Intention-in-Interaction

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In the chapter entitled « Are meanings in the head ? » of his book *Intentionality*, John Searle totally rejects the anti-internalist views of intention which, according to him, falsely « suggest that in order to account for the relations between words and the world we need to introduce… external contextual, non conceptual, causal relations between the utterance of expressions and the features of the world that the utterance is about. » (Searle, 1983, p.199). He claims that the term intention must exclusively be used to refer to the mental state of an individual. He thus asserts that « [s]ome form of internalism must be right because there isn't anything else to do the job. The brain is all we have for the purpose of representing the world to ourselves and everything we can use must be inside the brain… Intentionality is a biological phenomenon and is part of the natural world like any other biological phenomenon. » (*id.*, p.200)

The kind of naturalization Searle advocates here is too embracing to be convincing. In particular, it does not solve a problem : how is an intention to be identified ? Searle gives an unsteady answer to this question. He proposes a « dualist conception » which combines, on one side, a Background (which is like a warehouse where all the contents an intentional state can get at a given time and in a given society are stored) and a Network (which is a given and pre-ordered set of desires and beliefs which defines the conditions of satisfaction of a particular intentional state) ; and, on the other side, an intention-in-action (the actualization in a social relation of an appropriate ready-made intention that has been picked up from the Background)[1]. Among all the questions Searle's theory fails to elucidate, one is that it offers no explanation about where does this stock of intentions comes from in the first place, how is a specific intention picked up by an individual to fit the actual circumstance in which it is used, or what kind of reactions does this use elicit ?

Sociology – or the type of interactionist approach advocated by Goffman (1974) and Garfinkel (2002) at least – defends a « monist » conception of intention, which denies the validity of the cognitive division of labour Searle might be said to have introduced between Background and intention-in-action. A mass of sociological data has yet demonstrated that coordination of action seldom requires computation or deliberation on the part of the individuals in interaction since they directly possess a good sense of what is going on between them – i.e. they approximately know what their mutual intentions are. Moreover, very plausible arguments have accumulated in the tradition of the discipline which enable the sociologist to assert that no individual is able to decide by himself – i.e. irrelatively to the actual circumstances of an ongoing interaction - what his or somebody else's intention should be. Thus, instead of assuming that intention is a subjective state or the cause of an individual behaviour, the externalist stance would view it as a justification individuals are accustomed to use *in and for* action. That is what I call "intention-in-interaction".

In this view, intention is *public* (what one is able to intend in a given circumstance is an element of commonsense knowledge and might therefore be probably shared by all the partners in interaction), *anticipated* (the intention one might entertain in a given situation has to be adequate to the kind of activity in which one is engrossed) and *reflexive* (the goal one initially aims at can be radically modified in the course of an interaction to match unexpected events and new orientations).

This externalist view rules out that intention should be found in an individual's brain (the place where Searle would locate it). Such a position raises - Searle's critiques notwithstanding - a series of questions : what kind of phenomenon is intention ; how are we to describe it ; and where do we empirically have to search for it : in the world, or in the language, or elsewhere ? To present a sketch of the answers a sociologist is able to give to these questions, I will first try to demonstrate the immediate availability of social identification criteria of intention (that are concealed in roles, situations, and concepts of ordinary language) to individuals. I will then hypothesize that these criteria exert logical constraints on the imputation of intentions occurring in a specific context of action. And, to conclude, I will briefly argue that there is no need to consider these social identification criteria as « repertoires » comparable (both in objectivity and efficiency) to those

neurophysiology or developmental psychology have discovered in the sensori-motor realm.

1
Intention in Sociology

When a sociologist considers intention as a justification devised to account for action rather than as a mental state or as a cause of behaviour, he has to solve a problem of objectivity : how can one demonstrate that two individuals understand the intention an action is supposed to express the « same way »? This problem is usually turned into an empirical question that is addressed by collecting appropriate data about the ways individuals manage to « read » somebody else's « intentions » and correctly adjust their reaction to them even though these intentions are not explicitly stated in the course of action.

Max Weber has offered a theoretical answer to this question, claiming that the possibility to understand the reasons accounting for individual behaviours depends on the fact that the intentions these behaviours are supposed to express have a collective dimension. According to him, there only exist a certain « chance » (in the probabilistic sense of the term) for an intention (or what he calls a « motive ») to be apprehended as such. That chance is measured by two variables : expectations based on past regularities which have never been deceived, and rules of rationality and intelligibility supposedly shared by every member of a social group (Turner & Spector, 1981). Understanding others in the course of an action requires then, according to Weber, neither rational computation nor deliberation about what is going on : it is a kind of bet one directly makes on the chance (or degree of probability) an event or a behaviour has to occur in a given circumstance. Weber's position is externalist in a very specific sense : it advocates that the reasons that can be given to explain an action (or an intention) are socially pre-defined but only in a probabilistic way. The problem is that Weber ultimately relates this pre-definition to a mechanism : the domination generated, through socialization, by the belief in the legitimacy of the stable system of norms and values of the society (or social group) an individual belongs to.

