

Raimo Tuomela, *Social Ontology: Collective Intentionality and Group Agents*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, 310 pages. ISBN: 978-0199978267 (hbk.). Hardback: \$78.00.

Raimo Tuomela is one of the most distinguished authors working in the field of social ontology, and this book is a helpful presentation and elaboration of the views he has been developing since at least the 1980s. I find the material very challenging, and indeed in some spots quite puzzling. This is partly due to the depth and sophistication of the material itself, but I suspect it is also partly due to how the arguments are presented and defended. While I cannot hope to do justice to all of the arguments Tuomela presents, I'll evaluate what I take to be the most significant of them.

The field of social ontology can be divided into two main (and possibly overlapping) sub-fields: the first concerns *group agents*, while the second concerns *social reality*. Tuomela's book primarily treats questions regarding group agents. The first seven chapters of his book are about the properties of group agents and how they relate to individual agents: how group agents act; how the attitudes of group agents (group intentions, group beliefs, etc.) relate to the attitudes of the individuals who constitute the group; what it means to act for, or reason on the basis of, group reasons; how the nature of a group agent changes depending on internal hierarchies and authorities; and so on. Only one chapter, chapter 8, focuses on questions of social reality, which we can understand roughly as those things and facts which necessarily depend on collective intentionality. By focusing his discussion on group agents, Tuomela is in good company: many of the other notable figures in the field take the same approach. Compare, for instance, the most recent publications of Michael Bratman, Margaret Gilbert, and Christian List and Philip Pettit: all can be considered group agent theories of social ontology. (As a contrast, John Searle's work focuses on social reality—the things that group agents make—rather than on group agents specifically.) While Tuomela occasionally makes cursory reference to Bratman, Gilbert, List and Pettit, he prefers to develop his own group agent view rather than situate it within the landscape. While I would have liked more engagement, Tuomela's own account of group agency is detailed and complex, and so his focus on presenting the developments in his own thought is understandable.

Central to Tuomela's account of group agency is the notion of the *we-mode*. Individual agents can reason and hold attitudes in either the *I-mode* or the *we-mode* (more on these below). Moreover, agents reasoning in the *I-mode* can reason on behalf of themselves, or on behalf of other individuals, or on behalf of a group they are a member of—the last case Tuomela calls *pro-group I-mode reasoning*. Groups, then, can consist of *we-mode* reasoners—which Tuomela calls *we-mode groups* (WMGs)—or they can consist of *pro-group I-mode* reasoners (*I-mode groups*, IMGs). Both WMGs and IMGs consist of individual agents engaged in *pro-group* reasoning and coordinating their actions accordingly in order to produce an outcome that is (judged to be) good for the group; in this regard, they both differ from a group of individuals engaged in strategic reasoning solely on behalf of their own reasons or interests. However, there is an important difference between WMGs and IMGs: “The *I-mode* group is not constructed by the members as a group in the way that a *we-mode* group is, and thus ... it is not capable of acting *fully* as a group: The members do not act as full-blown group members ...” (p. 33, emphasis sic). Tuomela's main argument can thus be summarized as follows:

1. Group actions and agents (properly speaking) are a feature of the world;
2. Group actions and agents (properly speaking) can only be accounted for through appeal to

- WMGs rather than IMGs;
3. WMGs require we-mode reasoning;
  4. We-mode reasoning is irreducible to I-mode reasoning;
  5. Therefore, an individualistic approach to understanding the world (i.e. one that omits the we-mode) cannot work; our theory must be at least weakly collectivistic.

I cannot discuss these claims in detail, though I have worries about Tuomela's empirical and conceptual arguments in favor of premise 2. I will thus limit my remarks to a brief discussion of Tuomela's argument in support of premise 4.

The question of the relationship between we-mode reasoning and I-mode reasoning speaks to the central question of agent-based social ontology: what is it for *us* to intend something? One option is the individualist option: *we* intend something so long as *I* have mental states of a certain kind, and *you* have mental states of a certain kind, and other conditions are met which relate my mental states to your mental states. Another option is the collectivist option: when *we* intend something, that intention is, properly speaking, *held by us*. We might as individuals need to engage in a process by which we create an 'us', but once we do, the group mental states are possessed by the group and not by the constituent individuals. Tuomela tries for a middle ground between the two. Like the individualist, Tuomela holds that groups and group properties supervene on individuals and individual properties. But like the collectivist, Tuomela thinks that we cannot account for groups without appealing to group concepts that are irreducible to individual concepts—namely, we-mode concepts.

The worry is that this approach is either circular or uninformative. Tuomela's account proceeds as follows: in order for a group of persons *g* to be a WMG, it is necessary that the group of individuals *g* "has accepted an ethos *E as a group* for itself *and is committed to it*" (p. 27, emphasis added). What does it mean for a set of individuals to accept an ethos *as a group*, or for a group of individuals to be *committed* to an ethos? Is it sufficient that all of the members of the group accept the ethos? Probably not, since this would not be accepting the ethos as a group, anymore than the strangers on a bus are going downtown as a group in virtue of their each going downtown.

Tuomela thus owes an account of collective commitment, or doing something as a group. What he offers is a chain of concepts: collective commitment is analyzed in terms of collective acceptance (p. 35), and collective acceptance is analyzed in terms of 'jointly having an attitude' (p. 128). Tuomela does not explicitly define what it means to jointly have an attitude, though he does talk of *joint intentions* and (less frequently) of *joint actions*. But consider Tuomela's account of joint intentions:

Consider a group *g* consisting of you and me. The core idea is that if we, viz., you and I qua members of *g*, jointly intend to perform *X* together, this requires that you and I, qua members of *g*, both intend to participate in our joint performance of *X* for us (qua members of *g*) *while being collectively committed to performing X jointly*. (p. 76, emphasis added.)

This account of joint intentions appeals to collective commitment, which seems viciously circular. Tuomela acknowledges that there is some circularity involved, in that joint intentional *action* makes reference to joint intentions. But even if this particular circularity were benign (and Tuomela doesn't say how concerned we should be about it), it is not the same as the

definitional circularity we ran into above. We want to know what it is for a set of individuals to constitute a WMG, and Tuomela's response appeals to group-oriented concepts that are either synonymous or defined in terms of each other.

We can restate the problem concisely: Tuomela defines a WMG in part as a set of individuals who collectively accept an ethos. But what is it to collectively accept something? Either each individual accepts the ethos (individually) from the we-mode, or all of the individuals accept the ethos *as a group*. Tuomela does not want the first account; he equates this with pro-group I-mode reasoning. But the second account seems to presuppose the very concept of a group that we were trying to account for.

Although I was left confused by how some of Tuomela's concepts relate to each other, and how they relate to some of the main lines of argument in his text, I still found much of value in the discussion. Tuomela's work is full of interesting insights into the nature and structure of social groups, in particular with the myriad ways that social groups can be organized. Tuomela's theory accommodates a wide range of social groups, and this is a much-needed addition to the field, as agent-based theories of social ontology tend to focus on very small groups of two or a few. The text is rich enough to reward careful attention. Indeed, due to some of the confusion that I still have, I genuinely worry that my own attention was not careful enough.

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