On Discussing What We Should Do

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Abstract
Many of the good things which make human life worthwhile are essentially social, cannot be enjoyed by one person unless they are enjoyed together with others. And it is obvious that thinking in terms of the first-person plural, we/us, plays a large part in everyday life as people consider puzzlements ('What should we do?') and remark on the success of what they decided on ('That worked out really well for us!'). Analytic philosophers should accept this at face value, recognising that human beings are often co-subjects with each other, that there is irreducible plural intentionality. The paper explores how the existence of plural intentionality manifests itself in our concepts and ways of proceeding and how attempted 'analysis' of what goes on as the assemblage of many interlocking instances of singular intentionality distorts and misleads.

1. Introduction

There are good things which a person cannot enjoy except together with other people who also enjoy them. Let us call these 'essentially social goods'. One small-scale example is being a member of a successful domestic partnership. You cannot be happily partnered all on your own. Those who are trying to realise or sustain an essentially social good may be uncertain of or disagree about the way forward. And then they are faced with the question 'What should we do?' This paper is about how to conceptualise this question and, relatedly, the nature of the discussion which is needed to address it.

A great deal of what goes on in everyday life, its puzzlements, reflections, decisions, actions, and enjoyments, is naturally reported by sentences with plural subject terms. 'We didn't know whether to do such and such. But we reflected on it and decided to do it. And it worked out well for us. We really enjoyed it.' On the surface, remarks such as these record instances of what we may call 'plural intentionality', people being co-subjects of puzzlements, reflections, decisions, actions, and enjoyments.

But much of our tradition since the 17th century, in philosophy of action, mind, and value, assumes that in understanding intentionality the first-person singular has priority. It takes for granted that 'What should I do?' must be the fundamental practical question in life and

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that all intentional goings on belong, fundamentally, to singular subjects. This assumption generates pressure to deny that everyday remarks containing the plural term 'we/us' can be taken at face value, as brief and accurate reports of instances of irreducible plural intentionality. Rather (suggests this familiar habit of thinking), they are to be construed as convenient (perhaps in practice unavoidable) shorthand for talking about what would be more accurately (if far more lengthily) reported as assemblages of instances of singular intentionality.

Recent years have seen a revival of interest in the first-person plural and there has been much discussion of plural (or as it is sometimes called 'collective') intentionality, asking what is distinctively plural about, for example, our intending that we do something together. Some say that that what is distinctively plural about it is confined to what is intended, in that each of us, singly, has the intention that we should act together. Others say that what is distinctively plural is the mode, in that each of us, singly, is engaged in we-intending that we act together. Both of these ways of conceptualising matters accept the mainstream prioritisation of singular subjects for intentionality. The third option breaks free of this and says that what is distinctively plural is what does the intending, namely us, as co-subjects.[1]

This paper explores a version of the third option, focusing on the example of a partnership and using this small-scale case to get the logical structure of some ideas on the table. If there are essentially social goods at medium and large scale as well, as is highly plausible, the ideas will have ramifications for thinking about issues in social and political philosophy. But that is a further topic.

Here is an outline of what follows. The paper introduces two situations where questions about action arise. One involves two people in a partnership addressing the question 'What should we do?' and the other involves a single person on their own addressing the question 'What should I do?'. Next, and taking the questions in reverse order, it reminds us of the kind of thinking they may lead to, sketching a reflective monologue for the single person and a reflective dialogue for the partners. It considers how the subject matter and

[1] Raimo Tuomela and Margaret Gilbert are pioneering thinkers in this area and much of what is said by them is congenial to the approach of this paper. But engaging seriously with their work takes us rapidly into elaborate and quasi-technical debates and so risks obscuring the ideas I would like to highlight. For references to their work and much further work in this area see David P. Schweikard and Hans Bernhard Schmid (2021).

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structure of the monologue reveal that the thing that is thinking the thoughts it articulates is a single persisting human being. The same strategy applied to the dialogue then reveals that the thing that is thinking the thoughts it articulates should be understood as plural, the partners together. Finally, the paper makes a few observations about what this account suggests about the role of remarks in the dialogue and so about the role of language in our lives more broadly.