G. H. Mead has proposed, at the same time, to view socialization as a process which rests on a phenomenon : the capacity to know and take into account the expectations which are supposedly those of a partner in interaction, i.e. to « take the place of the other » (Mead, 1934). According to Mead then, the fundamental feature of intention is its typicality : its content is always attributed from a second person's point of view (i.e. in the anticipation of what the other would probably experience). In others words, an intention could certainly not originate from the decision of an individual to act entirely as he pleases. For Mead, externality of intention is, somehow, generic : the reasons publicly given to explain an action are necessarily those a social group (conceived as a "Generalized Other") presses an individual to adopt.

Inspired by Weber's and Mead's works, an « interactionist » sociology has developed, the aim of which is to discover and analyze the social organization of interaction and the determinations properly produced by the informal rules that govern social transactions, as they emerge in the sequentiality of joint activities. One knows that this approach has been devised in opposition to a tradition largely dominated by the determinist thesis according to which social order is enforced by a system of norms emanating from « the » society, the prescriptions of which are mechanically followed by subservient actors.

The interactionnist approach grants, on the contrary, a certain degree of autonomy to actors. It claims that individuals have to accomplish the joint action they are engaged in, and that to do so they necessarily have to give some intelligibility to what's going on between them, i.e. to instate a relation between observed behaviours (which implies an objectivation procedure) and the intentions they are supposed to express (which implies a conceptualization procedure). When a sociologist works in this perspective, he has to empirically account for the procedures individuals make use of to recognize and attribute an intention in an appropriate and acceptable way.

The interactionnist approach hypothesizes that an essential feature of these procedures is the multitude of identification criteria that are « distributed » in the direct environment of action and inform the ordinary methods individuals use to objectify and conceptualize. This hypothesis may seem circular or tautological. To put it to test, this chapter will thus focus on three questions :

1. do a class of identification criteria exist the use of which enables individuals to conceive (for themselves) and attribute (to others) intentions in such or such circumstance of action ;
2. can one say that these criteria guide the practical reasoning of all the members of a social group in an identical way, i.e. that they are collectively shared ;
3. do such procedures of practical reasoning make individuals produce "moves" in interaction that are, in advance, adjusted to the changing intentions of their partners ?

To answer these questions, two empirical propositions will be discussed : 1) identification criteria of intention are inherent to three constitutive elements of a context of action : roles, situations and the concepts of ordinary language ; and 2) the compelling use of these criteria plays a major part in shaping the practices of objectivation (recognizing what is it all about) and conceptualization (recognizing what is the case) through which coordination of joint action emerge.

Let us turn now to the analysis of the three types of identification criteria of intention that have just been referred to.

1.1. Roles

Though a reference to the notion of role can be found in the works of Pareto and Weber, and appears in the social psychology of Mead, it is R. Linton (1936) who gave it a sociological definition, introducing the now famous distinction between status and role. According to Linton, the first of these two notions must be reserved to qualify the sum of rights and duties structurally attached to an institutionalized position in a social system ; and the second one would only name the type of behaviour that should be adopted by the individual who put these rights and duties in application. This distinction, and the corollary assertion that the two notions are complementary, has turned to be a standard feature in the social theory of action.

According to S. Nadel (1957), this distinction is troublesome : no methodological rule instructs how to draw a clear separation between status and role. To overcome this problem, he proposes to reserve the notion of role to qualify a *class* of individuals, constituted on the basis of a finite list of attributes and properties. Nadel

turns then to another problem : does every action require the endorsement of a role ? According to him, a behaviour (riding a bike, eating or reading) can refer to a role only when those who accomplish it are viewed in relation to an institutionalized way to actualize this behaviour (as a professional cyclist, a gastronomical critic or a manuscript reader in a publishing house). He consequently claims that the obligations attached to a role are generated by a socially organized form of activity. In other words, playing a role amounts to following principles and maxims that can be explicitly stated, and abiding by them should normally guarantee that an individual behaviour is appropriate to the ongoing flux of transactions.

