Group-identification, collectivism, and perspectival autonomy

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INTRODUCTION

One of the aims of the 40th Annual Spindel Conference was to discuss whether the ongoing, but relatively distinct, investigations of relational autonomy and collective intentionality could crossfertilize. Whereas the concept of relational autonomy was developed to do justice to the relational character of selfhood, and as an alternative to traditional conceptions of autonomy, which were accused of exaggerating the self-reliance and social independence of the self (Mackenzie, 2021), recent discussions of collective intentionality have often centered on the question of whether and how collective intentions differ from aggregations of individual intentions. As different as they might otherwise be, theoretical explorations of autonomy and collective intentionality intersect at a crucial point: both require an understanding of the relationship between the self and the group, between individual subjectivity and social life. The aim of the following paper is to argue that the collective intentionality literature contains insights that cannot merely contribute to our understanding of autonomy, but also prevent us from taking our relationism too far.
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2 | GILBERT'S PLURAL SUBJECT

In her work on social ontology, Margaret Gilbert has consistently argued that we cannot account for collective intentionality and the many kinds of group formations that we encounter in everyday life unless we explicitly address the nature of the first-person plural, that is, the “we” (Gilbert, 2014, p. 5). As Gilbert points out, however, one can talk about a we in different ways. It can be used in a distributive sense as a mere stand in for “all of us,” as in “we all play solitaire” or “we are all hungry,” but the term can also be used in a collective sense and refer to more than a mere aggregate of persons, as in “let us go and play tennis” or “we want to marry.” When used in the latter sense, the notion implies a sense of unity and suggests that the involved individuals are linked in such a way that they jointly constitute what Gilbert calls a plural subject (pp. 63–65). When Gilbert further argues that the plural subject is the proper bearer of collective intentional states, one might wonder whether her account is not too metaphysically laden. Do we really need to postulate a we-subject, a group mind, over and beyond the minds of the participants? Is it really the group, understood as a distinct entity beyond the aggregation of its individual members, that has beliefs, intentions, and experiences? But it is important to realize that the reference to a plural subject can be understood in two very different ways. One can indeed postulate the existence of a supraindividual group mind, but that is not Gilbert's proposal (p. 9, 119); rather, for her, the plural subject is simply the name for a plurality of individuals who come to be unified and act as one as a result of a joint commitment (p. 63). ¹ The plural subject account should consequently be understood as the proposal that the proper bearer of collective intentional states is a plurality of individuals who are related to each other in quite specific ways.

Gilbert’s first comprehensive presentation of her plural subject account can be found in On Social Facts. In the beginning of the book, Gilbert remarks that her analysis will allow for an adjudication of the longstanding controversy between “individualism” and “holism” about social groups (p. 3). Both terms can be taken to cover quite different things, but Gilbert is especially targeting what might be called ontological individualism, that is, the view that social groups are nothing over and above the individuals who compose them, and ontological holism, that is, the view that groups have ontological and normative priority over their individual members. For some political articulations of these positions, consider the following quotes:

There are individual men and women and there are families and no government can do anything except through people and people look to themselves first. . . . There is no such thing as society. (Thatcher, 1987; see also Elster, 1989, p. 248)

Against individualism, the Fascist conception is for the State; and it is for the individual in so far as he coincides with the State. . . . Fascism reaffirms the State as the true reality of the individual. . . . Therefore, for the Fascist, everything is in the State, and nothing human or spiritual exists, much less has value, outside the State. (Mussolini, 1962, pp. 351–352)

¹For some reservations about Gilbert's joint commitment account, see León and Zahavi (2018).
Gilbert rejects both positions. On her account, individuals cannot be reduced to their group membership or social roles, nor can communities be considered mere aggregates of individuals. Individuals who form groups do not remain the same, but are transformed as a result, and when communities come into being, there is a substantial change, a creation of something new (Gilbert, 1989, p. 431).

