On Plural Subject Theory

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I. Introduction

Margaret Gilbert’s plural subject theory of our vernacular social concepts tells us that groups are real entities (Gilbert 1987, 1989, 1996, 2000). Ontological realism or (as it has been traditionally put) holism about groups takes them to be objects that figure in our best description of the social world, the domain of human interaction. In particular, the indispensability of groups for (some of) our best social scientific explanations provides a good reason to endorse ontological holism, provided our understanding and taxonomic treatment of groups is consistent with other kinds of objects we recognize as real. Realism about groups is an interesting and substantive position in the social sciences and philosophy because of its commitment to the view that groups cannot be reduced or analyzed out of our best explanations and descriptions of the social world. Gilbert is a realist in this sense, and plural subject theory tells us that groups are characterized by two essential features.

First, groups are formed by individuals who share a commitment to certain ends, intentions, attitudes, or actions and that commitment is common knowledge among them: the theory can be said to be intentionalist. Second, the individuals make the commitment as a unit or body or whole. I shall suggest contra Gilbert that there is no obvious reason for thinking the first condition necessary, arguing that plural subject theory does not adequately discharge the burden of explaining why intentionalism ought to be regarded as necessary. I then go on to explain that the second (supposed) essential feature of a group actually generates a dilemma for the plural subject theorist. Either the theory is circular because of a de facto presupposition of the notion of a group, or, in escaping circularity, it is unable to provide a general account of the nature of groups.

Since Gilbert sets out to elucidate paradigmatic everyday social phenomena and concepts, it is presumably an object of plural subject theory to provide an account of grouphood. That is, in as far as plural subject theory looks at the ontological nature of groups, it is not about a kind or subclass of social group but pursues the general or global question of what kind of thing is a group. Indeed, Gilbert asks, “[W]hat precisely is a social group?” (Gilbert 1989, 1), and in setting out how individual persons come to stand in group-forming relations Gilbert develops a conceptual framework to examine, inter alia, conventions, agreements, promising, political obligation, and collective emotions. If, as I shall explain, plural subject theory does not have the degree
of generality to answer Gilbert’s own question, then it may be more aptly regarded as a theory about a certain kind of group within an unstated wider and more general account. A defense of ontological holism may then ultimately depend upon the adequate exposition of that more general account.

In the next section I outline how plural subject theory regards the sharing of certain propositional contents as necessary in the formation and maintenance of a social group and how the theory takes obligations to inhere in the group-constituting joint commitment of individuals. Then I suggest that there is no principled reason for realism to be committed to intentionalism (section III). However, even if one is prepared to leave the necessity of intentionalism as an open question (at least pending its fuller specification), the claim that individuals must conceive of themselves as united as a unit or body or whole raises serious problems for Gilbert’s account (section IV). Finally, I note that notwithstanding the difficulties entailed by the nature of its intentionalism, plural subject theory is plausibly read as being committed to the material particularity of groups (section V). The ontological commitment of plural subject theory offers support to an understanding of groups as material objects, even if plural subjecthood does not itself furnish a global account of the ontological status of groups.

II. Plural Subject Theory

Gilbert’s project begins from an understanding of persons as social individuals. We are “beings both independent and interdependent,” leading our lives in terms of a personal and collective standpoint (Gilbert 1996, 1). The main aim of plural subject theory is an interpretation and elucidation of the collective standpoint: the perspective from which we possess shared goals, beliefs, values, and so on.3

The core of Gilbert’s account of everyday social phenomena is her analysis of groups as plural subjects. For Gilbert a social group is a plural subject, and any plural subject is a social group: “in order to constitute a social group people must constitute a plural subject of some kind. And any plural subject is a social group” (Gilbert 1990, 188), including families, tribes, corporations, religious bodies, literary associations, peoples, and states. A plural subject is formed when agents jointly commit as a body to do A or be X (or express a preparedness to so commit on the basis that joint commitment requires the corresponding commitments from the relevant others). Plural subject theory is explicitly intentionalist. Gilbert (1996, 9) points out in her introductory remarks that

[First, plural subject concepts apply only when certain individual people are in specific psychological states, that is only when they are jointly committed with certain others in some way. Second, one cannot employ a particular plural subject concept [i.e., speak of a plural subject of a belief, intention etc.] without employing the concept of the relevant psychological attribute . . . such as belief, having such-and-such goal, and endorsing such-and-such principle.
This commitment must be made under conditions of common knowledge. Very roughly, it must be out in the open between the agents that each has committed to do A as a body, that each knows that each has expressed preparedness to be jointly committed to do A and knows that each knows, and so on. Each agent is thus committing with each of the others that they together, as a body or unit, do A. The plural subject is not formed of a sum of individual commitments to do A, say, to go for a walk or bomb the embassy, but symmetrical and reciprocal commitments on the part of each individual to act together as a body. The commitment of each individual is to act jointly with the others—a joint commitment to act as a body. Taking a two-person group as the vehicle for more general analysis Gilbert (1999a, 147) has recently observed that

Quite generally, if Anne and Ben are jointly committed, they are jointly committed to doing something as a body, or if you like, as a single unit or ‘person’. Doing something as a body, in the relevant sense, is not a matter of ‘all doing it’ but rather a matter of ‘all acting in a such a way to constitute a body that does it’. Doing is here construed very broadly. People may be jointly committed to accepting (and pursuing) a certain goal as a body. They may be jointly committed to believing that such-and-such as body. And so on.