Goffman's theory of interaction (1961a) pushes Nadel's analysis a step further. He decomposes the notion of role into three constitutive dimensions : its normative side, its typical side and its representation. The normative side of role is defined by ideal rules of conduct one should follow to adequately perform the function a particular role is supposed to fulfil in a specific sphere of action. Its typical side refers to the qualities currently associated to the individual who plays such or such role. An important point Goffman hints at here is the following : since the way the qualities affixed to a role are to be displayed is not codified, the correctness of a representation is only and entirely assessed by the partners of interaction. For example, a police officer should keep his nerve, know and enforce the Law, be polite and trustworthy ; and a physician should speak and dress in an elegant fashion, have good manners, show perfect mastery of medical skills, know how to write his prescriptions the specific way. The smoothness of transactions in which police officers or physicians are involved will depend on the assessment made by citizens or patients about the correctness their behaviour exhibit. The third dimension of role, representation, has more specifically to do with the sequentiality of the interaction during which an individual occupies a given position trying not to breach the ideal norms, or not to fail to display the typical expected but unstated qualities.

This decomposition leads Goffman to formulate three propositions : 1) there is no strict codification of the behaviour that should be adopted concerning an essential part of the role (its typical side and its representation) : one has to behave the way he believes fit to the expectations of others about the role he plays ; 2) a role has necessarily a practical nature, since it is always within a "system of situated activity"

that it is actualized in the unique representation that is given of it ; 3) a role exist independantly of the individual who happens to play and represent it.

These propositions turn the use of the notion of intention into a rather problematical enterprise. For Goffman, in fact, the same person can be described in a thousand different ways almost at the same time ; and is able to switch from one to another of his multiple facets in the course of the same interaction, at the only condition that these shifts do not jeopardize the central role he plays in a specific situated activity. Here is the example Goffman gives to illustrate his « simultaneity of multiple identities » thesis (Ogien, 1999) : a surgeon can publicly express the most common human desires while he practices surgery as long as he performs his surgical operation in the most professional way. Goffman's role theory so dramatically decomposes the identity of the subject that it seems to dissolve entirely what we think constitutes the individual : his moral responsibility. If a human being is just a succession of roles, which can be contradictory and incoherent and to which one can always take distance, it seems difficult, or doubtful, to confer a consistent identity to anyone. In the light of such a decomposition, one fails to know to whom one could impute the responsibility for the representation of all these roles, or for the way one manages his relations to others. Goffman does not really solve this problem : he simply acknowledges that since human beings obviously have a physical identity, they can be described in terms of a single individual biography (Goffman, 1964). But this acknowledgement appears to be more a concession to reality than a plain conception of individual identity.

For Goffman, the essential dimension of role is its representation, the analysis of which leads him to draw four conclusions which taken together, build up a kind of model of the organization of interaction : 1) the role is a set of practical rules (instructions, principles, maxims) one has to learn and apply correctly if one intends to play it the adequate way in a given context ; 2) this learning and application cannot merely be reduced to drill or interiorization : if one knows what are the rules supposed to govern the representation of a role, one knows, by the same token, those governing the representation of the complementary and rival roles that are typically associated to it (for example, being a patient implies knowing what being a physician should be) ; 3) the representation of a role is always accomplished in the presence of others (who unremittingly assess the appropriateness and quality of the

performance) and in respecting the prerogatives normally attached to the other roles involved in this circumstance of action ; 4) knowing what is required to perform a role implies also learning to deal with uncertainty and ambiguity : if playing a role amounts to endorsing a « social identity » during the time a sequence of action lasts, it is also, as Goffman reminds us, endorsing a typical character one can play *at* (which is a condition of possibility of deception).

It is time now to return to identification criteria of intention. If one accepts the relevance of Goffman's dynamic model of interaction, one can claim that a first series of such criteria are constitutive of the roles that we necessarily endorse in our everyday dealings. One can assert that these criteria are probably shared by a majority of the members of an organized social grouping since everyone has to play a multiplicity of roles in his current life. Playing a role does not simply amount to acting mechanically according to a status but requires the mobilization of the social knowledge needed to take the complementary roles into account and to live up to the expectations of others. As already said, a physician can understand the way such or such patient is going to behave because he has already been one or is likely to be one some day ; and inversely, the patient has an idea about the way a physician should behave because he has already met one or have some clues about what a physician is supposed to do. One of the lessons that can possibly be drawn from Goffman's role theory is the following : identification criteria of intention are inherent in the idea everyone has about what endorsing such or such role should imply ; and about the way these criteria should be used in such or such context. These ideas are regularly reminded and upgraded in the unceasing flow of interactions which constitutes everyday life.

Lets turn now to the second social thing that supposedly encapsulate another series of identification criteria of intention : the situation.