I am quite sympathetic to these key ideas of Gilbert. In the following, I will first discuss some findings from social psychology that support her view. I will next turn to the type of holism of which she is critical. In a first move, I will show that this holism, which in the following I will call collectivism, is not merely a political ideology, but also a view with quite some presence in the social sciences. I will next criticize it by arguing that it conflates different explanatory agenda, and, in a final move, I will suggest that a plausible account of both selfhood and community requires a preservation of perspectival autonomy.

3 | SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY

Psychologists have for a long time been interested in the psychological basis of group behavior. But is there a proper group psychology or is psychology in all its branches a science of the individual, as claimed by Allport (1924, p. 4)?

One of the specific challenges facing social psychology has been to avoid the Scylla of a supra-individual group consciousness and the Charybdis of an individualist reductionism that considers the group nothing but an aggregation of its individual parts. The solution that many opted for was to insist that individuals are changed psychologically in group settings, for which reason we need to explore the group if we are to fully understand the psychology of the individual.

For some groups, membership can be determined based on the presence of a certain set of objective features. Whether or not you belong to blood group A, B, AB, or O is determined by the genes you inherit from your parents. Likewise, whether you belong to the BMI obesity category is determined by your height and weight. Other groups such as social class or ethnicity might be defined by less objective criteria, but you might still be counted as a member by others regardless of your own view of the matter. In all these cases, membership can be externally assigned regardless of whether you know or care about it and can happen even if you actively disidentify with the group in question. Such externally enforced classifications are, however, not of much relevance when it comes to understanding groups characterized by a “subjective sense of togetherness, we-ness, or belongingness” (Turner, 1982, p. 16). Participation in and membership of the latter kind of groups requires an experiential anchoring. To be part of a we, is to be with and relate to other members in a distinct way—one involving participation and identification. If you do not self-identify as a member of a we, you are not part of it.

In order to adopt a we-perspective, it is, in short, not sufficient simply to recognize the presence of others. In addition, at some level one has to feel connected to and identify with these others. Absent such an identification, the others will precisely remain others, and this will not allow for the emergence of any we-ness. To identify with others, to see oneself as similar to them, to experience oneself as a group member, as one of us, is, however, precisely something that involves and transforms one’s self-experience. It is this idea that Henri Tajfel’s and John Turner’s social identity theory seeks to develop.

A standard approach to identity in social psychology is to distinguish personal (self-)identity from social (self-)identity. Personal identity refers to one’s sense of self as a unique individual with distinct psychological characteristics, personal preferences and interests, bodily traits, etc. (Turner, 1982, p. 18; 1984, pp. 526–527). Social identity, by contrast, refers to one’s sense of self as a member of a collective group with properties and traits that one shares with other members of the same in-group, such as nationality, religion, profession,
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etc. Taken together, one's personal and social identity are then considered to constitute the cognitive structures that jointly make up most of one's sense of self (Turner, 1982, p. 18). Importantly, on this model, one's sense of self can involve different levels of inclusiveness, it can expand and contract, and undergo various transformations depending upon the context. If the locus of self-reference is the group, the focus point of self-esteem and motivation also changes. One might act or feel primarily as a group member rather than as a particular individual. One might, for instance, take pride in the accomplishments of the group to which one belongs. In cases with high group salience, such as situations involving intergroup conflict, one might even act almost exclusively in terms of one's social identity (Tajfel, 1978, p. 42). When seeking to explain one's behavior, one's personal identity is consequently often not the most relevant factor to consider. Rather, in many cases, one's social identity will be more salient and decisive.