Such a Gilbertian group can be the subject of beliefs and desires, and it can hold intentions and act. All these collective phenomena are susceptible to an analysis in terms of agents jointly committing to, say, holding certain proattitudes or to produce certain acts as a body.

For Gilbert (1989, 147), then,

Human beings X, Y, Z constitute a collectivity (social group) if and only if each correctly thinks of himself and the others, taken together, as us* or we*. For a group to hold a belief it must hold a belief qua plural subject, and this is cashed out in the following terms:

(i) A group G believes that p if and only if the members of G jointly accept that p. (ii) Members of a group G jointly accept that p if and only if it is common knowledge in G that the individual members of G have openly expressed a conditional commitment to accept that p with the other members of G. (Gilbert 1987, 198–99)

To jointly accept a certain proposition, to constitute a plural subject of a belief, two or more people must be jointly prepared to accept the relevant proposition jointly. Or, as I prefer: they must be jointly committed to accept the proposition as a body (as a unit, as one). (Gilbert 1996, 8)

To hold an intention as a group its members must be jointly committed to some end. As Gilbert (1997, 22) puts matters:
Persons P1 and P2 have a shared intention to do A if and only if they are jointly committed to intending as a body to do A.

It is possible, according to Gilbert, to be coerced into a joint commitment, to commit oneself with another(s) to do something as a unit.\(^6\) It does not, however, seem possible to have anything other than an intentional participation in a plural subject. This is not to say that individuals must intend to form a plural subject at the outset of their interactions. Gilbert (2000, 6) observes that “joint commitments are not necessarily brought into being with any clear conscious intent to do so.” For example, Peter and Paul may just fall into a joint commitment as their impromptu decision to have dinner after the faculty meeting becomes a regular fixture. After a couple of occasions each may surmise that “in effect each is ready to be jointly committed with the other to accept as a body the plan of having dinner together after work” (Gilbert 2000, 6). Although an original or motivating intention was not present, each comes to think of himself as related to the other in a saliently group-forming fashion.

Becoming party to a plural subject has agreement-like features. Although recognizing that there is a problematic vagueness in identifying when and what might constitute an agreement, Gilbert (1989, 382) maintains that

the exchange of conditional commitments of the will that I have argued is central to plural subject phenomena is of course not conceived of as involving understandings of the form ‘I promise if you promise’. Nor is it of the form ‘I promise to do A if you do B’. Like an agreement it is a device whereby a set of persons can simultaneously and interdependently become bound to act in certain ways.

Although the formation of a plural subject need not arise from nor amount to a full-blown, clear-cut agreement it is certainly to be understood as agreement-like in the meshing of obligations and expectations. A group has a structure as if arrived at through an agreement, although the group may actually be formed by a process which is more subtle and involves nothing obviously characterizable as an out-and-out agreement. Gilbert illustrates the kind of circumstances in which this might arise by showing how people can join together in regular trips to have coffee or to go for walks. In entering into a joint commitment to do or be something as a body or whole, individuals are expressing a conditional commitment or a contingent preparedness to act with the relevant others as such a body.

Gilbert argues that a joint commitment is not simply a matter of there being corresponding and entwining personal commitments. A joint commitment does not have separable parts composed of the constituent persons. Once the expressions of commitment are in place, the agents are subject to a single commitment—no single agent is the author of that commitment. Rather together, as a body, the commitment is formed. The commitment to do A as a body provides each agent with a reason for action. Moreover, the reason is not personal in the sense that the commitment cannot be rescinded by the individual’s change of mind, for she is not its sole author, as in the case of a
personal intention. Rather, “in being subject to a commitment such that she is not the sole author of the commitment . . . she does not have the authority to unilaterally rescind it” (Gilbert 1997, 21). Agents are seen as having an obligation to conform to the joint commitment in virtue of the commitment’s being the creation of the group. Each person has a commitment-based reason over which he cannot claim sole authorship. Obligations and entitlements between agents thereby inhere in the joint commitment so that

[i]f Anne and Ben are jointly committed to doing something as a body, each owes the other appropriate actions by virtue of their commitment.

. . . I shall say that a joint commitment obligates the parties, one to the other. (Gilbert 1999a, 151)

Gilbert has expressed one way of understanding the formation of the social group as the pooling of individual wills to be directed at a collective goal, under conditions of common knowledge, remarking that there appear to be similarities between Rousseau’s volonté générale and her notion of plural subjecthood.7 Agents are bound together, wills transformed or mapped onto the collective plane through agreement or agreement-like structures.

III. Intentionalism

The emphasis which Gilbert places on individuals’ sharing a conception or understanding of themselves as linked through a common belief, attitude, or goal has been widely endorsed by social scientists and philosophers as essential in the formation of a group. At a minimum it is often claimed that members of a group must see themselves as such. For example, Giddens (1997, 585) defines social groups as

[c]ollections of individuals who interact in systematic ways with one another. Groups may vary from very small associations to large-scale organizations or societies. Whatever their size, it is a defining feature of a group that its members have an awareness of a common identity.