1.2. Situation

Goffman has imposed the idea that interaction is an order of reality which conceals the principles of its organization in itself. His analyses have demonstrated that the moral requirements inherent to co-presence and to the necessities of cooperation create a regime of constraints to which all the parties to a social

relationship do defer, as long as they intend to honour the engagement they have contracted. These immanent moral requirements are the foundations on which interaction can emerge, unfold and stop in a mutual satisfying way (A. W. Rawls, 1987) . A first series of those constraints lie in the obligation to abide by the rules of politeness and reciprocity. For Goffman, these constraints are not mandatory : they are embedded in a constantly kept in mind principle which commands to always act so as to « save the face of the other ». Another series of constraints derive from an essential condition of possibility of social transactions : the *a priori* admission of the other's truthfulness, i.e. one has to admit, though not unconditionally, that others really do what they seem to be doing and really mean what that say. A third series of constraints is linked to the nature of the activity actualized by the ongoing interaction, i.e by the « situation ». For Goffman, the mere fact that one knows what kind of activity he is involved in implies a reference to what can be called « acceptability constraints » (Ogien, 1991) which compels those who act to follow a partially defined set of norms, of conduct or of talk, allowing them to give and preserve intelligibility to what they do - either by conjecture or on the basis of an explicit mutual agreement. What is then a situation ? A kind of envelope (a "membrane" says Goffman) which cuts off a part of the social world and operates as a filter which selects, among all the obligations individuals have to defer to, those which are relevant in the actual circumstances of action.

In sum, the notion of situation qualifies, for Goffman, a typical and relatively stable frame which organizes beforehand the kind of behaviour that must, at a certain time, occur in it. These frames preexist to the engagement of individuals in an interaction and survive to its termination. In this sense, the situation possesses the sociological features of an institution and thus provides some of the identification criteria (impersonal and supposedly shared) that are used to conceive (for oneself) or attribute (to others) intentions in a specific context of action.

Let's go a step further. Even though the situation circumscribes a specific modality of action and defines the form a particular activity might take, these pre-given limits do not work in a determinist fashion : they are always transitory references in permanent rearrangement. One can admit that an individual caught in a situation more or less knows what he has to do in such or such case (sending a letter, drinking a coffee, drawing a circle in a plan, sawing a piece of cloth, discussing the terms of a

contract, teaching a class, etc.), but that the way in which he does it builds itself up step by step in the course of doing it, and by reconsidering, at each of these steps, the unity and coherence of the ongoing action. Each situation represents a kind of field of variation ; and what distinguishes one of these fields from another is only the number and complexity of the constraints it imposes[2] : sending a postcard, organizing a mass-meeting, doing an arithmetical operation or ruling a nation are situations the form and nature of which enforce different obligations on those who accomplish them. And as far as one can think that the members of a same social group are currently involved in a multitude of similar practical activities, one can say that they share, even though very approximately, a similar knowledge about the situations they find themselves in and the acceptability constraints attached to each of them. One is then allowed to suppose that the « moves » individuals might make in a situation have a good chance to be sufficiently adequate to let coordination emerge. This is probably why Goffman conceives interaction as an « order *sui generis* » (to use Rawls' qualification), i.e. the obligations entailed in it are not thought of as external constraining forces, but inhere in the social principles of rationality or morality that any human being necessarily possesses. As Goffman writes : «The elements and processes [the individual] assumes in his reading of the activity often *are* ones that the activity itself manifests – and why not, since social life itself is often organized as something that the individuals will be able to understand and deal with. A correspondence or isomorphism is thus claimed between perception and the organization of what is perceived, in spite of the fact that there are likely to be many valid principles of organization that could but don't inform perception. » (Goffman, 1974, p.26)

Let's sum up. For Goffman, the situation is a structure of constraints which 1) imposes the use of a given range of description categories in order to recognize the things, events and behaviours observed in the course of practical activity ; 2) defines adequate ways to play the roles that are specific to this activity ; and 3) provides indications about the propensions of the action[3] that can possibly be accomplished in it. This structure of constraints controls the engagement in action as well as the assessments of the moves and utterances produced by the interacting partners. It also provides a series of rules of transformation[4] that enable to revise, when needed, the way a criterion is used, or the practical significations conferred to these things, events and intentions.

According to this conception, what an individual is able to think he should do in a given circumstance cannot go beyond the limits of a « possible » which is entailed *in* a situation. Though one can admit that such a « possible » is never definitively defined, one has nevertheless to acknowledge that the situation exerts a compelling force simply by virtue of being a typical and approximately stabilized form of environment which fixes what each activity it frames might be and the directions in which it should evolve. Hence, a situation conceals a series of identification criteria that allow individuals to conceive (for themselves) and confer (to others) intentions in context.

