Who are we?
Self-identity, social cognition, and collective intentionality

WE

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60 months

What does it mean to feel, think, and act as part of a we? During the last few decades, the topic of collective intentionality or we-intentionality has been much debated. However, the following foundational issues continue to remain underexplored and unresolved:

• How is the we related to the self?

• What does the fact that one can adopt a we-perspective tell us about the fluid character of selfhood?

• What type of social cognition is required in order to identify with and share a perspective with others?

• What kinds of interpersonal relations are at play in different we- formations?

• What is the relation between a transient we and a persisting we, and between a we that connects particular individuals who are known to each other, and a we that involves identification with a more anonymous and impersonal group?

The working hypothesis of WE is that a systematic account of the we must be embedded in a more comprehensive investigation of selfhood and social cognition. This hypothesis draws inspiration from and will engage with seminal contributions by figures in classical phenomenology.

The project will combine systematic theorizing with historical scholarship, and will challenge existing disciplinary boundaries by interweaving work on self-identity, social cognition, and collective intentionality. It will break new theoretical ground by developing a systematically convincing, phenomenologically valid, and empirically relevant account of the complex interrelation between the we, the you, and the I. In doing so, it will offer a clarification of foundational issues in the humanities and social sciences, and facilitate a much- needed cross fertilization between philosophy and theoretical considerations in the social sciences.

Given the recent upsurge of ethno-nationalism and identity thinking, a renewed critical reflection on the ontological and epistemological status of the we is of urgent societal significance.
Section a: Extended Synopsis

1. State-of-the-art and the limits of conventional approaches

According to a currently influential view, the capacity to engage in collective intentionality, to jointly be directed at objects and goals, is a key aspect of human sociality. Various non-human animals can engage in forms of cooperative behaviour, but humans are able to share intentions and cooperate in very different ways than, say, non-human primates (Tomasello & Carpenter 2005, Tomasello 2014). We can enjoy a sunset, solve a task, and make plans for the future together, just as we can share a collective identity, responsibilities, traditions and customs. But who or what is this we, to whom intentions, beliefs, emotions, and actions are attributed, and how does it come about?

During the past few decades, these questions have been intensively explored in various disciplines including social, cognitive and developmental psychology, economics, sociology, political theory, anthropology, ethology, and the social neurosciences (cf. Jankovic & Ludwig 2018). Significant parts of the empirical work in the area have relied on theoretical investigations by a handful of philosophers, including Searle (1990, 1995), Bratman (1999, 2014), Gilbert (1989, 2014), and Tuomela (2007, 2013), whose analyses have often gravitated around the question of whether and how collective intentions differ from an aggregation of individual intentions. As important as this question might be, this focus has left certain crucial issues underexplored and unresolved in the philosophical debate:

- What is the relation between collective identity and self-identity? How is the we related to the I?
- How is collective intentionality and the we-perspective related to social cognition and interpersonal understanding?
- What is the relation between different kinds of we, and which type of self-experience and interpersonal understanding do they each require?

These are significant questions; questions that any discussion of collective intentionality that hopes to clarify the nature of the we, and thereby also the relation between individual and community, must engage with. To explain more fully, can we, in the first place, really understand what it means to feel, think, and act as (part of) a we, if we do not understand what it means to be a self? Correspondingly, does the fact that an individual can identify with a group and adopt a we-perspective not tell us something important about the fluid character of selfhood and self-identity? Secondly, can we understand what it means to share a perspective with others if we do not have a proper account of how we come to understand and relate to others in the first place? Are all forms of interpersonal understanding equal to the task, or are particular types of social cognition (e.g., bodily resonance, second-person engagement, or detached mindreading) especially conducive for the emergence of a we-perspective? Finally, one should recognize that there is more than one type of we. What is the relation between a transient we and a persisting we, and between a we that connects particular individuals who are known to each other, and a we that involves identification with a more anonymous and impersonal group? What is the difference between pairs, crowds, associations and communities? What kind of we, if any, do they instantiate, which kind is most fundamental, and which kind of self-experience and interpersonal understanding do they each require and involve?

