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Response to Frank Hindriks

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Response to Hindriks: Group Agents and Social Institutions: Beyond Tuomela's *Social Ontology*

Hindriks's paper discusses many central questions in social ontology dealt with in my book and makes interesting remarks about the topic of group agents and social institutions. However, compared with what I have said in my book, his paper unfortunately contains many mistakes and inaccuracies of understanding concerning my theory. Some of these mistakes may be due to a hasty reading of the book (below SO, for brevity).

He says on p. 2 (referring to p. 10 of SO): "Tuomela combines his conceptual collectivism with ontological reductionism or individualism – the thesis that group agents consist solely of the activities, properties, and interactions between individuals." This characterization is quoted from my account of methodological individualism and refers to one of the central theses in my account. There is the oddity that while I continue to argue on pp. 10-11 of SO, in contrast, that methodological individualism is *not* acceptable in my account Hindriks in the above quote seems to claim in effect that I do accept it as a tenable doctrine. To be sure, my own functionalist view of group agents uses many of the ingredients in the above quote from Hindriks's paper, but still the mentioned facts are far from exhausting the important things that I say about group agents (see the central theses on pp. 46-54 of SO for my true account). Furthermore, my account does not speak of reduction of pre-analytic group agents to functional group agents or anything of the kind (see pp. 22-23).

There is a clearly individualistic ingredient in the ontology of my I-mode/we-mode theory in the book: Individuals are the basic purposive initiators of causal chains in the social realm. But this is only part of the matter. I say many times over in the book and argue by means of examples that groups as social interaction systems are functionally and causally real and capable of causation – even if causation by groups always takes place through individuals (their acting as group members). My view is that social groups qua groups are functional agents (with extrinsic quasi-mental states defined functionalistically) but that they do not and cannot as such have intrinsic minds partly because they do not have consciousness based on biological facts as is the case in ordinary humans. They can have attributed states resembling (intrinsic) mental states in an extrinsic sense, though. Extrinsic social attribution is normally based on group members' collective acceptance. The resulting extrinsic intentionality sense and the intrinsic biologically based sense of mentality are different – as different as the social realm is from the biological realm. (See p. 49 of SO.)

Hindriks writes (p. 5): “Tuomela maintains that their [viz. group members’] psychology is autonomous from their private psychologies – and in this sense enjoy autonomy.” To be sure, to function as a group member (group level) is different from acting as a private person (purely individual level) but to claim autonomy seems too strong. To act as a group member in principle entails that a member ought to give primacy to the ethos of the group in group contexts. People’s private affairs may (and often do in actual practical life) causally affect their acting as group members.

The fact that groups can be said to have reflective thoughts about their mental states means in my account that the group members may mutually believe or know that such and such mental states have been extrinsically attributed by the group members to the group. Such “self-conscious group thinking” just amounts to applying the idea that a group can only function (think and act) through its members’ functioning as group members (in my somewhat technical sense).¹ Nothing mystical or metaphysically suspect is involved here as we are at bottom only dealing with group members’ reflective thinking.

On p.7 of his paper Hindriks says in a critical tone that my account denies the existence of group agents. But this is not a true claim, for also functional group agents in my sense are clearly agents that can act and plan their activities, although of course only through their members (see e.g. chapter 2 of SO). Thus, I do not deny the existence of group agents. Hindriks may have in mind group agents with intrinsic consciousness and mental states when criticizing my account in this context. But those features are not directly relevant to my account of the very existence of group agents in the book.

In all, Hindriks’s discussion about ontological (i) individualism, (ii) reductivism, and (iii) eliminativism in my account is not accurate. As to (i), while of course individuals really exist in my view, also social group notions are central notions in my theory (e.g. we-mode states conceptually require groups), and groups exist as real, (typically and potentially) irreducible, and emergent collective social systems capable of causal interaction with the world (despite of having some fictitious features such as extrinsically attributed mental states). Thus my view is not ontological individualism – even when interrelations and interaction between the members is taken into account there are still emergent irreducible group features. Of course, groups can only function through their members (see my response to Ludwig in this anthology). As to (ii), my account does not reduce groups (as social systems) to individuals, nor does it eliminate groups (point (iii)).

According to my account, groups can purposively cause outcomes but only through their members (or some of them) functioning as group members in a coordinated way and being motivated by the group’s ethos (its constitutive goals and principles). Groups per se can only

extrinsically intentionally (on the basis of their members' extrinsic intentions) cause something through their members' action as group members. Sometimes such extrinsically intentional states may be fully internalized by the group members to be closely similar to their intrinsically intentional attitudes. (Cf. p. 49 of SO).

Hindriks asks why I do not embrace ontological collectivism but does not say clearly what ontological collectivism is. In any case, I take it to involve group agents with full-blown mentality and intentionality. Given this, my answer will be that group agents with consciousness and full-blown mentality need not be postulated, because the ontological commitments they involve are too strong, thus unacceptable, and are not functionally needed.