2. A Disagreement

So here is one case to be considered. You and I are partners. By and large we get on well, are happy that we are together. But an occasion arises on which we find ourselves disagreeing about what to do. An opportunity opens up for us to do some tandem paragliding, an activity which would be exciting but also carries some risks. You are keen that we should do it but I am reluctant and think that we should not. To you the thrill of our seeing the landscape from above is vividly apparent. To me the possibilities of feeling vertigo, landing badly and one of us breaking a limb, are all unpleasantly prominent. Gazing at each other in dismay at our disagreement, 'What should we do?' we wonder.

The word 'should' as used here does not indicate that you and I are about to get into a debate as to 'what is morally required'. It is possible to describe a situation in which the question of our paragliding could easily be labelled 'moral'. For example, perhaps our disagreement hinges on whether we should put money in the pocket of the entrepreneur who is arranging the activity. I think this person is unscrupulous and no one should deal with his company. You take another view. But let us disregard that kind of scenario and concentrate on versions of the story where issues about 'morality' (whatever exactly that means) do not seem pressing and where our disagreement has to do with which course of action would make things go better for us, would enable us to flourish more.

3. Another Conflict

What we need to note now is that a single person may face a difficulty analogous to the one just sketched. It is not true that people have complete and privileged first-person information about what will make things go well for them. It is not the case that, when other people are not affected by the choice and 'moral' issues do not arise, then a person will find it obvious what to go for. For sure,

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each of us probably does have a good deal of knowledge about what would make things go well for us. But we also say things like 'I had no idea that such and such could be worthwhile for me until I tried it' or 'It was only after I lost so and so that I grasped how much I had been undervaluing it'. Remarks of these kinds show that we appreciate that we can be ignorant of and mistaken about substantive questions of what promotes our welfare. A corollary of this is that a person may be confused and conflicted about how much importance to give to this or that possible element in their lives. A person in this situation needs a better understanding of what would make things go well for them, a better grasp of what their own capacities, together with the rest of the world, offers to them.

To make this vivid, consider a different me from the earlier one. This me is unpartnered and is confronted with a first-person singular version of a choice involving excitement and risk. I have an opportunity for solo paragliding but am undecided whether or not to take it up. I longingly contemplate the excitement it offers, but I also nervously recoil at the risk of bodily injury which it brings. I dither, am unpleasantly conflicted. 'What should I do?' I wonder.

4. Two Courses of Reflection: A Monologue and A Dialogue

How might things go in attempts to answer these questions, 'What should I do?' and 'What should we do?' Here are a monologue and a dialogue, to remind us of the kinds of reflection which people may engage in as they try to understand more of what is at stake for them in the options between which they are choosing.

This is the monologue, engaged in by the singular me:

> Paragliding would be thrilling. How strange it would be to see the landscape, the traces of old villages and field systems, from above, while hanging in mid-air, supported just by the glider, being able to control it as it rides the air currents! But what if it goes wrong? What if it induces vertigo, if some silly push on the control gear leads to a crash, a broken leg? Help! Help! No! But wait. How difficult would the control be? It is said to be manageable. Backing out of other things has left regrets. Certainly it would not do to overlook risks completely. That would be silly. But perhaps practice in confronting risks might lead to being, rightly, less frightened? Then many interesting options would open up!

And this is the dialogue between you and the other me who is your partner.

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You: Paragliding would be thrilling. How strange it would be to see the landscape from above, while hanging in mid-air, supported just by the glider, being able to control it as it rides the air currents! You could identify and point out interesting archaeological features.

Me: Wow! I'd never thought of that! But what if it goes wrong? What if I feel vertigo, if some silly push on the control gear leads to a crash, to your getting a broken leg? Just imagining it makes me feel very anxious.