Our understanding of the nature of the mind, of selfhood, and of interpersonal understanding affects how we think of the we. Our conception of the latter will differ dramatically depending on whether we think there is no self, that the self is bodily and experientially grounded and pre-reflectively present, or socially constructed and extended. It will differ depending on whether we think that the mind is private and hidden or in some way intersubjectively shareable, just as it will differ depending on whether we think that intersubjectivity is established via detached mindreading, through bodily and affective interaction, or rather crucially involves normative relations and shared values. The influence also goes the other way, however. If it is acknowledged that we-perspectives, we-intentions, and we-experiences are genuine explananda, this will put pressure on various traditional assumptions about the nature of selfhood and social cognition.

Questions like these are not merely of theoretical interest. Depending on how one conceives of the we, and depending on one’s account of collective intentionality, different implications follow for how to approach crucial legal, political, and social questions related to group-rights, intercultural integration, or the status of national identity. Given the upsurge of ethno-nationalism and identity thinking in the contemporary socio-political landscape, renewed critical reflections on the status of group-identities are a matter of urgency.

If one looks to the social sciences, one will obviously find empirical and theoretical work analysing and discussing a rich diversity of social phenomena and cultural formations. There is an ongoing debate between liberals and communitarians concerning the relation between self and society, just as there are discussions between methodological individualist and methodological holists concerning the proper level of analysis and explanation. It is rare, however, to find principled reflections on the fundamental structures of the mind, (bodily) self-experience, and (inter)subjectivity that address the question of how the first-person singular, the second-person singular, and the first-person plural perspective are ontologically and epistemically
The central objective of WE is to move beyond this impasse. Proceeding from the working hypothesis that a satisfactory account of the we must overcome and bridge the prevalent compartmentalization of research on selfhood, social cognition, and collective intentionality, WE will develop a novel integrative account of the complex interrelation between the we, the you, and the I, thereby contributing to a clarification of foundational issues in the humanities and social sciences. This task will be pursued in a twofold manner: historically and systematically.

**2. Methodology**

WE is a theoretical rather than empirical project. It will consider and consult empirical findings from a variety of disciplines including ethnography and social neuroscience, but will otherwise draw on methods developed in different philosophical traditions and disciplines: the conceptual analysis and systematic philosophical argumentation that one finds in the analytic tradition, the descriptive focus (with careful attention to the experiential, embodied, and affective dimensions) that one finds in the phenomenological tradition, and the meticulous and historically sensitive textual analysis and interpretation found in the study of the history of philosophy. The contemporary debate on collective intentionality in analytic philosophy has lasted a few decades, but questions concerning the nature of we, and the relation between self, intersubjectivity, and community are obviously far older. In the introduction to his book *The Construction of Social Reality* (1995), a book that has had a decisive impact and been cited more than 10,000 times, Searle remarks that the great classical ‘philosopher-sociologists’ from the early twentieth century lacked the adequate tools, including a sufficiently developed theory of intentionality, to tackle the question regarding collective intentionality. In reaching this verdict, Searle refers to the work of Weber, Simmel and Durkheim. Not only have subsequent critics questioned Searle’s assessment of these earlier thinkers (cf. Gross 2006, Lukes 2007), but Searle also fails to consider Schutz, whose book *Der sinnhafte Aufbau der sozialen Welt* (1932) has more affinities with Searle’s project than merely its title. What we find in Schutz, and in the writings of other phenomenologists such as Reinach (1913), Scheler (1913, 1916), Stein (1917, 1922), Litt (1919), Husserl (1952, 1973), Walther (1923), Heidegger (1927, 1928/29, 1934), Schmalenbach (1922), Löwith (1928), Frank (1929), von Hildebrand (1930), Gurwitsch (1932), Stavenhagen (1933), Sartre (1943, 1960), Merleau-Ponty (1945), Arendt (1958), Levinas (1961, 1974), Spiegelberg (1973), and Waldenfels (1971, 1997, 1998) are not only insightful analyses of intentionality, experience, selfhood, empathy and interpersonal understanding, but also sophisticated investigations of collective intentionality, affective sharing, social participation, communal experience, and group-identity. Indeed, while starting out with an interest in the individual mind, phenomenologists began exploring dyadic forms of interpersonal relations shortly before the start of World War I, and were deeply engaged in extensive analyses of communal forms of intentionality during the interwar period – at a time when nationalism was on the rise.