My theory can be regarded as partly collectivistic as to its ontology, because groups as acting social systems are causally real. Yet, on the other hand the collective causation has the kind of microstructure according to which the ultimate causation happens through individuals, although – and this is central – through individuals functioning *as members of the group*.

My position is said by Hindriks to be “eliminativism” with respect to group agents. However, this is not a good term as “group agent” (in the full-blown sense requiring intrinsic intentionality) is not a frequently accepted idea in common sense or current philosophical thinking, and hence the object of elimination here would not be a clear-cut entity. As indicated, I do not eliminate groups in SO – and instead I argue that they can be causally real (but with some fictitious features) and non-eliminable.ⁱⁱ

My central reason for denying full objective existence of group agents accordingly is not that they are collectively constructed entities and thus mind-dependent, although Hindriks claims so. I thus accept Hindriks's following central thesis presented in the paper:

- (1) The fact that group agents are mind-dependent does not imply that they are fictions.

Yet I accept this principle only for group agents that are constructed as group agents on the basis of groups that are existing social systems and that can causally affect the real world through their members' actions as group members. Completely fictional group agents that one might have in pieces of pure fiction such as in a novel would not fall within the scope of (1).

Hindriks's next thesis is:

- (2) Group agents are real due to the fact that they are causally efficacious.

I accept (2) in the book with the qualification that real group agents yet can have fictitious features concerning their intentional features – think e.g. of business companies (e.g. corporations) that are often arbitrarily taken to be limited liability companies and indeed are taken to be persons

responsible for what they intentionally do. I thus say in the book that group agents are real (despite having some fictitious features). Saying this is the opposite of “escaping realism” about group agents. Escaping realism is something that Hindriks wrongly attributes to me, because, as emphasized, I do accept the reality of groups as social systems of interactive group members - although I do not attribute consciousness and full intentionality to groups. Group agents in my functionalistic sense are in effect groups of individual human beings that can act jointly as group members in the group’s name on its extrinsic attitudes.

Hindriks incorrectly attributes to me the thesis that “we-mode attitudes only have intentional existence”. This thesis is not true and I nowhere make the claim it involves. We-mode attitudes are extrinsic attitudes that individual group members have as group members, and even if they are extrinsic they are as real as are I-mode attitudes. Thus a person can e.g. intend to move a table either in the I-mode (as a private person) or in the we-mode (as a group member) on the basis of his respective intention (see e.g. chapter 3 of SO). Both I-mode and we-mode intentions of course are real qua states of a real human being even if only I-mode attitudes generally are intrinsic.ⁱⁱⁱ

Hindriks says that Tuomela owes an argument as to why his idea of eliminativism does not generalize. First, I am not truly eliminating any entities (e.g. group agents) that are generally accepted as existing in common sense or in theory. Second, as pointed out, I make a distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic intentionality. Roughly, this is almost the same as the distinction between what is biologically versus socially based. These are distinctions that every rational person must accept as real (although the distinctions might not be sharp in all cases, they still exist). (Cf. the case of the examples such as the John and Jane one on p. 49, referred to by Hindriks). Nothing more hardly needs to be said here about the distinctions that relate to Hindriks’s problem of why “eliminativism does not generalize”: Why such eliminativism would not generalize is basically because of the either fully objective or epistemically objective distinctions mentioned above. They largely give the limits asked for.

I claim that something can be mind-dependent in the sense of being collectively constructed without being (completely) fictitious (“made up”). Hindriks seems to think that this is wrong (but may mean by the word ‘fictitious’ something else than I). I use the term ‘fictitious’ in the book primarily for collectively constructed (and “made up”) intentional features of group agents. As claimed, extrinsic intentional states such as intentions, wants, beliefs, etc. are examples of fictitious group agents’ states that do not truly exist or are not real as such although e.g. group members may treat them as real.

Group agents can, as shorthand, be said to be fictitious if they have *only* fictitious properties. They can loosely be said to be fictitious also in the case they have some fictitious properties.

Hindriks incorrectly claims that I take group agents to be fictitious to external observers (SO, p 47). But what I say is that they *may* take (i.e. it is possible that they take) group agents to be fictitious. This is a quite different, contingent matter about what people think, and it is not central to our present discussion.

As to the problem of institutions enabling new actions, Hindriks presents the following central thesis concerning them:

- (3) Collectively accepted rules enable new forms of behavior, irrespective of whether they are constitutive or regulative.

In my book I concentrate on constitutive rules and emphasize them as enablers of new forms or action. (I do not say anything about the possible role of regulative rules in that context, contrary to what Hindriks claims in his paper.) The matter would require a longer discussion than is possible here. Let me just say this: Within the social realm constitutive rules or principles specify what is normally taken to be constitutive and in this sense necessary for something to be a social system such as a group or other social entity such as a corporation. In many cases the form of such collectively accepted rules is the familiar one that Searle normally uses: X counts as Y in conditions C.