Gilbert’s own work is self-consciously inspired by Georg Simmel, for whom the awareness of being part of a body with others is central to the notion of a collectivity. Identifying the process of forming a group (“sociation”) as ranging “all the way from the momentary getting together for a walk to founding a family . . . from the temporary aggregation of hotel guests to the intimate bond of a medieval guild” (Simmel 1908/1971, 24),8 Simmel goes on to address the question of how a society is possible by urging that it is a unity of a particular kind. Namely, “the consciousness of constituting with the others a unity is actually all there is to this unity” (Simmel 1908/1971, 75).9 Plural subject theory clearly sets out its endorsement of intentionalism:

the view that according to our everyday collectivity concepts, individual human beings must see themselves in a particular way to constitute a collectivity. In other words, intentions (broadly construed) are logically prior to collectivities. (Gilbert 1989, 12)10
In being a member of a group each person conceives of herself as linked in some relevant fashion with the others. It is maintained that individuals must share certain goals, commitments or psychological states in order to constitute a group. Briefly stated, then, individuals can constitute a social group only when each believes or understands himself to be linked in some salient way with the others or when each conceives of himself as a member of the group. Now, the claim here is not just that our (or their) sharing salient beliefs or attitudes is sufficient for us (or them) to constitute a group, but that it is necessary that we (or they) do so. The relevant ways in which individuals can be linked range from entering into clear and open agreements and undertakings with others to the recognition that oneself and others share certain goals, values, or attitudes and that it is in virtue of this commonality that one stands with them in a group.

Intentionalism may resonate with much of our ordinary experience of groups. After all, being a member of a group may frequently involve one’s knowing participation in the practices that amount to the ongoing constitution of the group; and joining, engaging with others, and endorsing and departing from the practices and goals of a group are things we do intentionally. Moreover, when we are engaging with others as parts of a group it is surely plausible to think that one does so because one has a conception of oneself as linked with them, as a member of the group. The intentionalist thesis thus draws together a claim about what is necessary for individuals to form and maintain a group (the possession of certain shared psychological states that are common knowledge) with a commonplace feature of our experience of being in groups (the awareness that oneself and others are together members). In effect plural subject theory identifies a common feature of group membership with a necessary condition for the existence of a group.

Yet, as I shall argue in the remaining part of this section, the burden of the argument continues to rest with Gilbert to show that the intentionalist feature of groups is a necessary one. We should note that plural subject theory is not to be read as claiming that intentionalism is necessary because it is obviously or trivially true. Even if Gilbert thinks this is the case her analysis does not rest upon, for example, the isolation of an a priori reason to suggest that individuals who do not share salient intentional contents are unable to interrelate in a group-constituting fashion. Rather, plural subject theory assumes intentionalism and then appeals to its explanatory power in analyzing paradigmatic social phenomena. This is insufficient to allow Gilbert to make her case convincingly because, first, methodologically Gilbert seems to conflate the individuation of groups as such with the formulation of an account of how groups are formed; and, second, she ignores possible counterexamples to the intentionalist thesis.

At the beginning of this paper I observed that ontological realism about groups is supported by the indispensability of groups from social scientific explanation and description. This is not to say that groups must figure in every explanation, but that groups are ineliminable from the set of our best explanations and descriptions. For present purposes I shall not attempt to defend this view but take it to be something on which realists about groups agree. Given that explanatory role motivates the individuation of an entity,
it is at least an open possibility that a group could be established and maintained by individuals who do not share the kind of beliefs, attitudes, or goals upon which intentionalism insists. The individuals would nonetheless form a body through standing in certain patterns of relations, and that body would be individualizable in virtue of its causal powers and explanatory role.

The methodological confusion in plural subject theory is that an explanation of the process by which a group is formed and maintained is not identical to the criterion (criteria) in virtue of which a group is individuated qua group in explanation or description. Quite in general the individuation of entities depends upon their causal and explanatory role. For example, let us agree that a basic fact about the ecology of the oceans is that they support medium- to large-scale animals (i.e., measurable without the aid of specialist magnifying equipment) which spend their entire lives in the sea, and many of which depend upon other such animals for food. A much finer-grained taxonomy of sea-living animals is possible once we discover more about the variety of kinds that inhabit the oceans—not least by gaining knowledge of the differences in physiological forms. In the first instance, though, we can pick out a class of sea-living animals by reference to the impact they have on their environment and each other. Of course, we must be operating within a theoretical or conceptual framework which affords us the notion of an animal or organism. This is, though, a very high-order or general-level taxonomic category. The question of whether a whale is a fish or a mammal follows that of whether it is an animal.

Likewise, in the social sciences the term group can be thought of as a high-order term. In providing a description and explanation of the social world one of our first tasks is to pick out the explanatorily salient entities. We individuate groups in the explanation of both particular events, such as the storming of the Bastille or the Watts riots in Los Angeles, and in analyzing certain kinds of events, such as wars or revolutions. We may cite the role of groups in studying processes and structures like the maintenance and transmission of cultural norms, the development of capitalism, the institution of slavery within certain cultures, the long-term accumulation of capital within an economy, and the correlation between states of affairs such as poverty rates and levels of criminality. Nor is an interest in groups confined to macro-level phenomena, for we may explain the development, character, and actions of an individual through the groups of which he is a member and with which he has had contact.

The prima facie role of a group in explanation depends upon the properties and powers that are attributed to it. That does not appear to require intentionalism, which is a claim about a necessary feature in the formation and maintenance of a group. Groups as such figure in explanations because a relevant property or power is only appropriately predicable to the group qua entity. If we ask why the barricades fell or why the soldier was afraid, perfectly good answers might cite the way in which rampaging individuals interacted in a certain environment to form a charging mob or the way in which when individuals stand in certain group-forming relations the group has the property of inspiring fear in others. The question of whether the group was formed and maintained intentionally is a further and distinct one. More-
over, it is one that does not seem to need answering in order to individuate the group in question.