Classical phenomenological writings on group formations and communal experiences have been the subject of renewed interest within the last few years in philosophy and beyond, with a steadily increasing number of publications, special issues and edited volumes (cf. Schmid 2009, Duranti 2010, Chelstrom 2013, Ram & Houston 2015, Szanto & Moran 2016, Salice & Schmid 2016). However, the process of rediscovery has only just started; the focus has so far mainly been on some of the more well-known figures (Scheler, Stein, Husserl, Heidegger); and, most importantly, recent discussions have not approached the texts with the same systematic questions in mind as the current project.

The claim is not that a satisfying theory can simply be found in or pieced together by going through these theoretical resources, but rather that a systematic investigation of the we can profit from engaging with the ideas, distinctions and analyses contained in these texts. One reason for this is that a convincing theory of we-intentionality must do justice to the phenomenology of social experience. After all, group-membership is experientially salient: it affects the mind, and transforms one’s sense of self, one’s relation to others, and the way one experiences the world. Group-identification is “phenomenologically real” in the sense that it involves a feeling of belonging (Hogg & Abrams 1990: 7). Another reason is that the classical phenomenological authors, offer an approach to the we that engages with some of the very key issues that are absent from much current philosophical debate. In particular, they explore the intertwining and dependency relations that obtain between self(-consciousness), interpersonal understanding, and communal experiences.

Through a targeted exploration of ideas found in classical phenomenology, and by engaging with current debates on selfhood, social cognition, and collective intentionality, WE will develop a novel account of the complex interrelation between we, you, and I that is theoretically convincing, phenomenologically valid, and empirically relevant.
It may seem surprising to seek inspiration in historical sources for answers to currently contested and debated topics. But this is not an untested and untried strategy. Consider, for instance, how a renewed study of classical texts by Brentano, Husserl, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty (cf. Zahavi 2005, Gallagher 2005, Kriegel 2009, Gallagher & Zahavi 2012, Zahavi 2014) has changed the philosophical discussion of self-consciousness and social cognition and informed debates in anthropology, psychology, psychiatry, and neuroscience (e.g., Parnas et al. 2005, Reddy 2008, Ratcliffe 2014, Duranti 2015, Durt et al. 2017). A central hypothesis of the present project is that a systematically informed engagement with phenomenological work on the we might have a similar type of impact on the social sciences. Although WE is primarily a philosophical project, the topics under investigation are of obvious relevance to a wide range of other disciplines including developmental psychology, social neuroscience, anthropology, political theory, sociology and social psychology. It will not be feasible to engage in equal measures with all these different theoretical and empirical perspectives, but in order to overcome the regrettable compartmentalization of research and promote further conversations between philosophy and the social sciences, WE will continuously relate its own findings to central theoretical considerations found in anthropology, political science, sociology, and social psychology (including work by Durkheim (1893, 1895), Simmel (1908), Mead (1934), Goffman (1959), Garfinkel (1967), Bourdieu (1980), Turner (1987), Giddens (1991), Cohen (1994), Jenkins 1996, Brubaker (2004), and Yack (2012)).

3. Objectives

WE will be divided into three interconnected parts that in turn investigate A) the relation between we and I, B) the relation between we and you, and C) varieties of the we.

Part A) We and I.
The we is not something that can be observed and adequately described from the outside. The we is a plural first-person perspective. It is experienced from within, it is something that involves, rather than bypasses, the self-identity and first-person perspective of the involved parties. But does a we-perspective have a stable first-person singular perspective as its necessary precondition, or is it independent of, and perhaps even prior to, individual subjectivity? Does the we presuppose a plurality of pre-existing selves or does individual subjectivity necessarily require a communal normative grounding (cf. Taylor 1989, Kern & Moll 2017, Brinck et al. 2017)? Not surprisingly, the answers to these questions depend on how one conceives of selfhood and the first-person perspective in the first place. According to some versions of social constructivism, for instance, there is nothing primitive about selfhood and first-person experience. Rather, both are understood as cultural constructs acquired through participation in a (linguistic) community. Is such a view plausible? Can individual selfhood be reduced to group-membership? Furthermore, what features must the self have if it is not only to mark our difference to others, but also allow us to share a perspective with them? How does one come to experience oneself as ‘one of us’, and how precisely does the process of group-identification alter the first-person perspective singular? To address these questions, Part A will first engage in a critical discussion of relevant work by phenomenologists, who offer extensive analyses of the relation between individual self-consciousness, shared experiences, and group-membership (e.g., Scheler, Schmalenbach, Schutz and Sartre). It will then expand on and further develop more recent work on selfhood that target its experiential foundation as well as its normative character (e.g., Taylor 1989, Rovane 1998, Korsgaard 2009, Strawson 2009, Zahavi 2014). Finally, it will engage with recent influential theoretical discussions in social psychology, sociology and political theory concerning the link between identity and identification (e.g., Turner et al. 1987, Jenkins 1996, Brubaker 2004, Yack 2012, and Appiah 2018).