You: Well, how difficult would the control really be? It is said to be manageable. I have a good head for heights. You've backed out of other things before and regretted it later. I know that I can be a bit rash and it would be silly not to check on risks. I appreciate your doing that. But perhaps I could help you be a bit less timid about some things? Think of what that would make possible!

5. The Monologue and Its Implicit Subject

The words in which the monologue is articulated do not include any terms referring to who will do the various activities mentioned or feel the emotions. A different monologue might start 'Paragliding would be thrilling for Laura. How strange she would find it to see the landscape from above …'. And it could end with the monologist resolving to buy a paragliding voucher for Laura. But the absence of a term like 'Laura' means that, for making explicit the subject of the activities and emotions mentioned in the actual monologue, the only possible insertion is the first-person pronoun. 'Paragliding would be thrilling for me. How strange I would find it to see the landscape from above …' and so on. So the first thing to note about the monologue is that for it to be about me, the thinking articulated does not need to include explicit exercise of the first-person concept. The concepts exercised in the thoughts, together with the absence of a concept like 'Laura', combine to fix that the thoughts are about how things are for me and what I should do. If the thoughts do include explicit exercise of the first-person concept, and the monologue correspondingly includes 'I/me', the token reflexivity of the first-person marks the fact that the subject of the thoughts, in the sense of what they are about, is also the subject of the thoughts in the sense of what thinks them.

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What further can we say about this subject of these thoughts in both senses, the 'I' who is contemplating going paragliding?

Let us set aside radical scepticism, of the kind which takes it that we can make sense of there being thoughts which are both exercises of whatever substantive concepts make them the thoughts they are while being also, at the same time, so out of touch with the world that, except for the concept 'thinking', the substantive concepts are all empty. Instead of this scepticism we shall assume that where there are thoughts, they will, despite mistakes being made, enable whatever thinks them to be helpfully aware of a fair amount of what is going on. So we shall assume that the kinds of concepts used in the thoughts have true applications and the general conception of the world thus presupposed in the thoughts is rightly not doubted by the thinker. Given such non-scepticism, this general conception can be unpacked by exploring what is taken for granted in use of the particular concepts, including the unhesitating movements of thought which deployment of those concepts makes intelligible. Let us note also that non-scepticism requires that whatever is thinking is an occupant of the world, is part of the totality of what there is. The non-scepticism thus means that the nature of whatever is thinking will be revealed, along with the nature of the rest of the world in which it lives, by the unpacking of the presuppositions.

Applying these ideas to the monologue, one thing which is evident is that the thinker of the monologue takes for granted that it is an embodied being in a spatial world. These are the presuppositions of the possibility of its being up in the air, of its having legs which can be broken. Secondly, it takes for granted that it has existed in the past, may exist into the future, and that things can go well or badly for it. These are the presuppositions of there being things in the past which it regrets and of there perhaps being things in the future which it will regret. Thirdly, it takes for granted that it can act, to influence how things go, including with itself, so as to make things go well, at least in some respects. These are the presuppositions of its conceiving the project of making itself less timid and thereby becoming able to engage in worthwhile new activities.

In summary, the thinker of the monologue is revealed (unsurprisingly!) to be a person, an ordinary functioning human being, complex and changing but continuing to act and persist through change.

It is a familiar fact that philosophical reflection, in the analytic tradition, has trouble with this kind of complex, persisting but changing being. It supposes that we can dig into, 'analyse', the idea of a person. It equips us with, and encourages us to use, various sceptical and fragmenting tools for thinking about the kind of complexity and

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change which persons exhibit. The use of the tools seems to reveal each of us to be many separable items which need to be somehow assembled and stuck together if the familiar being is to exist. To take just one example, fragmentation may be driven by the grip of the idea that what exists at one time must be separable metaphysically from what exists at another time. This idea suggests construing the existence of a person over time as the existence of a succession of separable items, person-stages or temporary selves, which are somehow bundled or linked. So in the monologue (again taking just one example of the kind of speculation encouraged) we may be led to distinguish whatever speaks at the start and is excited, from whatever expresses itself in the middle and is frightened, and also from a possible future being which is less frightened. And so on.