To hold that this leaves Gilbert with the explanatory onus may appear to be overstating the case. After all, plural subject theory shows how groups as diverse as couples meeting for coffee, nations, and crowds can be analyzed as plural subjects. The burden is surely with the critic to illustrate how groups can be formed and maintained nonintentionally. The plural subject theorist can agree that the prima facie case for individuating groups does not depend on the intentionalist thesis, but that an analysis of the concept of a group reveals an interesting and profound fact about groups: intentionalism is a necessary property of any group.

Intentionalism is then a claim about what has to be true of individuals for it to be true that they constitute a group. In holding that individuals must share certain psychological states, intentionalism requires that group-making individuals have a certain mental content in the process of a group’s formation and ongoing maintenance. There is, though, scope for a distinction to be made between the psychological facts about individuals and the explanatory concepts used in elucidating social facts. The beliefs individuals have about their own actions and relations may not report the true or full nature of those actions and relations, in that they do not reveal to the individual the fact that he along with relevant others constitutes a group.

Let us imagine four egoists, each of whom has escaped independently from a prison. By chance they arrive at the same river bank where a large oared boat is moored. The boat is the only means of escape from the pursuing guards and dogs. The boat’s size is such that it is evident to each of them that no individual rower would be able to propel it. Now, whether they leap into the boat and just start rowing, or begin rowing after exchanging significant looks or after each has affirmed his commitment to share in the rowing, none of the escapees considers himself to be part of a collectivity or group, even though each recognizes the necessary contribution of the others. They all share the belief “I am escaping” and, in the circumstances, its entailment, “we are escaping.” There is no basis, though, to suppose that they have as a goal their (“our”) escape, but only each’s (“my”) successful flight.

It seems to me that they do constitute a group, even though each may sincerely deny that he is linked or united or constitutes a group with the others. It is not the individuals’ beliefs about themselves and their peers that are essential to their “grouphood,” but the relations in which they stand. It may often be the case that our relations with others are bound up with our shared beliefs, including those beliefs about the beliefs of others with respect to oneself. However, a group is formed through the ways in which individuals interrelate and interact, and group-constituting patterns of relations are not necessarily those in which the kinds of beliefs essential to the intentionalist thesis will feature.

The object of each prisoner’s belief “I am escaping” is the escape in which he is participating. The truth, warrant, or assertibility of the proposition “I am escaping” depends upon the actions and the contribution to the prevailing state of affairs (with respect to the rowing boat) that the escapees collectively produce. The escape in which they are engaged is analyzable in terms of the
action tokens of each individual, and in this case the most obviously relevant actions would be the rowing. However, the rowing of each is affected or constrained by the collective rowing and the production of the overall state of the boat. The actions and attitudes of each is partly shaped by the impact of the states of affairs produced by each-plus-the-others, and each escapee responds to and stands in a relation to the events and actions of them (i.e., including himself) all together. Thus prisoner $A$, who may be even more anxious to escape than the others, may not be able to significantly increase the speed of the boat because of its overall velocity. The actions of each must have regard to the actions of them all as manifested in the state of the boat; thus the rate at which each can row may be constrained by the danger of “catching a crab” at the current speed of the boat, which is the product of their collective action.

The fugitive prisoners come to form a group in the rowing of the boat and, as far as the story goes, the group is maintained by their ongoing rowing of it. The processes and interrelatedness of the rowing unites the individuals, motivated by the purely selfish desire for flight, into a unit, independently of their beliefs and attitudes about the others. The extension of “we” is the group as a collectivity or whole, although it also remains the case that each prisoner is indifferent to the fate of the others and is possessed only of singular goals. Nonetheless, the rowing of the boat is effected by a body, formed through the interrelations of the prisoners, which constrains and influences the rowing of each individual.

Consider also a commodities market consisting of selfishly motivated individuals who do not regard themselves as being members of a group—the market. The performance of the market is the outcome of the complex array of interactions between the traders. The totality of these interactions both constitute the market at any time and are in part made possible or constrained by the state of the market. Furthermore the market has an influence on the wider economy, determining to a greater or lesser degree price behavior and levels of activity elsewhere—but particularly in those sectors utilizing the commodities traded on the market or influenced by the pricing of financial assets traded. It is possible to develop a model of interlocking sets of practices or domains that are mutually dependent, the understanding of which can be attained only within the context of a practice’s relations to the whole pattern of interrelating domains. It may be that the London Metal Exchange and the Chicago Mercantile Exchange are best understood as individual entities constituted by the complex interactions of those who trade in them and individuated within the social world by tracing their impact upon, for example, individuals, companies, and governments. Like the escaping prisoners there is no need for traders to think of themselves as members of a group or as united with fellow traders. Indeed, it may be more likely that they conceive of themselves qua traders in specifically atomistic and adversarial terms. Furthermore, it is the case that some trading methodologies take the market to be an entity in its own right, to be assessed and predicted in virtue of its properties and its (historic) relations to other markets. Far from conceiving themselves to be part of a group, such traders take themselves to be engaging directly with another entity in the world, the market itself.
Now, if there is a nonintentionalist mode of group constitution, then it may still be true that a social group is capable of formation only by creatures with a certain cognitive capacity. However, the forms of interrelations from which a group is established and sustained need not be restricted to those characterized by shared beliefs, attitudes, and so on. Or at any rate plural subject theory must discharge the burden of explaining why the sharing of beliefs and so on is necessary for individuals to constitute a group in the face of the kind of considerations adumbrated above. In the absence of such an explanation intentionalism is not a principle realism has either the need or warrant to endorse. Much more needs to be done in order to demonstrate that the intentionalist thesis does set the barriers of entry to grouphood too high, but intentionalism cannot be merely assumed as an obvious truth about groups. However, even if we were to endorse the principle of intentionalism, plural subject theory faces a problem of circularity arising from what it identifies as a necessary part of either the content or understanding of the joint commitments of group members.

