

We and I

If I am I, because you are you, and you are you, because I am I, then I am not I, and you are not you. But if I am I because I am I, and you are you because you are you, then I am I and you are you, and we can talk.

Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk (1787-1859)

The capacity to engage in different types of collective intentionality is often considered a key feature of human sociality. We can enjoy a symphony, solve a task, reach a decision, and make plans for the future together, just as we can share responsibilities, traditions and customs. After winning a match with a group of teammates, I might share feelings of joy at our victory, just as I might regret that we, the Danes, lost Scania to the Swedes in 1658, or inform my mother that we have now finished moving all her furniture.

But who or what is this *we*, to whom intentions, beliefs, emotions, and actions are attributed? When confronted with a question like this, it might be natural to think of it as an invitation to reflect on the features that characterize us as a group, a community, or a nation. What is it that makes us, say, Danes, and who belongs – and who does not belong – to that group? Another option is to engage in a kind of descriptive sociology and examine the varieties of *we*. How do dyads, groups of friends, members of a bridge club, business associates and national communities relate to one another, and what kind of *we*, if any, do they each instantiate? What is the relation between an ephemeral form of *we* that is bound to the here and now of concrete face-to-face interaction and a more enduring, but at the same time also more normatively mediated, transgenerational form of collective identity? All these questions merit further examination, but in the following my focus will be on the relation between group-identity and self-identity. What is the relation between the *we* and the *I*? This type of question is not merely of theoretical interest. Depending on one's account, different implications follow for how to approach crucial legal, political, and social questions related to, for instance, the status of national identity.

If we look at the political discourse, for example, the answer is often taken for granted. On a view found across the political spectrum, your group identity is your most important identity marker. Some would even claim that it is your membership of certain groups (be it a nation, a religious community, a social class, an ethnicity, a sexual orientation) and their intersection

that provides you with a self-identity in the first place. It might consequently be tempting to reverse the order of explanation. What we need first and foremost is not an explanation of how a number of individuals come together as a we, but rather an explanation of how each of us eventually manages to secure some degree of separation and independence.

In the contemporary philosophical debate on collective intentionality, attempts to prioritize the we and the group have, however, frequently been met with scepticism. When John Searle insists that the very notion of a group mind is “at best mysterious and at worst incoherent” he is speaking for many. But perhaps there is a way of defending the primacy of the we that can avoid what some would take to be excessive metaphysical commitments, e.g. a commitment to the existence of some kind of “hive mind”. One might, for example, argue that the I – the first-person perspective, the self – is communally grounded and enabled by certain kinds of social circumstances. As one translation of the Nguni Bantu term *ubuntu* has it: “I am because we are”

The *community first* view can take different forms. Some would argue that we first experience ourselves as part of a group, a family or tribe, and automatically partake in its way of life, before we develop our own individuality and distinct perspective on the world. Others would defend the view that human selfhood presupposes the possession of the first-person concept. It requires the capacity to conceive of oneself as oneself and the linguistic ability to use the first-person pronoun to refer to oneself. On this account, being an I requires concept possession and language acquisition and therefore also membership of a linguistic community. A third option would be to defend the view that the community does not merely condition *what* we experience, but also *that* we have experiences. On this account, subjective experiences are social constructs. All these accounts would claim that the standard way of addressing the problem of collective intentionality and identity suffers from what might be called an individualist bias.

There are many good reasons to reject an aggregative account of community, i.e., the view that the relation between a community and its members can be understood in analogy with the relation between a heap of sand and its composite grains. But should one go so far as to defend the reverse view and ascribe primacy to the we? Are you a member of a collective, of a we, before you acquire your own individual identity, and is the latter derived from the former?

Here is one argument in favour of this view. On a certain understanding of selfhood, our self-identity is not something ready-made, something fixed by nature that simply awaits discovery. You do not have a self-identity in the same way you have a spleen and you cannot use the same method to examine both. Who you are might partially depend on your biology, but it is certainly also a question of what matters to you and what you care about. In short, it is more an accomplishment than a given, more the result of an act than of a fact. It is a question of the values you embrace and the commitments you endorse. Indeed, it is by living a life in accordance with certain normative guidelines that you develop your own distinct point of view on matters, and thereby acquire a distinct individuality. This is why knowing that you are, say, pro-life and pro-gun rather than pro-choice tells me something about who you are. If you change your interests, political view, religion etc., *you* also change. But of course, the community of which I am part influences what has significance and meaning for me. It is crucial to my personal flourishing and provides me with a background against which more individual choices about how to live can be made. To imagine that each of us develops our own preferences – be they culinary, religious or political – in splendid isolation, to imagine, as Hobbes did, that we each emerge from the earth like mushrooms without any obligations to each other – and that we only start to engage in social and communal activities because we deem this to be conducive for the realization of our own individual goals is clearly nothing but a fantasy. By implication, why not accept that you cannot be a self on your own, but only together with others, as part of a group?