This is not the place to engage in sustained discussion of the metaphysics of persons and personal identity. Here I want only to offer two observations. The first is this. Irrespective of exactly what account the fragmenting strategy offers, deployment of intellectual resources in trying to think in the terms it recommends is likely to have disadvantageous consequences.

For example, entertaining the fragmented picture of each of us consisting of a sequence of 'selves' requires trying to make sense of questions such as 'How does the present self relate to the future self?' and 'Why should the present self care about any future self?'. These questions are puzzling and the answers are not obvious. If we take them to be, nevertheless, meaningful and important, then their obscurity has the corollary of making the familiar idea of the persisting person seem dubious, not an idea the thinker can call on unhesitatingly when reflecting on how things are and what to do. And that in turn brings discouragement and disempowerment in pursuing enterprises which are long-term and demanding.

To see all this in action, consider my undertaking the enterprise of making myself less timid by confronting, in ways which will surely be stressful, things which I now find frightening.

An initial puzzlement brought by thinking in fragmented terms is making sense of the enterprise and what its success could be. Before the fragmenting ideas are introduced, one aspect of the future good is envisaged as being able to think 'I did it!' on touching down from my first and enjoyable paragliding. But, on the fragmented picture, an intelligible focus for these triumphant feelings is elusive. The future self is not what confronted and worked on the fears. And how is 'An earlier self did it!' a proper focus of current triumph? Moreover, to the extent that the separateness of the future self seems intelligible, it seems to become optional for the present self

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to care about it. Hence any present inclination to think 'Why bother?' is strengthened, and grip and urgency drain away from the long-term and difficult project of self-change. But if determined efforts to engage in self-transformation are not resolutely pushed through, self-development and the bolder new activities will not occur. Instead what will occur are a succession of shorter-term, less difficult, activities, with the limitations on possible satisfactions which they can offer.

The claim that the present self ought to care altruistically for the future self does not seem of the right logical shape to engage with this. Rather, what might block these developments is disengagement from the fragmented picture and reversion to unhesitating use of the familiar concept of the persisting person. That allows it to become vivid to me that I am short-changing myself by my timidity. The options available to me are only two, becoming a more resolute person or chickening out again. My thinking resources flow in channels shaped by this way of conceptualising the situation and do not get diverted into side-channels shaped by conceptualisations on which the claims of any future self are up for appraisal and possible rejection.

Thinking in terms of the unified, persisting, complex and changing person also makes evident the possibility and value of a kind of reflection which is disadvantageously backgrounded on the fragmented view. This is exploration of the capacities for excitement and fear, both of them aspects of the one persisting me. What exactly am I excited by or frightened of, and why? How are the responses of excitement and fear related? Which of those responses do I find, on reflection, excessive or feeble? The result of such reflection may be a richer appreciation of the world and how my capacities for both excitement and fear, and indeed their subtle interdependencies, are among the things which enable me to live a good and interesting life.

So that is the first observation about the fragmenting strategy. Thinking in the terms it encourages is disadvantageous.

The second observation is this. What is right about fragmenting accounts, what gives them their appeal, can be acknowledged without making concessions to the metaphysical picture of 'separate existences' which they call on. One thing these accounts rightly draw attention to is that our conceptions of how things are and what is worth doing are not fully coherent. We have many muddled thoughts and conflicting impulses. Another thing fragmenting accounts remind us of is that there is no guarantee that any one of us will retain our full range of capacities for complex and integrated awareness of time and possible actions. Perhaps you or I will

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become more thoughtless and impulsive, lose our memories, become demented or what not. And if that happens then we will cease to be so robustly present in the world as persons who can be talked to, reasoned with, co-operated with in long-term projects, although we may still be present to be fed or given a hug. And finally the fragmenting accounts are also right to point out that we face interesting questions about the future. It is possible and sensible to ask 'How much should I care about next year and what aspects of my future should concern me?'