To understand and explain these processes better, social psychologists have highlighted the role that categorization plays for social identification, group belongingness, and group formation (Hogg & Abrams, 1998, p. 65). In our everyday interactions, we readily classify people according to various categories. Rather than seeing them as unique and irreplaceable individuals, we see them as defined in terms of shared in-group or out-group properties, that is, as stereotypical and interchangeable group members. Consider the case of posting a letter, to take a classic example of Schutz. When I post a letter, my action is guided by assumptions I make regarding the postmen. I assume they will read the address and send the letter to its recipient. I do not know them personally and I do not think of them as particular individuals, but by behaving the way I do, I relate to them as types, as bearers of certain functions. And, of course, for this social process to work, I also must typify some of my own actions. I try to write in such a way that a typical postal worker will be able to decipher my handwriting, I write the address in a typical place on the envelope, etc. Briefly put, I try to make myself the typical “sender of a letter” (Schutz, 1962, pp. 44–45). Social categorization, typification, and stereotyping facilitate everyday predictability and make it easier to navigate the social world. And as the example highlights, individuals do not merely structure their understanding of others according to such categories, they also engage in self-categorization, employing and internalizing similar categories when thinking about and understanding themselves. This is precisely what happens when one self-identifies as a group member. Such group-identification involves a shift of reference or frame, “a shift towards the perception of self as an interchangeable exemplar of some social category and away from the perception of self as a unique person” (Turner et al., 1987, p. 50). Turner's central idea is consequently that self-categorization involves a component of self-stereotyping, where individual differences are downplayed and deemphasized, and where similarities between self and other in-group members are accentuated such that social uniformity is generated. Turner even speaks of this process in terms of a depersonalization, in so far as the individual no longer views herself in terms of her unique features, but, rather, in terms of her shared in-group attributes (p. 50). As a result, “the individual self is replaced by a collective group membership-based self (i.e., social identity) that is defined by, and acts according to, the in-group prototype” (Hogg & Williams, 2000, p. 88). Henceforth, members will be more likely to understand themselves and other in-group members as representatives of their social group and think of themselves in terms of we and us. One significant implication of such categorization based intergroup relations is what has been called the accentuation effect, that is, the accentuation of both intraclass similarities and

2In comparison to some of the anthropologists and cultural psychologists to be discussed later, it is striking how clear Tajfel is about the scope and limitations of his theory. His primary focus is on social identity and group membership, and he explicitly states that his theory does not pretend to offer a more general account of selfhood or to explain the nature of individual self-consciousness (Tajfel, 1982, pp. 2–3).
interclass differences. When social category membership is salient, the respective individuals tend to be assigned all the characteristics belonging to their category. This then leads to an exaggeration of the unity, coherence, and homogeneity of both in-group members and out-group members, respectively, as well as to an overestimation of the intergroup differences (Hogg & Abrams, 1998, p. 19).

The social identity approach can be contrasted with the social cohesion model, which claims that groups are formed as a result of interpersonal attraction and shared interests. Whereas personal attraction might be relevant when explaining the constitution of small interpersonal groups, where the members are known to one another, Tajfel and Turner have argued that studies of larger intergroup relations call for a different account. When members of one group interact with members of another group, the nature of their interaction is not primarily determined by personal attraction or lack thereof. Rather, questions of identity and social categorization are found to be much more important, which has led to the hypothesis that it is group identification that leads to social cohesion rather than vice versa (Turner, 1982, p. 22; Turner et al., 1987, p.34, 67). A famous experiment by Tajfel supported this claim. In Tajfel's study, schoolboys were divided into groups based on a trivial and explicitly random criterion. There was no interaction within or between the groups. There was no group goal and no conflict of interest between the groups, and although each member knew to which group he had been assigned personally, he did not know the group affiliation of the other participants. The subjects were then assigned the task of privately donating money to pairs of anonymous others, who were identified only by group membership. The unexpected results were that even in this minimal setting, subjects discriminated in favor of in-group members and against out-group members. Tajfel's minimal group paradigm has since been taken to show that social categorization, even if based on a completely random basis, is sufficient to generate group behavior, in-group favoritism, and group cohesion (Turner et al., 1987, pp. 27–28).