IV. Bodies

Gilbert quite deliberately explains the formation of a plural subject as the coming together of individuals as a body or unit or whole. A group consists in the joint commitment (under conditions of common knowledge) by agents to φ as a body. Thus, according to plural subject theory, Paul and Peter can form a group through their commitment as a unit to dine together after the faculty meeting, as can a much larger number of individuals (say, a people) who share a commitment to value as a body certain ends or practices. The requirement that individuals join together as a body or unit or whole gives rise to a significant problem for plural subject theory. Either it is circular in its tacit dependence on a prior notion of group, or it evades circularity at the cost of abandoning its claim to provide a general account of grouphood. Beginning from an obvious, but plainly circular, reading of body/unit/whole as simply being synonyms for “group,” I consider alternative ways of interpreting this aspect of plural subject theory, concluding that it is unable to offer a well-motivated noncircular and general account of groups.

An obvious way of reading Gilbert is to regard “coming together as a body or unit or whole” or “sharing in an intention or belief together” just to mean that individuals are coming together and committing to do certain things or hold certain beliefs or attitudes as a group. For how else is a realist to regard a social group but as a body or unit or whole? The notion of acting or being a body or unit just is the notion of being a group: we constitute a group in virtue of our joint commitment, because joint commitment is essentially the coming together of agents as a body or unit—that is, as a group.

The formation and maintenance of a plural subject presupposes that its constituents possess a concept of body or unit such that they can intentionally commit to act as such. While a class of group may indeed be formed in just this way, the presupposition means that plural subject theory is a poor candidate as an analysis of the concept of a social group. It is hardly informative to hold that a social group consists of those who have come together
to act as or be a body or unit or whole when this is just to say that they are committed to certain ends, etc., as a group. On the face of it, then, the plural subject account of a group looks to be a circular one. Moreover, it is not clear that the circularity is benign, arising from the inevitable interdefinability of closely linked concepts. To avoid the charge of circularity and to maintain the generality of its scope plural subject theory must be able to distinguish the sense in which it requires individuals to join together as a body, unit, or whole and the sense in which a plural subject is a social group.

Arguably it could be maintained that the idea of jointly committing as a body is innocent of presupposing the notion of a social group. For example, we could say that agents are employing a conception of being a body or of being unified that is quite naturally associated with our own bodies, other organisms, and artifacts. In conceptualizing our commitment to, say, endorse as a unit the belief that $p$, we are committing to be united or linked with others in a way already familiar from our experience of nonsocial unities. Under this view there remains the task for plural subject theory of explaining why this way of thinking about our relations with others arises. In order to provide a general account of social groups an elucidation is owed of why individuals come to think of themselves as being united or forming a body. Perhaps we could think of individuals making a joint commitment to come together as if they were a body or a unit. They would not be presupposing that they are a particular kind of body—a social group—merely that they are prepared to act or be a particular way under a general conception of being united as a whole. This approach would suppose that the concept of a group is to be understood as a restriction on, or application of, a more general conception of a body or unit. If one is to employ this account to explain the nature and formation of groups in general, then one is already committed to the view that groups are not among the things in the world through or in virtue of which we develop a concept of an object or unit.

I shall not here attempt to furnish an argument that groups are material objects alongside artifacts and organisms. However, if groups are objects in the world, then this fact would certainly have a prima facie claim to explain why they figure in certain explanations and why we conceive of membership in terms of being part of a body, unit, or whole. One of the ways in which we establish groups would thus be through the self-conscious application of the concept of a group, a concept developed through our encounters with and reflection upon the objects in our world and relations with them. Under this view groups would be prior to our conceptualization of them and the application of our understanding of them in our interrelations. The point of immediate concern is that the application of a general notion of a body preserves plural subject theory as an account of grouphood only by presupposing that groups are not among the bodies or wholes through which we develop the very conception of a body or whole.

An interpretation of plural subject theory as employing a general concept of a unit, whole, or body leaves the theory assuming as a fact about groups a claim that an account of their ontological status ought to be investigating. Plural subject theory would need to exclude groups from the class of objects, our experience of which explains the development of a general concept of a
unit. If it did not do this, then plural subject theory would not be a general account of grouphood as it would already have (tacitly) acknowledged the existence of groups. Yet there is no clear principled basis for presupposing that groups ought to be excluded from that class of objects. The exclusion (and indeed inclusion) of groups from this class would be an interesting fact about groups and a substantive claim for a realist to make. To maintain the generality of the account, plural subject theory seems forced to assume rather than explain why groups are not among the “basic” objects of the world.