Key questions to be addressed:
- To what extent does the first-person plural perspective presuppose, precede, preserve, or abolish the first-person singular perspective?
- What conceptions of self are compatible with a robust we-identity?
- How should one conceive of the relation between identity and identification?

Part B) We and you.
The second part will focus on an issue that, again, has received surprisingly little attention in recent philosophical discussions of collective intentionality: What kind of understanding of and relation to others is relevant for the emergence of a we-perspective? How cognitively sophisticated and normatively entrenched does it have to be? Many of the standard philosophical accounts have favoured quite demanding accounts, involving perspective-taking, metarepresentations and advanced forms of mindreading. Part B, by contrast, will initially consider the importance of the affective dimension, and the role of shared affects and emotions. What does it in the first place mean to share an emotion? Does emotional sharing involve a kind of fusion or blurring of the distinction between self and other, some sense of merged personal identities, or does it rather presuppose a preservation of plurality? If unity and integration as well as plurality and differentiation are
required, what is then the right balance? Does affective sharing challenge ontological individualism and what is the relation between affective sharing and other forms of we-intentionality such as joint actions? A popular idea in recent philosophy, developmental psychology, and social neuroscience concerns the significance of the second-person perspective, i.e., the perspective in which one relates to another as a you—as somebody who is also attending to and addressing oneself (cf. Darwall 2006, Reddy 2008, Carpenter & Liebal 2011, Schilbach et al. 2013, Eilan 2014). Although recent work on the second-person perspective has focused on its importance for social cognition and ethics, there haven’t been any attempts to highlight its importance for collective intentionality. The situation is different in classical phenomenology, where figures such as Litt, Husserl, Löwith, von Hildebrand, and Schutz have all defended the idea that a you-relation is crucial for a we-formation. Part B will critically assess the systematic relevance of such a proposal and develop it further in light of recent theoretical work, and new empirical evidence. It will also compare this focus on recognition and reciprocity with ideas found in the work of Simmel (1908), Buber (1923), Honneth (1992, 2010), Gutman (2003), and Darwall (2006) and consider the dissenting position of Heidegger, who maintains that “the With-one-another [Miteinander] cannot be explained through the I-Thou relation” (2001: 145, cf. Arendt 1994, Schmid 2005).

**Key questions to be addressed:**
- What is the role of affective sharing in collective intentionality and we-identity?
- What kind of self-other differentiation is preserved in the we-perspective?
- To what extent does the adoption of a we-perspective require second-personal engagement and mutual recognition?

**Part C) Varieties of we**
Social reality is complex and multifaceted. As Schutz wrote in 1932: “Far from being homogeneous, the social world is structured in a complex way, and the other subject is given to the social agent (and each of them to an external observer) in different degrees of anonymity, experiential immediacy, and fulfilment”. Since then many theorists (most recently Tomasello (2014)) have pointed to a basic distinction between a second-person dyadic form of we-intentionality, which is a short-lived relation between ad hoc pairs of individuals in the here and now, and more anonymous forms of being-together, where others are those from whom “one mostly does not distinguish oneself” (Heidegger 1927). But what is the relation between an ephemeral form of we that is bound to the here and now of concrete face-to-face interaction and a more enduring, but at the same time also more normatively mediated and impersonal form of collective identity? Does the latter depend on the former, or does it have its own originality and irreducibility? A central task of Part C will be to distinguish we-groups from other group-formations. What is the difference between dyads, crowds, teams, associations, and communities? What kind of we, if any, do they instantiate, and what kind of self-experience and interpersonal understanding do they each require and involve? What is, for instance, the role of typification and self-stereotyping in different we-formations (Schutz 1932, Gurwitsch 1932, Hogg & Abrams 1990, Brewer et al. 1996, Taipale 2016, Appiah 2018)? How is the coherence, unity, and persistency of different forms of we constituted? What is the role of shared memories and practices, symbols and stories? Do narratives, which some have argued are important for the constitution of the long-term diachronic identity of the individual self, play a similar role in the constitution of the intergenerational we? Is the internal cohesion of a we-identity always contingent on an external opposition, on the they and the outgroup, or does this only hold true for some we-formations (cf. Sartre’s distinction between we-subjects and us-objects (1943))? 