Tajfel's and Turner's work on social identity and self-categorization sought to explain the psychological processes underlying group behavior, and, in doing so, they not only recognized the importance of accounting for we-ness and the subjective sense of togetherness, but also the central role played by matters of identity and by the individual group members' expanded and redefined sense of self. As Turner writes,

We need not posit any metaphysical entity such as a ‘group mind’ to argue that group behaviour is more than a summation of individual actions. There is an important discontinuity at the level of psychological processes between an individual acting as a differentiated, unique person and an individual acting as a group member, as a relatively interchangeable representative of a social category. . . . The fundamental difference is that the individual's very conception of self changes to partake of the common attributes of an historically originated, socially determined and culturally and situationally constructed social group. (Turner, 1982, p. 33)

To insist on the importance of identification is not to commit to the view that participation in a given group always happens deliberatively and/or voluntarily. 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 conscious decision. Likewise, through coercion one might come to think of oneself as a member of a certain ethnic group, social class, or religious community. Even in such cases, however, for the membership in question to count as a we-membership, it must involve rather than bypass one's self-understanding; one must come to see a commonality between oneself and other comembers and experience oneself as one of us. The idea that group membership involves a deep transformation of the human individual is precisely one that Gilbert and the social identity theorists share.
COLLECTIVISM AND SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM

The view that individual human beings have no value, importance, or reality except insofar as they are group members is not exclusive to certain totalitarian political ideologies. The idea that your group identity is your most important identity marker and that it is your membership of certain groups (be it a nation, a religious community, a social class, an ethnicity, a sexual orientation, etc.) and their intersection that provides you with an identity in the first place is widespread. Consider, for instance, the following quotes by the Buddhist scholar Jay Garfield:

Just as we shouldn't ever think that Hamlet has any reality outside of the play, we shouldn't ever think that we as persons have any reality outside of the narratives in which we participate. (Garfield, 2022, p. 156)

[You are] constituted by the multiple roles you play, including family roles, professional roles, roles in networks of friends, and political roles. (p. 38)

The social constructivism embraced by Garfield has also had and continues to have quite some presence in the social sciences. Let me exemplify this with some brief references to cultural psychology, sociology, and anthropology.

In an influential paper, Richard Shweder and Edmund Bourne contrasted a Western egocentric conception, which views the self as a discrete and self-reliant entity, with a sociocentric and organic conception of the relation between individual and society that they took to be prevalent in non-Western cultures. On this latter account, the self is not distinguished from or separated from the social context. Rather, selfhood is by and large a question of the culturally determined social role(s) one occupies. On the non-Western conception, we are defined by our interpersonal relationships and are all part of an interdependent system (Shweder & Bourne, 1982, p. 105, 111, 127, 132).

This view was echoed in several much-cited papers by Markus and Kitayama, who argued that people in different cultures have different construals of the relation between self and other, and that these construals influence the nature of individual experience and ultimately the nature of selfhood (1991, p. 224). They went on to distinguish what they called the independent Western conception, which conceives of the self as an independent, self-contained, autonomous entity from the interdependent non-Western conception, which conceives of the self as “an integral part of the collective” and as nothing “without the collective” (1994, p. 570), and argued that there are cultures where the individual is no longer “the primary unit of consciousness” (1991, p. 226).

Rather than endorsing a straight form of ontological relativism, Markus and Kitayama ultimately seemed to favor the more relational, collectivist or “groupist” non-Western conception of self, and they suggested that the Western conception of self was quite at odds with actual social behavior and should be reformulated so as to reflect the substantial interdependence that characterizes even Western individualists (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, p. 247; see also 1994, p. 575).

