. It could be that the groundskeeper maintains the garden for a private reason – because she enjoys the work, say – and contributes to the street's beauty only by accident. Alternatively she might maintain the garden in order to satisfy a group aim ('to make *our street* beautiful,' with the 'our' referring to the community of which she recognises herself to be a member). A third possibility is that she acts for mixed reasons, such as if she both enjoys gardening *and* means to satisfy the community's aim, even if one of these goals is more consciously considered than the other. Hence I- and we-mode thinking and acting can occur simultaneously, but they 'are not reducible to each other.' [p.57]

Discussion

PoS's first chapter lays out the basic ideas for the rest of the book. This is demanding material, involving distinctions between ostensibly similar terms. Although Tuomela's prose is cleanly and carefully written, it is heavily laden with condensed and/or numbered signifiers for its technical terms. Such compression eliminates the need for excessive repetition and enables the author to describe discrete concepts with a precision that would be hard to attain in more natural prose. However, these savings come at the expense of immediate accessibility, and careful reading is required to make sense of the concepts described. Examples are used sparingly but effectively; Tuomela points them out to help orient the reader, but never avails himself of the kind of story-telling by which other analytic philosophers (Derek Parfit is an obvious example) illustrate and elaborate difficult problems in ways less abstract and more entertaining than cold formulae usually allow. Readers new to the philosophy of social groups or unused to the hard analytic style would be well advised to start with Abraham Roth or Margaret Gilbert before tackling Tuomela's pithy but dense prose.

The intricacy of Tuomela's arguments defies easy overview, but it is worth sketching out a few of his ideas in broad strokes. In the book's early chapters we see how, through their collective acceptance of a group's *ethos*, together with the 'mutual belief' that other persons recognise themselves as members of the same collectively constructed group, a group acquires an 'entity-nature,' making it a 'quasi-person.' [pp.19-20] This *ethos* is, roughly, the group's 'constitutive goals, values, beliefs, standards, norms etc.' [p.32] To act as a member of a certain group one must accept its *ethos*, if only in a general way; Tuomela points out that some groups will possess an *ethos* that accommodates the kind of disagreement and diversity of interpretation necessary for 'its own evaluation and updating.' [p. 33] Group members may disagree about the details of what that *ethos* entails, but must share some basic conception of what the group is *about*. (Tuomela offers the example of a stamp-collecting club whose *ethos* involves a commitment to collecting stamps. To reject that is to cease to be a member of the group in a meaningful way.)

If several persons collectively contribute to the performance of a group act, it is necessary that they 'stand or fall together,' and are 'fully collectively committed' to this idea. [p.173] That is: for the group to succeed, its members must recognise that they are conjoined in a collective endeavour in which their success or failure *qua* group members depends upon the meeting of certain more-or-less clearly specified goals or intentions that all members hold in common. Nonetheless, a person can also *function* as a group member, or act in 'a group context,' without *acting* as a full member. She might further a group's goals, or even be *necessary* to those goals' accomplishment, without considering herself part of the group. Hence she does not perform an act in the 'we-mode,' in order to further group goals that are also *her* goals insofar as she is a group member, but the group still relies on her contribution in order to persist as a group. (To extend Tuomela's stamp-collecting example: it could be that a stamp-collecting club relies on postal workers to supply stamps purchased from other parts of the world).

Sometimes in analytic philosophy, topics are addressed with such precise focus and attention to detail that what was

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originally interesting about them – in this case, the idea of groups as agents – somehow escapes amid the thorough dismantling and systematisation of concepts. It is admirable, then, that Tuomela manages to combine rigour with breadth of vision. The reader's patience is rewarded as throughout the book there emerges an impressively rich conception of the agent. This includes a basic meta-ethical position, accounting for altruism and selfishness by reference to the I- and we-modes (Tuomela endorses a 'broadly communitarian moral conception'); [p.23] solutions to classic collective action problems, such as the famous Prisoner's Dilemma, in which individual rationality is ostensibly at odds with collective rationality; and various interesting applications of the I-/we-mode idea to developmental psychology and evolution. (Chapter 9, on the 'cultural evolution of cooperative social activities,' explains how 'the disposition to form collective intentional states [... and] to cooperate is a co-evolutionary adaptation in humans.')

[pp.62-4 & 231]

This book is a worthy contribution to the literature on social groups and agency. While challenging, its meticulous argumentation helps to recast the familiar notion of the group as a tightly defined and widely applicable concept. No doubt there are many possible applications for Tuomela's two modes of agency, not least in moral and political philosophy, and *PoS* provides a firm foundation on which such studies could be built. In this way it achieves the task to which philosophy is so uniquely well suited: to take an old idea and reveal to us what we really understood by it all along.

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