But, and here is the crucial point, none of these facts about us show that there is a more accurate account to be got, by the use of sceptical and fragmenting tools, which reveals each of us to be an assemblage of simpler, more robust, less conflicted items. There are other ways of thinking about the facts noted. For example, as to how much to care about the future, the fragmenting account is right that we can care too much. Being demanding and long-term is not always a mark of merit in an enterprise. Instead, it may be a mark of grandiosity or lack of insight into one's finitude. We can short-change ourselves by not relishing enough what is available right now as well as by failing to be resolute in pursuit of some long-term goal. But puzzlement about how to choose between the difficult and problematic long-term on the one hand, and the easy and straightforward short-term on the other, need not be conceptualised in terms of how much the present self should care about the future self. Instead, it can be seen as about what kinds of life are available to the one persisting me. What comes to light with the puzzlement may be an example of a kind of conflictedness, perhaps unavoidable and irresoluble, which we find ourselves liable to because we are beings who can become aware of our temporality.

In short, we can accommodate all the facts equally well if we stick with the idea that we are embodied, unified and persisting, provided we recognise at the same time that we are muddled, conflict-prone, and easily damaged. And my suggestion is that this offers a fruitful and honest way of conceptualising the situation.

6. The Dialogue and Its Implicit Subjects

So now to the dialogue. Here are the ideas to be carried forward from consideration of the monologue. Thoughts may be had by and be about an implicit subject which is not referred to by any explicit conceptual element in those thoughts. Given non-scepticism, the nature of any such implicit subject (or subjects) can be unpacked by

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exploring what is presupposed in the kinds of concepts used and in the unhesitating movements of thought which those concepts make intelligible. Employment of sceptical and fragmenting tools is a prominent part of our tradition but brings puzzles and disadvantages with it. And there may be alternative non-fragmenting ways of accommodating the facts to which fragmenting accounts draw attention.

If we consider the dialogue, bearing these ideas in mind, what comes to light? The dialogue does not contain the words 'we' or 'us'. But these words are what are required if the subject of some of the concepts, in the sense of what the thinking is about, is to be made explicit. To whom would the paragliding be thrilling? Us. Who would engage in the new activities made possible by my becoming less timid? We would. And so on. 'We/us' slides easily into the dialogue and has a role in making explicit its subject matter analogous to that of 'I/me' for the monologue.

So whose thinking is articulated in the dialogue? Pursuing the analogy with the monologue, the indexicality of 'we/us' gives the answer that it is our thinking which is displayed. We are the co-subjects of the reflections set out. Seen this way, the dialogue presents an instance of a distinctive and irreducible kind of intentionality, namely plural intentionality, of which the actions, enjoyments and so on to which it leads are also instances.

Could this be the right way of looking at things? A couple of remarks to clarify the question. First, by 'plural intentionality' I do not mean what is sometimes called 'group intentionality'. The question is not whether groups of people, partnerships, governments, or businesses for example, can judge, act, be held responsible and so forth. The kind of intentionality envisaged with that idea is another kind of singular intentionality, attributed to things which may be, in some sense, 'agents' but are not individual people. Its existence and nature are an excellent topic, but not the one under consideration here.[2]

And secondly, our question is not whether the thinking of two people is articulated in the dialogue. The answer to that is obvious. Of course it is. Your thinking is expressed and my thinking is expressed.

The obviousness of this fact may seem to support the idea that singular intentionality is fundamental, that what goes on is most

[2] For more about group agents see *Group Agency: The Possibility, Design, and Status of Corporate Agents* by Christian List and Philip Pettit (2011).

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accurately understood as an assemblage of metaphysically separable instances of singular intentionality, in each of which the other person may appear as an object of thought but cannot be present as a subject.