1.3. Concepts

A third kind of « social thing » can be considered as a source of identification criteria of intention : the concept. To assess the relevance of this proposition, one has to evoke Cassirer's theory of the concept, which strangely echoes the way Durkheim has defined the sociological properties of the concept as well as the ethnomethodological considerations on the reflexive nature of practical reasoning.

A generally admitted view asserts that knowledge has two sources : intuition and concept (Heidegger, 1971). According to Cassirer, this classical distinction rests upon another one which, he claims, is of greater importance : whereas intuition is related to perception, conceptual knowledge is directly associated to the capacity of thought (Cassirer, 1953). In *Substance and Function*, Cassirer (1923) rejects the validity of this second distinction : he contends that intuition is, just like conceptual knowledge, a construction resting on a form of thought. He then proposes a theory of conceptualization based on an analysis of the operation which constitute knowledge : abstraction. For Cassirer, this operation consists in relating « a present content to a past content and to comprehend the two as in some respect identical. This synthesis, which connects and bind together the two temporally separated conditions, possesses no immediate sensible correlate in the contents compared. According to the manner and direction in which this synthesis takes place, the same sensuous material can be apprehended under very different conceptual forms. » (*Id.*, p.15)

Cassirer does not stop his description of abstraction here. His analysis further reveals a more primitive operation, which is constitutive of the activity of abstraction itself : the ordering of perceptions into « series of similars ». He writes : «Without a process of arranging in series, without running through the different instances, the consciousness of their generic connection – and consequently the abstract object – could never arise. This transition from member to member, however, manifestly presupposes a *principle* according to which it takes place, and by which the form of dependence between each member and the succeeding one, is determined. Thus from this point of view also it appears that all construction of concepts is connected with some definite form of construction of series. We say that a sensuous manifold is conceptually apprehended and ordered, when its members do not stand next to one another without relation but proceed from a definite beginning, according to a fundamental generating relation, in necessary sequence. It is the identity of this generating relation, maintained through changes in the particular contents, which constitutes the specific form of the concept. » (Id., p.15)

In Cassirer's detailed analysis, the activity of abstraction consists *simultaneously* in continuously instating relations between the elements of the « perceptual given » and maintaining their stability through the vicissitudes and contextual variations that put their precarious acceptability to test. Cassirer's conception of abstraction is reflexive (in the sense ethnomethodology gives to the notion) : to know is to connect elements of an environment and the form taken by this connection depends on the circumstances in which it occurs. From this point of view, a concept does not refer to an entity defined in terms of sufficient and necessary conditions. Its variable content emerges in a movement in which each former arrangement of elements sets the conditions under which the latter might be ordered. Cassirer proposes then a dramatic change in the conception of the concept : «What lends the theory of abstraction support is merely the circumstance that it does not presuppose the contents, out of which the concept is to develop, as *disconnected particularities*, but that it tacitly thinks them in the form of an ordered manifold from the first. The concept however, is not deduced thereby, but presupposed ; for when we ascribe to a manifold an order and connection of elements, we have already presupposed the concept, if not in its complete form, yet in its fundamental function." (Id., p.17)

Arguing that the concept is presupposed rather than derived – i.e that it organizes and control knowledge instead of resulting from it -, Cassirer further topples the classical theoretical construction : not only does he claim that intuition and conceptual knowledge rest on the same procedures of abstraction, but he furthermore adds that the concept must pre-exist to intuition if an object is to be apprehended. From this point of view, the concept does not refer to a *substance* that could be defined in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, but to the *function*[5] it directly fulfils in the activity of abstraction ; and that function consist in instating a particular type of nomological relationship. According to Cassirer, «the characteristic feature of the concept in not the "universality" of a presentation, but the universal validity of a principle of serial order. We do not isolate any abstract part whatever from the manifold before us, but we create for its members a definite relation by thinking of them as bound together by an inclusive law. » (*Id*., p.20)

I have probably said enough by now on Cassirer's theory of the concept. What has been reminded here allows to suggest that using a concept is at the same time establishing a given relationship between particulars (an occurrence in an environment) and a generality (the class of things this occurrence can immediately be related to) ; and such a relationship must be instated within the bounds of a specific « realm of acceptability » which is itself in constant rearrangement in the dynamics of action. In other words, the mere fact of making use of a concept sets about an unnoticed procedure : the implementation of non-formal logic operations. From this point of view, the concept possesses an irreducible duality : it entails both the elements of a definition of the entity it qualifies *and* the modalities according to which one instate a relationship between these elements that is adjusted to the circumstances *in and for* which it has been instated.