But we need to tread carefully here. To argue that one owes one's identity to the collective, and that one is what one is simply as a result of one's group membership can quickly lead to the view that members of the same group(s) are alike in all essential respects. And that is obviously wrong. Indeed, just as one should not take groups and collective intentions to be simply the summation or aggregation of individuals and their intentions, one should not seek to reduce selfhood and self-identity to group identity and group membership. In what follows, I will consider two reasons why this kind of group-thinking is mistaken. First, it operates with too simplistic a conception of what it means to be a self and have a self-identity. Secondly, it fundamentally errs in its understanding of what it means to be (part of) a we.

The self is neither simple nor univocal. Rather, the self is something that is better viewed as multifaceted and multidimensional. This has often been recognized in the literature. Whereas William James, for instance, distinguishes between the material, social and spiritual self, and Ulrich Neisser between the ecological, interpersonal, extended, private, and conceptual self, it has more recently become customary to distinguish a minimal experiential self from a more normatively enriched and extended self. Some dimensions of self are clearly social and first established in and through development and socialization. This would, for instance, include those aspects that are constituted by the values and norms we endorse. These dimensions can also be lost, for instance, in severe dementia.

But there are other, more fundamental dimensions that are present from very early on and which are linked to our embodiment and experiential life. Consider, for instance, the fact that we encounter the world from an embodied perspective. The objects I perceive are perceived as being to the right or left of me, or as being close by or further away from me. According to some developmental psychologists, from early infancy children are able to discriminate their own body from the surrounding environment; they can perceive where they are, how they are moving, what they are doing, and whether a given action is their own or not. Likewise, we do not experience hunger, pain, distress, fatigue, and anger as free-floating anonymous events, but as self-concerning experiences. When feeling nausea, I am not faced with a two-step process in which I first detect the presence of an unpleasant experience, and then wonder whose experience it might be. Rather, experiences are necessarily like something *for* a subject, they necessarily involve a point of view, they come with *perspectival ownership*. It might consequently be argued that a minimal form of selfhood is a built-in feature of experiential life, and that only, as Joseph Margolis has put it, “the utter elimination of experience could possibly vindicate the elimination of selves”.

If one really wishes to extirpate the so-called individualist bias, one should consequently go all the way and argue for the radical claim that experiences are socially constructed, not only when it concerns their specific content, but also their very *being*. Wolfgang Prinz, who defends such a view, have claimed that human beings who were denied all social interaction (like the famous case of Kasper Hauser) would be like zombies, “completely self-less and thus without consciousness”. But is such a view really plausible? The main difficulty with a view like this is that nobody so far has been able to explain how social interaction is

supposed to give rise to experience. Some psycho-analytically-influenced developmental psychologists have suggested that it is the caretaker that teaches the infant to attend to its own initially non-conscious affective states and that the latter only become experientially manifest as a result of being introspectively monitored by the infant. On this account, the caretaker's social behaviour would consequently be part of the causal process leading to experience. The problem, however, is that this model – like all other higher-order representational accounts of consciousness – fails to explain how a non-conscious mental state by being targeted by another (in this case, socially induced) non-conscious higher-order mental state can be transformed into a subjective experience.

What about the we? Why does an attempt to derive the I from the we fail to understand the nature of the first-person plural? It is important here to realize that a we is a quite particular kind of social formation. Although by birth(right) one might belong to a certain social category (family, class, ethnicity, blood group etc.) regardless of whether or not one knows or cares about it, and although outsiders might classify one as a member of a certain group quite independently of one's own view of the matter, such externally enforced classifications are not of much relevance if we wish to understand what it means to be part of a we. In contrast to various kinds of aggregate groups, a we requires an experiential anchoring. To put it differently, you cannot be a member of a we without somehow affirming or endorsing that membership experientially. To be part of a we, you have to experience it from within. That is what makes the we a *first-person* plural. Saying this is by no means to say that the identification with and participation in a given group always happens deliberately and voluntarily or that it cannot be based on shared objective features such as biological kinship. One might be born into and be brought up within a certain family and community, and such memberships might be quite beyond the domain of personal will and decision. What is important, however, is that the membership in question involves rather than bypasses the self-understanding and first-person perspective of the involved parties. Even in such cases, for the membership in question to count as a we-membership, it requires that you do experience yourself as *one of us*.