Contrary to what is implied by Shweder, Bourne, Markus, and Kitayama, it is, however, not that difficult to find more communitarian, sociocentric, or groupist accounts of self in Western theorizing as well. From within the field of sociology, Joas has praised Mead’s proposal that the self only “arises in the process of social experience and activity” (1962, p. 135) as “one of the greatest discoveries in the history of the social sciences” (Joas, 2001, p. 2). Mead’s central argument in Mind, Self, and Society bears on the relation between

3For a more extensive treatment, see Zahavi (2022).
self-consciousness and selfhood. For Mead, what is distinctive, and indeed constitutive, of the self is that it can relate to itself as an object (1962, p. 136). Thus, for Mead being a self is ultimately more a question of becoming an object than of being a subject, and the decisive question is how this is possible, how “can an individual get outside himself (experientially) in such a way as to become an object to himself?” (p. 138). Mead’s answer is that this can only happen in an indirect manner, namely by adopting the attitude or perspective of others toward oneself (p. 138), and Mead ultimately concludes that one “has to be a member of a community to be a self” (p. 162) and that the group preexists the self (p. 164; cf. 189). In more recent discussions, we find prominent sociologist Randall Collins explicitly embracing the Meadian idea that individual subjectivity is a social product (Collins, 2004, pp. 345–346). As he insists, we are deeply social beings, and it is social symbols that “make up the very structure of our consciousness” and constitute the pathway to individual experience (p. 374).

In The Raw and the Cooked Lévi-Strauss famously argued that it might be best if anthropology would disregard “the thinking subject completely, [and] proceed as if the thinking process were taking place in the myths, in their reflection upon themselves and their interrelation” (Lévi-Strauss, 1969, p. 12). Fashion has changed, however, and there is currently quite some interest in subjects and subjectivity from the side of anthropologists. Consider, for example, the introduction to the volume Postcolonial Disorders:

The increasing use of the terms “subject” and “subjectivity” in anthropology points to widespread dissatisfaction with previous efforts to understand psychological experience and inner lives in particular cultures, characteristic of an earlier generation of psychological and cultural anthropologists. . . . “Subjectivity” immediately signals awareness of a set of historical problems and critical writings related to the genealogy of the subject and to the importance of colonialism and the figure of the colonized “other” for writing about the emergence of the modern (rational) subject. Subjectivity denotes a new attention to hierarchy, violence, and subtle modes of internalized anxieties that link subjection and subjectivity, and an urgent sense of the importance of linking national and global economic and political processes to the most intimate forms of everyday experience. (Good et al., 2008, pp. 2–3)

In this context, the reference to subjects and subjectivity is clearly indebted to the work of Foucault. Partly playing on the etymological roots of the term “subject” (one is always subject to, or the subject of, something), Foucault claimed that people come to relate to themselves as selves, come to engage in practices of self-evaluation and self-regulation, within contexts of domination and subordination. Forming subjects and subjecting them to authority are, on his view, two sides of the same coin (Foucault, 1990, p. 85). On such an account, subjectivity and individuality are ideological categories produced in a system of social organization. They are enabled by discursive relations of power and therefore social and relational through and through.

It is at this point important not to conflate different explanatory agendas. On one understanding of the term, subjectivity is related to power, domination, and subordination and refers to historical and ideological categories of political (usually subordinate) position and identity. On another understanding of the term, subjectivity is a fundamental dimension of experience; one that any account of phenomenal consciousness must factor in. On this reading, there is not merely something it is like to taste cognac, feel a headache, or enjoy a walk in the woods; rather, such experiences are from the outset also like something for a subject, they come with what has been called perspectival ownership. When feeling a headache, 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. We do not experience hunger, pain, distress, fatigue, and anger as free-floating anonymous events, but precisely as first-personal experiences.

Analogously, one can talk of points of view in different ways. On one understanding of the term, you have a first-personal point of view from the moment you have experiences, since experiences by nature are first-personal (Zahavi, 2014, 2020). On another reading, having a point of view of one's own is not a given, but an achievement. On this alternative, normative, reading, you come to have a view (and voice) of your own by being committed and devoted to a certain set of values and by leading a life in the light of specific (identity-defining) norms. This is why knowing that I am, say, pro-choice rather than pro-life and pro-gun, tells you something about who I am.