Now, it may held be that a basic conception of a unit or body is innate to us, and it is in virtue of this conceptual capacity that we are able to individuate objects in experience. Plural subject theory could be read in terms of individuals’ deploying this innate concept in certain of their social interactions. However, even if there is such a built-in conceptual capacity, the question remains of whether groups as such (as objects) could be formed without that concept’s being employed in the interrelations of individuals. Moreover, if we are endowed with an innate concept of unit through which we pick out objects in the world, it could remain the case that groups would be individualizable prior to their conceptual taxonomization if a group can be formed nonintentionally. An appeal to an innate concept of a body might remove the immediate threat of circularity (at the cost of accepting a certain view on the conceptual content of experience), but it does nothing to demonstrate the necessity of individuals’ conceiving of themselves as a body in order to constitute a group.

An alternative understanding of Gilbert’s position is that we should not take a description of agents jointly committing as a body to entail that they have a concept of a body as part of the content of their commitment (or their mental content in committing). According to this interpretation we should see agents as coming together in agreement-like relations, and in doing so they are coming together as a body. This is a judgment that can be made, so to speak, externally of the group in virtue of the way in which the individuals are bound together through the joint commitment. The notion of a body or unit would not figure in the content of their beliefs or intentions. While this would preserve plural subject theory from presupposing the notion of a group, there is an instability in the interpretation of plural subjecthood as being a unity through the agreement-like relations of its members. The instability emerges from the need of plural subject theory to analyze agreements in terms of the relations constitutive of a plural subject, which ultimately presuppose the concept of a body. Let me explain.

Agreements bind their parties. To enter into an agreement is to engage in a practice with a constitutively normative element. Gilbert explains that in jointly committing to something individuals acquire obligations with respect to each other. These “obligations of joint commitment” are internal to or constitutive of jointly committing. Gilbert argues that in being bound together by our joint commitment, “it is appropriate to speak of joint commitments producing not just reasons for action but obligations. The word ‘obligation’ comes, after all, from the Latin ligare, to bind” (Gilbert 1993, 295). The joint commitment of plural subject formation therefore provides a way of understanding our central notions of agreement and of obligation. As Gilbert, fol-
lowing Brandt (1965), notes, there is a range of senses in which we deploy notions of agreement, obligation, and duty. Nonetheless, Gilbert has proposed a “joint commitment account of everyday agreements” (Gilbert 1999b, 243), maintaining that “if we are to understand agreements and promises, and the hold they have upon us, we must understand the nature and structure of joint commitment” (Gilbert 1996, 11).

The bindingness of the obligations of joint commitment is not then to be explained in terms of the general features of agreement, for these features are to be explained by a consideration of joint commitment. Instead we must conceive of the persons forming a plural subject as being linked in virtue of their joint commitment in a way that entails obligations owed by each to all and the right of each that no other can unilaterally rescind the joint commitment. As coauthors of a joint commitment we are permitted only to rescind it together.

Under this interpretation a body is formed through individuals’ being bound together by obligations inherent in their joint commitment to hold some belief, intention, or attitude. However, the fact that obligations inhere in the joint commitments of plural subject formation does not furnish plural subject theory with an account of agreement-like relations which can make the formation of a plural subject independent of a prior notion of body. The normative cement of an agreement (and presumably of agreement-like relations) is explained as a result of the binding together and coauthorship of entering into a joint commitment. Individuals are normatively bound together just in the process of jointly committing as a body. The very understanding of agreement and obligation depends on this account upon Gilbert’s conception of a plural subject. A group cannot then be analyzed as individuals standing in agreement-like relations without presupposing that they have a prior conception of a body or whole. The problem of a circular dependence on a notion of a body to explain the constitution of a plural subject thus reappears. Obligation may well be a plural subject phenomenon. However, if it is, an elucidation of obligation ultimately rests on a prior conception of a group rather than being part of the explanation of the nature of grouphood.

The presupposition of a notion of a body in the understanding of joint commitment, and the reliance of Gilbert’s explanation of agreements on her conception of joint commitment, undermine Gilbert’s account as a general or global analysis of the ontological status of social groups. Unable to attain the degree of generality required to answer the question of what kind of thing a social group is, Gilbert’s intentionalist account is perhaps then to be better interpreted as marking out a particular kind of group in terms of the characteristic features of and nature of the relations between its members.

V. The Ontological Commitment of Plural Subject Theory

Whatever the explanatory pressure to include groups within our ontology, it is reasonable to expect the realist to locate groups taxonomically, to say what kind of thing they are. If the price is deemed too high, then she does not have to pay it. However, the realist cannot also retain the benefits of realism while eschewing the task of making clear their ontological cost (if not
actually repudiating the ontology) without indulging in what amounts to a form of “philosophical double talk.”

Gilbert denies that her formulation of a plural subject presupposes a commitment to a “body” which carries any ontological weight:

In some places I have written that a joint commitment is the commitment of ‘two or more individuals considered as a unit or whole’. I do not mean to introduce the idea of a new kind of entity, a ‘unit’ or ‘whole’. I could as well have written ‘a joint commitment is the commitment of two or more individuals considered together’ which would not carry any such suggestion. (1997, 18)

Well, it seems to me that in the context of her argumentation individuals considered together makes no advance on individuals being considered as a unit, whole or body. As is clear from the bindingness of a joint commitment, being considered together is not to be associated with others in just any fashion. It is to be linked or united with others in a very particular way. Individuals are party to a commitment to think or act not only in a way that is coincident, but in a way in which their actions and attitudes mesh as inseparable elements of a single subject. To be considered together as parties to a joint commitment is, by Gilbert’s own lights, to be united or linked. Gilbert’s alternative formulation is just another way of saying that they are to be conceived as a unit.