If Cassirer's thesis of the constitutive duality of the concept[6] can be viewed as a contribution to the description of knowledge as it expresses itself in action, it still confronts the traditional contradiction which burdens the notion of definition : would it be possible to identify an object without possessing any *a priori* idea about the identity of this object ? As all those who advocate the essential lability of significations and defend the thesis of the reflexivity of practical reasoning (like Wittgenstein or Garfinkel *inter alia*), Cassirer claims that to make use of a concept is an activity in which a word, *and* the objects it might name, *and* the acceptable uses it

might accept are indistinctly mixed. And when one accepts that no straightforward separation can be introduced between language, world and thought, one comes to think that it is the contradiction itself that is inane. Another way to consider the dynamics of the concept can be discovered in Durkheim's theory of knowledge, which gives, so to speak, a sociological twist to Cassirer's.

The original question Durkheim (1995) tries to answer in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* is the following : how is one to account for the passage of the concepts which are created by society into the minds of individuals ? Durkheim's answer is formulated in the same outdated terminology as the one used in his question : he claims that a slow process of individualization of the faculty of thought has taken place which has brought forth the inscription of the collective way of thinking a society imposes to its members into each of their brains. One has to remind that, in Durkheim's thesis, the general categories of the understanding and the concepts of ordinary language that constitute the human faculty of thought emanate directly from social life. In contemporary terms, Durkheim's radical and still stimulating claim is that the cognitive is social through and through (Bloor, 1983; Livet, 2002 ; A. Rawls, 2004).

Durkheim's argument is simple : since it entails the principle of an obligation, the concept is an institution. And as such it has two indivisible properties : immovability (a word survives as long as it is part of a lively lexicon) and universability (a concept can, according to the circumstances, be used to qualify a multitude of unexpected entities). Durkheim claims that these properties are dynamically connected : they confer at the same time sufficient stability and sufficient lability to the terms of ordinary language so as to enable individuals to assign and maintain a sense of mutual understanding about what is going on when they act together. A question remains unanswered though : what kind of constraint does the concept exert and how does it exert it ? Let's now turn to that question.

Whether it refers to an object, a property or a function (Peacocke, 1991), the concept has an essential feature : it always is « the concept of something » (Pettit, 1991)[7]. The sociologist is inclined to complement this philosophical statement by insisting that all the « somethings » concepts do refer to are invariably apprehended and named in the course of an action accomplished in common and in pubic.

Empirical inquiries show, as said earlier, that each form of practical activity and each situation set in advance the specific conditions in which concepts can be used in ordinary descriptions and circumscribe the range of acceptable significations one can give to them.

Let's summarize what has been suggested so far. Though the idea that the content of a concept is susceptible of multiple rearrangements (even surprising ones) in the course of social interactions came finally to be largely accepted, such an acknowledgement does not allow to claim that these rearrangements are boundless. Would it actually be possible to mean something by using whatever term in whatever circumstance, one would soon find himself in a world that one is just unacquainted with. We still have no good reason to believe that the numerous uses of a same word can vary inconsistently. One should better suppose that the procedures implemented to arrange the way we apprehend the world to act in it are loosely defined and controlled. This is the stand I have taken in the description of the three regimes of constraints which supposedly conceal social identification criteria of intention : roles, which specifies the kind of intention one can possibly conceive (for himself) or attribute (to others) in relation with the social identity one has temporarily endorsed ; situations, which limits the likelihood an acceptable justification might be given by invoking such or such intention ; and concepts, the mere existence of which define the space of lability of the significations one can give to the word intention in a description.

The short analysis proposed here has tried to explain what allows a sociologist to consider that he is founded to claim that conceptual constraints impose, on a group of partners in interaction, the use of sufficiently similar identification criteria of intention, and how it enables them to make sense, in the course of action, of what everyone is doing. But does this claim really entitle him to assert that individuals are able to recognize the intentions supposedly expressed in behaviour in the same mutually intelligible way ?

2

The Invocation of Intention and its Logical Constraints

Intentional concepts are words one usually uses to relate an individual behaviour to the desires, beliefs, aims or ambitions that have motivated it. The use of a such a word is guided by the logical constraints governing the attribution of mental predicates. These constraints have been accurately described by G. Ryle (1949) in his grammatical analysis of dispositions.