But the availability of focusing on what I express and what you express, does not settle the question in favour of this view. Consider the analogous move for the monologue. Is thinking at different times articulated in it? Of course it is. There is the thinking at the beginning, where excitement is prominent, the thinking in the middle which foregrounds the dangers, and so on. But the availability of this way of looking at things does not settle matters in favour of viewing a person as constructed from a succession of separable selves or person-stages. On the contrary, the kinds of action which come up for consideration, how those actions are appraised, what decisions are made, the responses of apprehension or triumph which following events may evoke, are all shaped by the concept of a persisting, embodied person and presuppose the existence of such a thing. The viewpoint of the monologue is that of such a person, the 'I/me' who is its subject in both senses. That is what the reflections of the previous section aimed to make vivid.

Looking at the dialogue in this light reveals that the same is true of it, when 'we/us' is put in place of 'I/me'. The viewpoint of the dialogue is that of 'we/us'. The actions which come up for consideration are joint enterprises such as our going paragliding, our working together so that I become less timid and our doing the things which then become possible. And the reasons for undertaking these actions are that we may benefit. And it is our triumph which we will celebrate, as we say with satisfaction 'We did it!' on touching down from our first tandem paragliding.

Continuing the comparison with the monologue, we saw that the ability to occupy the viewpoint of the single persisting subject, and to reap the advantages which that brings, is undermined by attempts to reconstruct what goes on in terms of the fragmented picture. Analogous observations can be made about the co-subjects of the dialogue. It is corrosive and disadvantageous to us to set aside the idea of our being co-subjects and to focus instead on representing what goes on in the terms offered by the 'only singular subjects' view. Working in terms of the 'singular subject' view, invites me to change my focus from thinking about what might be good for us to thinking about what might be good for me considered singly. Given this approach, the fact that some development would be good for you, also considered singly, can be relevant to my decision only if I happen to care about you, which of course I may do. But, given that I am focusing

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on myself, it becomes possible and sensible for me to ask whether I care enough about you to do something which advantages you at a cost to myself. 'Perhaps I won't bother' I think.

And when these kinds of thoughts become preoccupying, other topics are backgrounded and overlooked. For example, we will not be encouraged to explore together what your boldness and my comparatively stronger risk aversion contribute to us. We will not come to see, with shared pleasure, what our varying viewpoints contribute to ours being a satisfactory partnership for both of us.

A final point of comparison with the monologue is seeing that the fragmenting view gets some things right, but that these things can be equally well accommodated on the co-subject view. For example, partners may disagree and quarrel. Also it is proper to ask whether the partnership is unbalanced, one partner is asking too much of the other. 'Unselfishness' is not always a virtue. Invoking it may be a way in which one partner exploits the other, may be a marker of grandiosity, or lack of realism. And there is no guaranteed way of avoiding conflicts. Some may be unavoidable, may even justifiably lead to a breakup. (This is a possibility which does not have an obvious analogue in the individual person case. Plainly the parallelism between the persisting person and the co-subjects goes only so far.) But these facts do not show that all intentionality must belong, fundamentally, to single subjects. Just as difficulties about how much to care about the future are best understood as corollaries of the fact that, for good or ill, we are temporal beings, so difficulties about different views of our shared future are best understood as corollaries of the fact that, for good or ill, we are essentially social beings. So, echoing what I said at the end of the previous section, my suggestion is that this is a more fruitful and a more honest way of conceptualising our situation than struggling on trying to give an account of things in terms of only singular subjects.

7. Language and Its Roles

The view of this paper is not that the 'analytic' strategy of trying to understand some complex and interesting thing by looking for its separable parts is always wrong. Rather, the view is that this strategy is just one among many, which may get us into trouble if used inappropriately. There are other approaches by which we may get equally or more important insights, for example looking outward to the setting which sustains the complex and interesting thing we hope to understand and so coming to see its role in the larger whole of which it is a part.

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Plural intentionality, as a kind of thinking in its own right, is apt to strike analytic philosophers as strange and paradoxical, as requiring telepathy or as needing the co-subjects to become somehow identical with each other. Its seeming mysterious in these ways is bound up with a picture of intentionality which takes radical scepticism, and the related drive to fragmentation, too seriously. Starting from a different metaphysical and epistemological view, one which is in effect more pragmatist in spirit, licenses other strategies for understanding and allows us to see that plural intentionality is not mysterious at all.