The suggestion that we consider individuals together may be motivated by the challenge that holism must in the end be committed to the introduction of new (“weird”) kinds of entities and so is ontologically extravagant. I doubt that “unit” and “whole” distinguish any unique kind of entity. They are nouns which can stand in the predicate place in descriptions of (inter alia) material objects. Indeed to have a certain unity and wholeness is a hallmark of such things. The question of present interest is whether Gilbert is committed to regarding plural subjects as material entities. I believe that plural subject theory is committed in this way.

In considering what it means to accept or require something as a body Gilbert (1999b, 84–85) maintains that

[t]he phrase to “accept as a body” is just one of the possible phrases with which the relevant idea might best be indicated. One might also write “accept as a unit,” for instance, or “accept as a single person.” The relevant joint commitment is a commitment, if you like, to constitute as far as is possible a single entity with a certain psychological property (in this case accepting or requiring something).

It is important to note that these are ways of talking about plural subjects, ways of describing plural subjects without ontological extravagance. It is clear that Gilbert does not think that plural subjects are persons, nor does she simply wish to leave it that plural subjects are bodies or units. Instead, Gilbert sees plural subjects as a “special type of entity... But as far as I can see they are not illusory or based on illusion” (Gilbert 1989, 434). For the most part
Gilbert does not discuss the ontological status of the unity of agents as conceived in terms of a plural subject. In large measure this may be because much of her work has focused on the light the notion of plural subject casts on topics such as political obligation, social convention, and collective beliefs and emotions. Toward the end of *On Social Facts* Gilbert does address the question of the reality of social groups (Gilbert 1989, 432–34). Taking plural subject theory to be in agreement with Simmel’s view that societies are real unities and Durkheim’s claim that societies are sui generis syntheses of human beings (Gilbert 1989, 431), she asks how a conception of an individual as a complex system differs from that of a plural subject:

We might say that for there to be a singular agent is for there to be a system which contains as a crucial element a conception of the system. This conception of the system powers the system in the sense that leads it to acts of will and physical motions. Now, how is this complex system, the singular agent, different in kind from the plural subject? Someone might say that it alone is ‘self-contained’. It is in the trivial way of having all its essential components packaged up in a single human body. But how can that fact contribute to a difference in the reality of one thing as opposed to another. Surely a plural subject, as characterised in this book, is the same kind of system as a singular agent. Its physical components are two or more human bodies. The movements of the system occur in response to the conception of the system which is contained contemporaneously in its physical parts, and which is based on the perception of what is taking place in each. . . . The existence of the complex plural subject system does not entail the existence as lower order component of two singular agent systems. In any case, it is hard to find a good reason for denying the reality of either type of system. (Gilbert 1989, 433)

Naturally Gilbert’s observations are riddled with intentionalism. A metric of similarity between a person and a plural subject is that both act under a conception or understanding of what it is to be a certain kind of agent. If we are to read Gilbert as regarding agents as real in the sense of being material objects (being composed of physical parts), then to the extent that groups are the same kind of system constituted from physical parts (“two or more human bodies”) they too are real qua material entities.

Plural subject theory does not provide an explanation of the nature of groups—it fails as an analysis of the concept of a social group—but it does not presuppose the truth of holism. Instead it seeks to offer a comprehensive theory of our core social concepts, and this results in Gilbert’s Simmelian-inspired holism. In this respect, and notwithstanding its problems, Gilbert’s account offers support for a more general or global account of holism that recognizes the material reality of groups. The task of providing a general account of the material reality of groups is one that I must leave for another day.

I wish to thank Alan Thomas, Tom Pink, and Peter Goldie for comments and criticisms on my views of plural subject theory and an anonymous referee for the Journal
of Social Philosophy for helpful suggestions. I am also indebted to Margaret Gilbert for the opportunity I had to discuss various aspects of her work with her while she was visiting King’s College in 1996 and 1997.

Notes

1 *On Social Facts* (1989) is the major statement of her views, which have been developed in a series of papers (collected with introductions in her 1996 and 2000). Gilbert’s work amounts to a consistent defense and elucidation of the position set out at length in *On Social Facts*, and it is the core concept of a plural subject that is the object of critical scrutiny in the present paper.

2 Ontological holism in the social sciences has often been criticized. It appears too readily to collapse into a claim that there are mysterious sui generis social substances. Moreover, it has sometimes been intended as or taken to be the claim that collectivities are the only real entities in the social world or are at any rate prior to individuals. Realism, though, need not be committed to such “spooky” metaphysics, nor must it prioritize groups over individuals. I believe that groups are to be best understood as compositional material particulars, which feature in the social world alongside individual organisms and artifacts. Groups are objects constituted by individuals standing in relations through time. They are objects that we individuate in virtue of their causal impact and their explanatory role. None of this will convince either holists who believe groups are nonmaterial but locatable entities (cf. Ruben 1985) or individualists who believe either that there are no groups or that individuals are in some (nontrivially constitutive) sense prior to groups. In this paper I focus on the structure of one realist approach to groups, rather than attempting to defend realism.

3 Now, it is worth noting that plural subject theory is broad and ambitious in its scope. It is not seeking to answer questions that arise for particular sociological schools or perspectives, but looking to provide the conceptual framework in which our experience of the social world can best be understood. It is probably true that plural subject theory will be more appealing to some sociological perspectives than to others. For example, given Gilbert’s emphasis on the role of shared intentional contents, an approach such as symbolic interactionism may see much relevance in plural subject theory. On the other hand, a Marxist sociology may be relatively uninterested in a theoretical framework that stresses how groups are formed rather than how they interact in light of the distinct interests assigned to them.