Ryle's idea is that dispositional concepts are used, as intentional concepts are, in a specific type of phrase : « lawlike sentences », the essential feature of which being to refer to both justifications and empirical propositions. On the one hand, these sentences instate a relation between two elements[8] by placing one in the position of a « cause » and the other in the position of its « effect » ; on the other hand, this relation has a particular content since it refers to a given disposition – or intention - which has supposedly been displayed in a given circumstance. Ryle notices that dispositional or intentional sentences cannot be considered as lawlike sentences since « they do not refer to particular objects or human beings » whereas laws only apply to generalities. Nevertheless, he claims that one can consider these two types of sentences as if they were of the same kind since they are about phenomena or events regularly « causing » predictable effects, even though not in the absolute and certain way science give to causation.

Ryle admits then that a proposition invoking a disposition or an intention gives, as lawlike sentences do, what he calls an « inference ticket » : it allows someone to draw practical conclusions and to act according to them. The sociologist may suggest that all those inference tickets are issued and used in ongoing interactions, and henceforth that their content depends on the practical circumstances in which « doing an inference » occurs. This is valid for intention. Making use of this « vocabulary of intentionality » is seldom an operation done in an office or in a laboratory, or a computation accomplished by a mind totally severed from all social relations (though it is still possible and legitimate to define intention in a purely abstract or theoretical way). It is more often a public phenomenon : the acceptability of any invocation of intention is systematically put to test in the ongoing action and can be revised at will when a failure, a misunderstanding or an error are supposed to have occurred or have actually been noticed by others.

Ryle's inferential conception of intention can be combined with the sociological conception of intention as justification. One may then claim that the invocation of an intention emerges within a structure of constraints which circumscribes, beforehand, the approximative content such an invocation might take, i.e. a pre-given structure sets the objective limits (in the sense of mutually shared) within which the actual definition of the intentions of the partners in interaction is shaped.

These objective limits have been presented here as identification criteria of intention. I have tried to demonstrate that these criteria inhere in roles, which set the limits of the « presentation » of social identities ; in situations, which define the bounds within which acceptable significations can be given to moves and events occuring in interaction ; and in the concepts of ordinary language, the mere existence of which determine the extent to which the meaning that can possibly be given to a word might vary.

When one takes intention to be something which is invoked in an ongoing action and is conceived within a set of logical and sociological frames that preexist and constrain it, one is led to propose an enlarged definition of the notion of intention. Instead of reducing it to a particular substantial content to which a dubious causal efficiency is granted, it should better be apprehended by considering the function the vocabulary of intentionality commonly used by human beings fulfils in the practical reasoning necessarily implied in the production of acceptable invocations of intention in social interactions.

3

Common Repertoires of Social Things ?

Three questions have been asked at the beginning of the analysis :

1. do a class of identification criteria exist the use of which enables individuals to conceive (for themselves) and attribute (to others) intentions in such or such circumstance of action ;
2. can one say that these criteria guide the practical reasoning of all the members of a social group in an identical way, i.e. that they are collectively shared ;
3. do such procedures of practical reasoning make individuals produce "moves" in interaction that are, in advance, adjusted to the changing intentions of their partners ?

I hope the brief answers that have been given to these questions in this article have provided some arguments in favour of the sociological externalist conception of intention. These answers may also have suggested that an internalist view of intention has to be far more intricate than the version Searle advocates. Internalism is not simply a matter of locating meaning in the brain of an individual. Even in the light of the advances made by cognitive science (Fodor, 2000 ; Berthoz, 2003), one would nowadays expect an explanation of intention to be founded on a description of the functioning of the cognitive mechanism that realizes it.

Such a cognitive model is presented and discused in this book. Stated in a very gross manner, this model defines an intention (or an intention-in-action as Searle would have it) as (1) a smooth movement (2) oriented towards a single target which (3) never changes its goal, and (4) is executed, in a mechanical or deliberate way, by an individual - an organism or a system - (5) by making use - even if unconsciously – of « repertoires » of movements that are stocked somewhere in the cognitive apparatus to accomplish (or recognize) it. One immediately senses the abyss that separates this internalist conception of intention from the sociological one that has been described in this chapter. In the latter, intention refers to (1) a "move" in a game which (2) takes place within a certain type of practical activity, (3) the relevance of which is tested during action itself and (4) the content of which can change since interacting with others involves unceasing adjustments to unpredictable aims, desires, beliefs and projections emerging as action unfolds.

In a sociological perspective, intention is a justification or a revisable judgment formulated, in the course of action, on what can possibly guide an individual behaviour. To do this job, identification criteria of intention are available : roles, situations and concepts are infinite sources of such criteria which are probably shared – though in an approximate way - by the members of a same social group since these resources are part of their commonsense knowledge. In other words, the capacity to make use of identification criteria of intention in a sufficiently quick and satisfying manner inheres to the everyday practices of the members of a social group. One must also add that the relevance and efficiency of these criteria is unremittingly put to practical test in social interactions.