The 'only singular intentionality' idea has encouraged a view of the role of individual remarks in a linguistic exchange as one person trying to influence the intentional attitudes of another. 'The speaker makes an utterance intending thereby to produce in the hearer some belief.' This is the kind of thing which is said.[3] And there may be episodes which have this shape. For example, I may try to manoeuvre Auntie Flossie into leaving me her money. In the course of this, I may talk at Auntie Flossie, trying to induce in her false beliefs about myself (that I am likeable and trustworthy) and about her other nieces and nephews (that they are unpleasant and dishonest).

But another view of the role of individual remarks comes into view if we take seriously non-scepticism and plural intentionality. With those in place, the idea of talking with other people, rather than talking at them, becomes more prominent. And talking with each other is what you and I are doing, when discussing the paragliding possibility. It is evident that we can deliberate well together only if we can call on relevant common knowledge. So one role of individual remarks in a conversational exchange must be to make active the common knowledge participants have which is relevant to their current situation. A later part of our dialogue might be this: 'Do we know whether your cousins enjoyed it?' you ask. 'Yes', I say. 'They said it was great.' This exchange should be taken at face value. What I know, but have not yet told you, is part of what we know. The role of the particular remark is to make this element of our common knowledge usable by us. Compare the singular case. 'Do I know what other people have felt about it?' I ask myself. 'Yes', I recall. 'Cousins Edie and Frank really enjoyed it.' What is not currently vivid and needs to be brought to mind is part of what I know. The role of the particular episode of recollection is to make this element of my knowledge usable now by the persisting me.

[3] As in the whole line of thought initiated by Grice's well-known discussion in 'Meaning' (1957).

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So making common knowledge usable is one key role of language. This is so, whatever the topic under discussion among the parties to the conversation, whether it is theoretical or practical, scientific, historical, political, aesthetic, or what not. The relations in which the parties stand and the nature of the topic under consideration are then among the circumstances which help the parties to shape the contributions they make.

I have focused on a particular kind of discussion, about what we should do, in a context where we find we do not have a clear objective to which we are working out some means, but where we are rather trying to agree on an objective, on what to go for. When faced with this challenging kind of perplexity about what to do, my suggestion has been that one thing we can try for is a deeper and more articulate understanding of what is at stake for us in the options offered. We can, for example, try to identify what we are certain we care about and distinguish that from what is more doubtful or less important. And we can try to understand better why we care about what we care about. For this enterprise, it may be that exchange of tentative remarks will be appropriate, ones where we try experimentally to articulate how things strike us, where we acknowledge uncertainties and are open to others' ways of looking at things.

Language is essential to the human kind of social existence. It is not a surprising modern discovery that we are social animals, having much in common with other social animals. This is something obvious, which our hunter gatherer ancestors already recognised and which has been confirmed and spelled out in detail by more recent developments in biology and evolutionary theory. But syntactically elaborate language, containing many parts of speech including the pronouns 'I/me' and 'we/us' is something which only human animals have.

Use of such a language does not create the unified, persisting, changing, essentially social beings which we are. Our primate ancestors were already such beings. But what language does provide is extension of cognitive resources, increase in things we can think about explicitly, can focus attention on, debate, value, choose between. Use of language is one of the vehicles by which we carry on our social lives, in familial, sporting, political, economic, technological, artistic, and scientific enterprises.[4]

The big picture in these aspects of our lives is one of change, of development, facing us with new and challenging situations. So for us

[4] The view of Charles Taylor in his 'Irreducibly Social Goods' (1997, p. 127ff.) is close to that of this paper.

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perplexing questions about what we should do are all over the place. If thinking in terms of plural intentionality is a helpful way of understanding our situation then these reflections about how to conceptualise and tackle such questions may have wider application. But that is plainly another topic.

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