4 Gilbert has devoted considerable attention to elucidating, criticizing, and developing the notion of common knowledge introduced by David Lewis (1969).

5 Gilbert employs the star to indicate the technical use of the terms.

6 See Gilbert 1993, especially 301–3. In the case of coerced agreements there may often be a moral duty not to honor their terms.

7 “At a late stage in writing this book I realised that I had come close to Rousseau’s conception of what makes a collection of human beings into a genuine people as opposed to a mere aggregate” (1989, 438). “I do not claim, nor need to claim, that I am certain what Rousseau had in mind. However, it and several other passages in the book [*The Social Contract*] clearly bear some resemblance to what I want to say about plural subjects” (1990, 190).

8 Also cited in Gilbert 1990, 178.

9 See Gilbert 1989, chapter 4, for an extended discussion of the Simmelian influence on plural subject theory.

10 The way in which individuals must see themselves is as being committed together to a belief, goal, intention, and so on and for such a commitment to be common knowledge. Gilbert’s “pro-intentionalist stance finds its positive basis (in the argument) that people must perceive themselves as members of a plural subject” (1989, 13).

11 Some realists may object to this assumption. The existence of groups need not be linked to their explanatory role, at least if one agrees with Ruben (1985), who claims that one could find “that there were social entities, which played no role whatever, or no irre-
ducible role, in the explanation of events. This would still be of great philosophical interest, for it would tell us something about the nature and structure of reality, in spite of having no interest at all from the point of view of the methodology of the social sciences” (I). He is here responding to Watkins’s (1957) note that presenting the issue of holism as a question about the existence of irreducibly social facts “seems to empty it of most of its interest. If a new kind of beast is discovered what we want to know is not so much whether it falls outside existing zoological categories, but how it behaves. People who insist on the existence of social facts, but who do not say whether they are governed by sociological laws, are like people who claim to have discovered an unclassified animal but who do not tell us whether it is tame or dangerous, whether it can be domesticated or is unmanageable. If an answer to the question of social facts could throw light on the serious and interesting question of sociological laws, then the question of social facts would also be serious and interesting. But this is not so” (169, n. 2).

Although Ruben’s point is noted, a prima facie reason for thinking anything real is that it feature in our best forms of explanation within a certain domain of inquiry. If some thing has no explanatory role at all, then one may wonder why it would be individuated. It is also worth noting that holism (typically considered in opposition to methodological individualism) has been defined as the “view that social phenomena are to be explained by appealing primarily to the properties of social wholes, since the latter are the causal factors that shape the characteristics of individual members of society” (James 1984, 79). Formally, this notion of holism does not entail the existence of groups. One can imagine a world in which there are, for example, irreducibly social systems of laws, economic trends, properties, and cultural norms but which is without social groups. Holism does invariably take groups as paradigm social wholes, but holism as an explanatory thesis is committed more generally to the notion of the irreducibility of social facts, properties, and states of affairs.

12 This is not to say that the structure of a group does not explain (at least in part) why it possesses certain properties by which it is picked out, but it is the possession of those properties which is immediately relevant to the group’s individuation.

13 The story could be equally told using four walkers who independently arrive at the river, each of whom has a singular desire to cross it. The point is that, unlike, say, the passengers on a plane which is hijacked, the prisoners or the walkers have no shared history as elements in an aggregate prior to a change in circumstances which may encourage a group-forming pattern of relations.

14 The escapees’ actions are social in Weber’s (1922/1978) sense, according to whom 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” (88).

15 If captured and questioned as to what he thought he was doing, each escapee could answer “we were escaping,” taking the extension to be an aggregate of individuals. An interrogator may take “we” to refer to either an aggregate of individuals considered severally or to a body or group of individuals considered jointly or united. The belief expressed depends significantly on the sense in which “we” is understood. Even if each prisoner has the belief “we were escaping,” the object of the belief varies depending on the referent of “we” (cf. Perry’s [1979] discussion of the “essential indexical”).

16 It may be objected that in fact traders frequently must be members of a market in order to gain access to it and that therefore no trader in, say, a Chicago futures pit is likely to fail to think of him- or herself as a member. However, the formal and institutional requirements regulating certain markets should not be confused with the ontological status of the market itself. The corporate and institutional framework of a market is distinct from the group, which may be constituted by the often adversarial and selfishly motivated actions of the individual traders.

17 One approach to trading commodities and financial instruments is to make purchase and selling decisions on the basis of one’s interpretation of charts recording the performance of the market and perhaps its relationship with certain others. The charts record the “life” of the market, from which some traders claim to be able to extrapolate predictively valuable generalizations. The point is that the strategy is premised on taking the
market to be an entity in its own right, and decision making screens out any source of
information other than facts about the market’s past performance.

A plural subject is maintained by individuals who continue to share certain attitudes,
etc., as a body or whole. The plural subject–forming attitudes or goals or intentions
may change over time.

See Quine 1960. Of course, by preserving all the language of groups without providing
an adequate account of an individualist ontology, individualists can indulge in such
double-talk, too. The point is also made by Ruben (1985) that we ought to take seri-
ously the apparent ontological commitments of our ways of speaking (10).

I shall not consider here whether a plural subject is apt to be regarded as possessing psy-
chological states.

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