But even if this analysis is correct, can one contend that the social criteria of identification and control concealed in roles, situations and concepts constitute true « repertoires », which would be stored in some hypothetic « social memory » and would mechanically produce an appropriate recognition and attribution of intention in each and every context ? Is there any sense in introducing a notion drawn from neurophysiology (« repertoire of movements ») in sociology to explain how a « move » in a sequence of action is perceived as intentional and agentive ? Is it necessary to postulate that such a perception is only possible when an individual possesses a « similar movement scheme in his repertoire » and is able to « co-activate this scheme to perceive the function this movement fulfils » ?

The sociological arguments that have been exposed in this chapter command to give a negative answer to that question. Why ? If one acknowledges that social criteria of identification and control of intention do exist and are part of ordinary knowledge, one can claim that they lead individuals to resort immediately to an available vocabulary of intentionality rich enough to characterize even the smallest move. When one assumes that ordinary knowledge enables to keenly and directly identify intentions, one might then ask what sense would there be to naturalize it, i.e. to conceive it as a cognitive mechanism reduced to a set of neural correlates. A final question has thus to be answered : do one really need, even from a purely evolutionist point of view, to go down at a phylogenetic level to explain intention, as it is currently invoked in social interactions at least ?[9] A good answer to this question has been given, I think, by sociology and philosophy of action which have by and

large demonstrated that common knowledge[10], as it manifests itself in the mastery of ordinary language, is a human capacity - which can be viewed as a biological function - enabling individuals to solve their everyday problems of attribution of agency in an economic and efficient way.

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[1] A quotation illustrates the confusion between forms and levels of knowledge in Searle's definition of the Background: "A minimal geography of the Background would include at least the following : we need to distinguish what we might call the "deep Background", which would include at least all those Background capacities that are common to all normal human beings, in virtue of their biologial makeup - capacities such as walking, eating, grasping, perceiving, recognizing, and the pre-intentional stance that takes account of the solidity of things and the independent existence of objects and other people - from what we might call the "local Background" or "local cultural practices", which would include such things as opening doors, drinking beer from bottles, and the preintentional stance that we take toward such things as cars, refrigerators, money and cocktail parties… Now within both the deep and the local Background, we need to distinguish those aspects which have to do with "how things are" from those aspects that have to do with "how to do things"." (Searle, 1983, p.141-142). He adds to the confusion by stating : "The Background, therefore, is not a set of things, rather it is simply a set of skills, stances, preintentional assumptions and presuppositions, practices, and habits. And all of these, as far as we know, are realized in human brains and bodies. There is nothing whatever that is "transcendental" and "metaphysical" about the Background, as I am using that term." (*Id.*,p.154)

[2] These properties are of two kinds : material (location, dress, topography, physical distribution of the objects and participants, etc.) and interactional (rules of reciprocity and deference, temporal order of transactions, asymetrical dimensions of a relation, etc.).

[3] At the sense given to that notion by F. Jullien (1992) or K. Popper (1992).

[4] According to Goffman : «The process of mutually sustaining a definition of the situation in face-to-face interaction is socially organized through rules of relevance and irrelevance. These rules for the management of engrossment appear to be an

insubstantial element of social life, a matter of courtesy, manners, and etiquette. But it is to these flimsy rules, and not to the unshaking character of the external world that we owe our unshaking sense of realities. » (Goffman, 1961b, p.81).

[5] At the mathematical sense of the term.

[6] A contemporean formulation summarizes it this way : « The concept is at the same time *act* and *object* of thought... As "object of thought", it is essentially characterized by its aptitude to dissociate into elements or parts, hence by the application of ordered procedures of analysis and composition. As "act of thought", it is the rule according to which these procedures are implemented. » (Granger, 1989, p.530).

[7] Pettit (1991) claims that the "dependence" of a concept to its context of use is a constitutive and irremediable phenomenon.

[8] Following Descombes (1996), one could claim that this relation has a "tryadic structure " : the action of aiming at something, the object aimed at and the content of the aiming itself. In other words, making use of an intention might amount to arranging these three elements *as well as* the relation that links them together in the particular context of its use.

[9] This point reminds the controversy on mental reductionism, and, in particular, two theses Davidson (1980) opposed to the naturalization of the mind : the anomalism of the mental and the multiple realizability of mental concepts. To illustrate : whereas it seems highly improbable to ever discover the specific set of neural firings that would account for the intention to eat some milk chocolate with hazelnuts of a given brand on a full moon night on a sandy beach with a particular girlfriend dressed in white (Seron, 1997), one does easily account for it by using the rudimentary resources of ordinary language.

[10] Which undeniably rests on a neural substratum.