It is crucial not to conflate these two understandings of what it might mean to have a point of view, just as it is crucial not to conflate the two different understandings of subjectivity. When defending the view that the self is relationally constituted and individuated, when defending the view that subjectivity is communally grounded and nothing apart from the collective, we need to be clear about what we are referring to. Are we talking about experiential subjectivity or political subjectivity? Are we talking about selfhood framed experientially or normatively? It is one thing to show that what we experience can be influenced by social relations and power structures, that what has significance and meaning for us is influenced by the community of which we are part, and that our social identity categories are discursively constructed. It would be uncontroversial to argue for any of these claims. It is something completely different, and far more controversial, to argue that phenomenal consciousness and experiential subjectivity are products of discursive power structures. But often the topics are lumped together, and authors end up advocating claims that far outstrip the evidence they present and the arguments they offer (Zahavi, 2014, 2021).

Let me emphasize that we do not have to choose between the normative/political conception and the experiential conception of subjectivity and selfhood. We can have, and arguably need, both. But they must be distinguished, otherwise different explanatory agendas will be conflated. An example of this kind of conflation can, for instance, be found in the anthropological claim that sociocentric cultures—that subordinate individual interests to the good of the collective—do not contain individual subjects (Dumont, 1986).

5 | BEING-WITH-ONE-ANOOTHER

Let me at this point return to the topic of social ontology. Group identification is “phenomenologically real” in the sense that it involves a feeling of belonging (Hogg & Abrams, 1998, p. 7), and a proper account of collective intentionality must address the question of what it takes to act together with others, to experience oneself as part of a we, to feel joy or anger or a victory not simply as mine, but as ours. Even if members of a we must be bound together in some fashion, even if the togetherness distinctive of a we requires some kind of integration, we should not be looking for an undifferentiated fusional unity (León et al., 2019). Thus, as Mathiesen has pointed out, a quite wrong way to think of group experiences is to think of them on the model of the Borg. In Star Trek, the Borg is presented as a collective entity with a single unified consciousness. Through cybernetic implants, individuals get absorbed into this consciousness and thereby come to partake in the experiences of all the rest. But such a group mind would be far too unified. It would lack the plurality required for a we. And, indeed, rather than thinking of the Borg as a we, it is better to think of it as a single consciousness distributed across a number of brains (Mathiesen, 2005, p. 237). Star Trek is altogether something of a treasure trove for intriguing and thought-provoking scenarios. In one episode from the Star Trek: Voyager series, the two characters Tuvok and Neelix are visiting an alien planet in order to collect plant samples. When they attempt to beam up to the ship, the procedure malfunctions, and they fuse
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into a single composite creature, who names himself Tuvix. Tuvix has all the memories of Neelix and Tuvok and combines their skills, temperaments, and interests. Would Tuvix qualify as an ideal and seamless we? The reply must again be negative. Neelix and Tuvok no longer exist. They have been absorbed or dissolved as a result of the fusion. Tuvix has one unified stream of consciousness, and it is not coincidental that throughout he employs the first-person singular pronoun.

To qualify as we, plurality must be preserved. The differences between self and other(s) must be recognized and appreciated in order to make possible the being-with-one-another distinctive of we-ness. Rather than requiring some kind of single unified consciousness, we-experiences and communal experiences presuppose intersubjective differences that are then bridged rather than erased or dissolved. This plurality requirement is accepted and endorsed by many contributors to the debate on collective intentionality. Gilbert, for instance, has argued that a we is a plurality of persons (2014, p. 9) and that the constitution of a plural subject “requires a plurality of individual participants” (p. 238). We can find a related view in Arendt, who famously claimed that togetherness and cooperation should not be understood as some kind of one-ness (1958, p. 123), but rather as “a plurality of unique beings” (p. 176).

