Review of Margaret Gilbert, Social Facts

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What makes an action into a social action? According to Max Weber, an action is social when:

by virtue of the subjective meaning attached to it by the acting individual(s) it takes account of the behaviour of others and is thereby oriented in its course. []

Margaret Gilbert uses this now classic definition as a starting point to develop her own account of social action and the social groups which perform it. In the first place, she objects, many phenomena which are of central importance to social science are simply not directed towards others in this way.

Take the example of suicide: unless the act of suicide is a kind of statement or protest directed towards other people (and surely not all suicides have that character) then the subject falls outside the scope of social science on Weber's definition -- an absurd implication, Gilbert believes.

But replies from a perspective more sympathetic to Weber do suggest themselves. In particular, it might be argued that the scope of social action is not really so narrow because the ways in which "the behaviour of others" enters into the "subjective meaning" attached to an action are more diverse and pervasive than at first sight appears. Indeed, to the extent that the beliefs and intentions behind our actions are linguistic and the concepts in our language are (at least partly) socially determined, it seems to follow that almost all deliberate action is social in some sense. Even the action of the suicide might be said to be social insofar as his intention is linguistically formed in a particular social context.

Gilbert gives arguments such as this her attention in a long chapter in which she examines Wittgenstein's private language argument and attacks Peter Winch's claim that "all meaningful behaviour must be social" [].

Our natural view of language is, Gilbert maintains, individualistic -- to use a concept in a certain sense is, on this view, "solely a matter of how it is with me now. It does not concern how it is or has been or will be with any other person." [] From which it follows that it is at least possible that "a being could use a word in a certain sense even if he has always been entirely alone in the world" []. Those who believe that language is social, on the other hand, Gilbert claims, hold that language is "social from a logical point of view" and that it is "logically impossible to have a language if one has not participated in group life" [].

In presenting the issue in this way, however, Gilbert substantially misrepresents the position of her opponent. For the fact is that Wittgenstein (whatever some of his disciples may or may not have thought) did not deny that a private language was possible, logically or indeed practically: he was quite prepared to admit that a solitary caveman might develop a language for his own use []. What he was

concerned to argue against was not the logical possibility of a private language but -- the difference may appear small but it is crucial -- the possibility of a logically private language. For this reason, Gilbert's attempt to use the case of a "congenital Robinson Crusoe" to cast doubt on the social view of language seems beside the point.

Positively, the main thrust of Gilbert's argument is to establish that groups are collective agents whose beliefs and actions are not to be reduced to those of the individuals who compose them. What that amounts to is less startlingly Hegelian than it might sound, however. Social groups are not transcendent metaphysical entities but are constituted as the result of a special kind of interlocking conjunction of individuals' expectations and attitudes. For a group to exist, the individual members must each make a kind of conditional commitment to collective action -- they must be willing to engage in group action if others will do so too -- and it must be common knowledge between the members of the group that they have mutually expressed their readiness to do so []. If these conditions are met, it may then be appropriate, Gilbert argues, to say of the group that it has such-and-such a belief or does such-and-such an action even though it would not be true to say this of the members of the group themselves (or of any proper subset of them).

The crucial question, of course, concerns the nature of the commitment involved. On the one hand, it might be thought that I express my willingness to do something if my behaviour causes in you the (justified) belief that, in the appropriate circumstances, that is what I will try to do. But this is not enough for Gilbert: if the expression of willingness were to involve nothing more than interlocking expectations, there would then be no distinction of principle to be drawn between collective action and mere coordinated behaviour. So the expression of willingness must involve some kind of an undertaking on my part -- social groups require, Gilbert says, "a deep and rather special kind of voluntarism" [].

But for this to be possible the agents who participate in social action must already be able to form intentions which place them a long way down the poorly marked road which leads from nature to culture: they must be able to recognise the behaviour of others as signifying (presumably conventionally) acts of commitment and they must appreciate that such commitments carry a normative force which is more than merely prudential. Granted these resources, the existence of social groups in Gilbert's sense does not seem especially surprising -- no more so than the existence of chess pieces, traffic signals or any of those other "institutional facts" which result from human beings' ability to create normatively structured patterns of behaviour. The real problem (or so at least the defender of the social view of language will maintain) is to explain how we should come to have that capacity in the first place.

Michael Rosen

Department of Philosophy

University College London

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.Max Weber, Economy and Society (Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1978), p.88, quoted p.27

.Peter Winch, The Idea of a Social Science (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), p.116, quoted p.59, p.95

. ibid.

. pp.59-60

. See David Pears, The False Prison, Vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1988) especially pp.373-74: "The predicament of someone who can get reassurance from standard objects, but not from other people, because there are none around, is discussed in several manuscripts written between The Blue Book and the final draft of Philosophical Investigations... These texts demonstrate conclusively that when he first separated the effect of solitude from the effect of restriction to the resources of sense-data, [Wittgenstein] held that it would definitely be possible for a person to speak a language even if there were nobody else around."

. See pp.175-203

. p.410