To conceive of the we as an undifferentiated fusional oneness is to misunderstand the very notion. The attempt to derive the individuality of minds from a pre-existing undifferentiated group will consequently not get us what we want, namely a proper account of the first-person plural. Rather, if we are to speak meaningfully of a we, plurality and differentiation must be

preserved in order to make possible a genuine being-with-one-another. One might express this by saying that the interpersonal differences must be bridged rather than erased. Heterogeneity is an essential part of communal life. But if this is so, the suggestion that the we precedes and enables individual differentiation – be it on the level of identity or on the level of experience – must be rejected as incoherent. When Martin Buber claimed that “Only men who are capable of truly saying *Thou* to one another can truly say *We* with one another” he was onto something.

Perhaps some might object that abstract considerations like the preceding are all well and good, but we shouldn’t forget that in real life we are together with others from the start, that from the very beginning we are all embedded in sociality. So why not just acknowledge that the collective we is prior to the individual I, or that they at the very least arise together? But here again it is important not to move too fast. First, we need to distinguish factual co-occurrence (which nobody is denying) from constitutive interdependence (which is a much stronger – and theoretically interesting – claim). The former is no evidence for the latter. To put it differently, an infant’s first experiences typically occur in the company of others, but that does not show that its experiences are enabled or constituted by social interaction. Secondly, we shouldn’t make the mistake of assuming that one can prove the primacy of the communal we simply by pointing to the fundamental role of sociality. Whereas the different forms of we (the dyad of lovers, a group of friends, an editorial board, etc.) are all quite particular social formations, sociality is a much wider umbrella term that also covers relations of antagonism, indifference, instrumental interactions etc. To put it differently, the number of people with whom we have social relations is much larger than the number of people together with whom we constitute a we. Even if infants are ultra-social from birth onwards, this hardly shows them to be part of a we from the outset.

Denying that our identity can be reduced to or exhaustively explained by our group membership(s) is not to deny that this membership in many ways shapes who we are. Even if it should turn out that a we requires some pre-existing (minimal) form of selfhood, it is far from obvious that genuine we-phenomena are compatible with just any account of self, including one that considers the essence of selfhood to reside in some kind of self-enclosed disembodied interiority. To put it differently, the fact that an individual can identify with a group and adopt a we-perspective does tell us something significant about the fluid nature of selfhood and self-identity. If it is acknowledged that we can come to share intentions,

emotions, and even identities with others, this will consequently put pressure on various assumptions about the nature of selfhood and constrain the range of available options. Selfhood is not only what allows us to mark our difference to others, it is also something that permits us to share a perspective with them.

It is currently not difficult to find advocates of some form of no-self doctrine, i.e., sceptics who – often on the basis of neuroscience and/or Buddhism – deny the existence of selves. A critical rejoinder to this scepticism would lead too far afield, but it is worth noting that the claim that the self is an illusion has wider ramifications. To deny that the self is real is by the very same token to deny the reality of the community. If you eliminate the first-person singular, you also lose the first-person plural.

Arguing that a we requires a plurality of selves, arguing that it involves processes of group-identification, is, however, only part of the story. Even if I cannot be a member of a we unless I identify with the group in question, my identification is only necessary and not sufficient for membership. Why is that? Because a we by necessity involves more than one member. And whether I count as one also depends on whether the others recognize me as such. To understand the nature of a we, it is consequently not enough just to look at the relation between I and we. One also has to look at the relationship between the prospective members. To put it differently, if we wish to understand what it means to share a belief, an intention, an emotional experience, or more generally, a perspective with others, we also need to look at how we come to understand and relate to others in the first place. Collective intentionality requires some capacity for social cognition, but are all forms of interpersonal understanding equal to the task? Is it enough simply to be able to single out and relate to others as special kinds of objects ('agents with intentions')? Will two people who simultaneously adopt a third-person observer perspective on each other be able to enter into and maintain a joint we-perspective, or is something else needed? While recognizing that size matters – there are important differences between the kind of we whose members know each other in person and the kind of large-scale we whose members have never met, but who are nevertheless united via shared rituals, traditions and normative expectations – let me propose that *second-person engagement* is of crucial importance. To relate to and address another as a *you* (rather than as a he or she) is to relate to someone, an I, who in turn relates to me as a you. Second-person engagement is a subject–subject (you-me) relation where I am aware of and directed at the other and, at the same time, implicitly aware of myself in the accusative, as attended to or

addressed by the other. Second-person engagement consequently involves not merely an awareness of the other, but also and at the same time, a form of interpersonal self-consciousness. The idea that the you is important for the we can not only be found in Buber, but also in classical phenomenologists such as Edmund Husserl and Alfred Schutz. Schutz, for instance, claims that a we-relationship is established when two individuals engage in a reciprocal thou-orientation (*Du-Einstellung*). To make this proposal compelling, more details have to be added, but I find it very plausible that a proper account of the we calls for a closer examination of topics such as reciprocity, recognition, and communication.