A relevant example case in my theorizing is provided by the notion of group *ethos* – a central notion in SO concerning the group’s constitutive features. Suppose that some people forming a collective *g* have collectively constructed *g* from their point of view as “*our group*” with some conceptually indispensable properties for its proper functioning, e.g. certain goals, beliefs, norms and standards, positions etc. Taken together these constitutive properties (call their set *E*) form the *group’s ethos* (in my special sense of constitutive goals and the like) and serve to give special institutional status to it and to the group (involving e.g. that we are not just *any* crowd or collective). Given this collective construction, we can say that there is a constitutive norm “*E* counts as the ethos of *g*” (e.g. *E* could express the norm that *g* be democratic). This norm is a constitutive ought-to-be norm for group *g*: Things ought to be so that the ethos *E* be upheld and promoted in *g* by the members through their related activities, and accordingly there will be relevant regulative ought-to-do norms for members specifying what kinds of democratic activities are normatively expected from the members of *g*. It is important to notice, though, that *E* concerns the whole group or community *g* in the first place and only indirectly individual group members. The constitutive norm accordingly is a higher order norm when compared with the regulative norms. This is an important point against the kind of reduction of constitutive norms to regulative ones that Hindriks advocates (See Searle, 2015, for a similar point concerning constitutive versus regulative norms.)

To continue along Searlean lines, ethos E is a group level property of g that gives its institutional status and, indeed, (partial) identity among groups and, if g is suitably instituted, also among social institutions. What is perhaps more central presently is that ethos E may refer to or at least indicate the institutional statuses of the institutional positions (e.g. lawyer, professor, nurse) that E in part is about. Positions qua having institutional statuses are normally governed by constitutive norms for position holders, ought-to-be and ought-to-do as well as corresponding may-do norms, plus typically and importantly by suitable regulative norms. The constitutive norms for positions must of course be compatible with the constitutive ethos norm that the group ought to function so as to satisfy and further the ethos. This is because the individuals' relevant activities as group members are needed to bring that about.

My above treatment clearly indicates that constitutive rules do not reduce to regulative rules, for regulative norms cannot do the central job of constitutive norms e.g. in constituting and creating groups capable of acting as groups. This goes against Hindriks's claim of reducibility in his paper. Another incorrect thesis according to me in Hindriks's paper concerns his denial of my claim in the book that constitutive rules or norms can create novel actions. To rebut this denial, consider the following. In modern societies the state typically regulates its citizens entering the territory of the country. A passport generally gives a citizen the permission to enter that territory. The norm of permission underlying the passport institution can create behavior that was not earlier *normatively* (indeed, deontically) possible. Hindriks somewhat oddly assumes that the cases he discusses are such that the behaviors in question have not been previously prohibited (p. 12). But we are discussing what we have in modern societies that are to a great extent normatively governed. Imposing his requirement leads to a normless state of nature that we do not have. In such a situation the role of social norms could be played by norms or principles of rationality or even by non-normative physical coercion. But that is another matter. In any case, contrary to Hindriks's claim, constitutive norms can enable novel behavior and, in addition, are often also necessary for constituting groups that are capable of action.

Finally, concerning Hindriks's numbered theses (1)-(4), some of which were already considered, I would like to say that they are largely acceptable in the case of the theory created in SO. I will only make short remarks on them below. Referring the reader back to the earlier formulations, this is my summary view of them. Thesis (1) I find acceptable and have not argued against it in the book. Concerning (2) and focusing on my functional notion of group agents, my account finds this claim acceptable. However, it does not hold for the kind of group agents that allegedly "have minds of their own" and have consciousness. I suspect that Hindriks has something like them (instead of my functional group agents) in mind when he speaks of group agents. Thesis

(3) seems compatible with what I say in the book, but my claim in the book really concerns only constitutive norms as sufficient for enabling new behavior (and my claim is skeptical about whether also regulative norms could do that even in some cases). I do want to claim that a group that can act as a group and is constructed by the members as “our group” (as a we-mode group) typically is a product of constitutive rather than regulative norms. A similar claim is warranted also for social institutions such as money, marriage, and the statuses of a professor, lawyer, etc. (See Searle, 2015, for a good account of similar matters.)

Hindriks’s fourth thesis is this:

(4) Constitutive rules make explicit an ontology that regulative rules leave implicit.

Thesis (4) concerns a topic that goes beyond my explicit discussion in SO and I will not here discuss it.*

* I wish to thank Dr. Maj Tuomela for comments.

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ⁱ As to the notion of acting as a group member, see my account in chapter 1 of Tuomela (2007) and the relevant remarks in SO.

ⁱⁱ In the forthcoming (2016) paperback edition of SO some minor changes concerning what I say of fictitious features of group agents are made in chapter 2.

ⁱⁱⁱ Some remarks in Hindriks’s text indicate that he takes my view to be that groups can have we-mode states. But in my account we-mode states can be had only by individual group members. The source of such we-mode, though, lies in the group’s mental states attributed to it – through the group’s collectively accepted decision procedure – by the members to the group. E.g. the group members may decide to build a house and to form the required beliefs as group members for the group. Here we have attribution that results in the group’s extrinsically intentional mental states that in turn serve to generate correspondingly extrinsically intentional states in the members. Yet, those intentional member-level states might be fully internalized by the members so as to become approximately intrinsic intentional states.