On the proposed account, a plurality of individual minds is a precondition for, rather than an obstacle to, genuine we-phenomena. Collective intentionality presupposes plurality, but plurality presupposes difference and diversity, and if genuine difference and diversity is to be possible, my identity cannot simply be reduced to the culturally determined roles I play, nor can my experiential perspective on matters simply be constituted by others. The same, of course, goes for the other(s). It is precisely because we have underived perspectives of our own that agreement and collaboration as well as conflict and disagreement is possible.

Pauli Murray once wrote that true community “affirms the richness of individual diversity as well as the common human ties that bind us together” (2006, p. 210). Garfield would presumably disagree and has argued that a proper appreciation of social reality requires us to realize that none of us are selves, and that none of us possess any kind of qualitative experience, interiority, or autonomy (2022, p. 166). In fact, on his account, it is only the moment we reach this realization that we will be truly able to respect and care for each other (p. 166). Terminological differences aside, Garfield's account converges with communitarian arguments according to which “the individual is identified and constituted in and through certain of his or her roles, those roles which bind the individual to the communities in and through which alone specifically human goods are to be attained” and where one is “a member of this family, this household, this clan, this tribe, this city, this nation, this kingdom.” And as MacIntyre then adds, “There is no ‘I’ apart from these” roles (1981, p. 172).

But to operate with a conception of the self that reduces it to an aggregation of social roles, to claim that individuals who are bearers of the exact same social roles are identical, and to argue, as Sandel has done, that the community constitutes the self-understanding of its members (1982, p. 175), is not only to ignore the significance of experiential subjectivity but also to fundamentally misunderstand the pluralistic nature of intersubjectivity.

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4Somewhat surprisingly, Gilbert concludes On Social Facts by arguing that “humans as singular agents and humans as members of plural subjects are ontologically on a par. Neither is prior as far as ontology goes” (Gilbert, 1989, p. 432). But the contradiction is only apparent. Gilbert is operating with a rather demanding conception of singular agency, one that involves the capacity to self-ascribe goals and thoughts, and, as she also writes, the basis of both the singular agent and the plural subject is “the human being, with his or her own will and conceptions of the situation” (p. 432). In short, Gilbert is not denying that individual intentionality (and presumably experiential subjectivity) precedes and is a condition of possibility for the constitution of plural subjects.
At this point, it might be argued that the reference to underived plurality and irreducible experiential subjectivity is misguided if we really want to understand communal experiences, group-identifications, and feelings of belonging. After all, only a self whose self-understanding gravitates around socially available roles and typifications will be able to identify with others who partake in similar roles and share similar norms and values. Only a self defined in terms of features that are shareable, such as roles, narratives, commitments, and values can group-identify and come to see itself as one of us. This might all be true, at least when it comes to memberships of more robust and enduring communities, but this merely shows the insufficiency and not the superfluousness of experiential subjectivity. Absent experiential subjectivity, we would never be able to relate to others and be enriched as a result. Absent experiential subjectivity, we would be nothing but substitutable aggregations of social roles. Absent a first-person singular perspective, a first-person plural perspective would be impossible. To understand communal life, we need to operate with a multidimensional model of self, one that does justice to both the experiential and the normative dimension (Zahavi, 2021).

6 | CONCLUSION

The outlined position seeks to strike a balance between an undersocialized and an oversocialized view of the subject, that is, between the view that the subject is either completely independent of or wholly constituted by the community within which it operates. Both extremes must be avoided. Not only because they are defective accounts of human nature, but also because they are politically problematic. Just as individual subjectivity cannot be fully explained by or reduced to social roles or relations, groups are not mere aggregates of individuals. Experiential subjectivity is not constituted and individuated by social relations, but individuals who form groups are transformed as a result, which is also why collective phenomena cannot be explicated fully by reference to singular agents.

We need an account of the subject as someone who is shaped (rather than enabled) by society, but who also has the capacity to transform that society. Individuals need social relationships for their development and flourishing. But we should not conclude from this that every feature of the subject is socially constructed. Some nonrelational perspectival autonomy must be preserved.

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