**Key questions to be addressed:**
- How are we-identities solidified beyond the here and now?
- How are different we-formations linked to different types of self-experience and different modes of interpersonal understanding?
- What is the role of the they in the constitution of the we?

The following table provides an overview of the various parts of the project and their key foci:

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<th>Parts</th>
<th>A. The we and the I</th>
<th>B. The we and the you</th>
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<tr>
<td>Tasks</td>
<td>The I-perspective and the we-perspective</td>
<td>Affective sharing and the we</td>
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<td>Task 1</td>
<td>We-identity and fluid selfhood</td>
<td>The we: unity vs. plurality</td>
<td>Dyads, crowds, associations, and communities</td>
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<td>Task 2</td>
<td>Identity and identification</td>
<td>Second-personal engagement and the we</td>
<td>The we and the they</td>
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The three parts are interrelated and designed so as to promote mutual enlightenment. Jointly they will offer a novel account of the structure, character and foundation of the we-perspective and provide answers to the following three questions:

1. How is the first-person singular perspective related to the first-person plural or we-perspective?
2. What role does the second-person singular perspective play in the emergence of a we-perspective?
3. What are the varieties of the we-perspective and how are they interrelated?

4. Ground-breaking approach and deliverables

Contemporary philosophy has seen exciting work on 1) self and phenomenal consciousness, 2) social cognition, second-person engagement, and recognition, and 3) collective intentionality. So far, however, the three domains have not been brought and thought together in an integrative fashion. But this is precisely what is required if true progress is to be made in understanding the nature and status of the we. WE is uniquely positioned to undertake this kind of comprehensive approach. In doing so, it will not only contribute significantly to contemporary philosophical theorizing on collective intentionality and facilitate a much-needed cross-fertilization between philosophy and theoretical considerations in the social sciences. It will also, and most importantly, offer a new and original account of the relation between the we, the you, and the I.

To test its findings and gain critical feedback and comments, WE will organize two types of recurrent annual workshops, that both aim to facilitate constructive boundary crossing exchanges. The first type will bring together prominent philosophers working on self, social cognition and collective intentionality from both the phenomenological and the analytic tradition. The second type aims to determine how insights developed within WE can speak to other disciplinary perspectives on the we, and will include experts from the social sciences: in particular, social psychology, political science, sociology, anthropology and developmental psychology. Speakers for both workshops will partially be drawn from WE international expert panel, which will be composed of scholars from a variety of disciplines, who have all done cutting-edge research of high relevance for the project, and who will also provide feedback on an individual basis. The members of the panel are Dominic Abrams (Kent), Michael Bratman (Stanford), Malinda Carpenter (St. Andrews), Naomi Eilan (Warwick), Axel Honneth (Frankfurt/Columbia), Philippe Rochat (Emory), Hans Bernhard Schmid (Vienna), Jason Throop (UCLA), Deborah Tollefson (Memphis), and Nicolas de Warren (Penn State).

The results of the project will be published not only in philosophy journals such as European Journal of Philosophy, Continental Philosophy Review, Mind and Language, Review of Philosophy and Psychology, Philosophical Psychology, and Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences but also target relevant journals in the social sciences, such as Current Anthropology, European Review of Social Psychology and European Journal of Social Theory in order to ensure dissemination to a broad interdisciplinary audience. In addition, the three parts of the project will produce at least two monographs and two edited volumes, which will be submitted to top-level academic publishers (most likely OUP). In the past, the PI has communicated his research to the public in TV and radio programs, newspaper interviews, introductory textbooks, and various popular talks and lectures. By pursuing this targeted strategy for public outreach, the project will seek to maximize its impact on political and societal debates.

6. References

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