Two Conceptions of Collectivity

Mariam Thalos
University of Utah, Salt Lake City, USA
mthalos@philosophy.utah.edu

First they came for the Communists, but I was not a Communist so I did not speak out. Then they came for the Socialists and the Trade Unionists, but I was neither, so I did not speak out. Then they came for the Jews, but I was not a Jew so I did not speak out. And when they came for me, there was no one left to speak out... (Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

Abstract
This paper distinguishes two conceptions of collectivity, each of which tracks the targets of classification according to their aetiology. Collectivities falling under the first conception are founded on (more-or-less) explicit negotiations amongst the members who are known to one another personally. Collectivities falling under the second (philosophically neglected) conception are founded – at least initially – purely upon a shared conception of “we”, very often in the absence of prior acquaintance and personal interaction. The paper argues that neglect of collectivities of the second kind renders certain social phenomena (for example, sense of place and certain kinds of conflicted loyalty) inexplicable or invisible. And the paper also stresses that a conception referring to the second kind of collectivity will put us in position to revitalize a variety of important questions, including: Which conception of collectivity best serves the needs of a theory of justice? The paper will

1) It is a pleasure to acknowledge the help I have received on this essay. First and foremost I would like to thank Nancy Cartwright for the very idea for the essay, Bob Goodin for thoughtful criticism, and an anonymous referee for this journal for insightful advice. And I wish to thank, as always, persons whose conversation directs my thinking in pleasant and productive ways: Chrisoula Andreou, Ron Mallon, Lije Millgram and my stalwart partner Robert Richardson.
contrast the distinction between these two conceptions with the classical Gemeinschaft/Gesellschaft distinction, as well as with the more recent attempts to articulate differences between groups according to membership-structuring norms.

Keywords
collectivities, negotiated collectivity, circumstantial collectivity, socio-cultural identity, sense of place, Gemeinschaft

The Recent Philosophical Trajectory on Collectivity

For several decades now, analytic philosophers have been examining the workings of collective action, as for example when a group of people paint a house together, execute a complicated soccer play on the pitch, perform a symphonic piece, or simply go for a walk together. Examples such as these have contributed importantly to the development of one conception of collective action, as well as to the development of conceptions of the supporting mental states – intentions and understandings – that foster and facilitate these certain types of collective action.

For example, Michael Bratman proposes that two people “share an intention” to paint a house together when (roughly) each intends that the house is painted by virtue of the activity of each, and also intends that it is so painted by virtue of the intention of each that it is so painted.2 That these conditions obtain must also, on his view, be “common knowledge” between the participants. And in her book On Social Facts and subsequent articles and book chapters, Margaret Gilbert has argued for an account of collective action and intention according to which these phenomena rest on what Gilbert calls a “joint commitment” rather than on a basis of individual intentions plus common knowledge.3 She argues that when, in ordi-

nary life, two people formulate an intention to go for a walk together, they are formulating a joint commitment, which is not a matter of a set of independent individual commitments on the parts of the individuals party to the enterprise; it is instead a single commitment to whose creation each party to the collaboration makes a contribution. So the parties collaborate on the intention (it is a we-intention in a strict sense), as well as on the actions that result from it. Interactions of this sort, argues Gilbert, result in mutual obligations, for each party, to act in conformity with the collective intention or action in progress.

Discussion of issues connected with collectivity continues to expand, and it has already influenced conversations in other disciplines including anthropology, developmental psychology, neuropsychology, social psychology and even economics. One large and still open issue is whether it is necessary to articulate concepts that go beyond the personal intentions of individual human beings in order to characterize properly what it is to act together. Bratman’s account does not go beyond such personal intentions. Gilbert’s account, with its invocation of joint commitment, does go beyond.

Whichever way the issue of we-intentions is ultimately (if ever) resolved, what remains constant in the current discussions is the conception that the

---

individuals who are party to the types of collaborations in the example cases, and to the collective actions that result (when they do), are personally known to one another. Not only have they met face to face, but they also have negotiated their enterprise, in one way or another, albeit not always in all the details.

But there is another conception of collectivity, a conception at which Dietrich Bonhoeffer gestures in the passage I quote above – a conception of “we” that involves less fellow feeling, singularity of mind and mutual understanding, and more a civic, perhaps purely institutional, perhaps even purely humanitarian conception of we. And its allied notion of we-intentions is perforce somewhat different as well. What is distinctive about the collectivities referred to by this conception is that they are in no way founded on acquaintance and prior interaction. They are founded instead on what humans are so distinctively good at – conceptualization. These collectivities are formed by we-conceptualizations rather than we-intentions.

A Second Conception of Collectivity

To illuminate this conception of collectivity it is important to shift examples. Consider this one. Profits are down, or at any rate the income stream that flows into our institution’s operating budget has slowed to a trickle. So this year’s budget is smaller than last’s. “We” have to cut costs, whether we know each other or not. Perhaps for the first time ever each of us formulates a conception of the “we” whose task is this feat of cutting costs – the “we” whose job it is to suffer the painful process.

Here’s another example. Surface fresh water runoff in our geographical region is declining (due perhaps to global warming). “We” who live in the ten communities that depend upon this resource for our water supply have to put our heads together, perhaps for the very first time, and work out an equitable and sustainable division of this critical life-sustaining resource.

New collectivities are forming all the time. And equally frequently collectivities are dissolving. Seldom are they mourned, but on occasion they are celebrated, for example when their collaborations bring about successful resolution of the dilemmas that brought them into existence in the first place. In the cases I am envisioning, the individuals concerned are not known to each other before the relevant “we” has been conceptualized. In some of these cases, the conceptualization, and indeed the collectivity
itself, is created by a confluence of circumstance. It is brought about by a shared fate. In other cases, the conceptualization, and the collectivity too, is a consequence of some other thing shared (a shared source of wages, a shared source of drinking water, a shared way of life).

Nations and ethnic groups are sometimes self-consciously “we”. Other times, they are not. Ethnic and national identity is therefore a mixed bag of collectivities. All depends upon the challenges, oppositions and general circumstances they face. And this applies as well to social movements like socialism. Therefore it applies to all of the groups that Bonhoeffer mentions.

Two Conceptions of Collectivity

And so it would appear that there are two conceptions of collectivity. In the first conception, the “we” that emerges is a “we” whose functioning is negotiated explicitly, and whose coming into existence is in a certain way optional. This “we” is in an important sense self-selected or self-constructing: the members in question collaborate on creating the conditions for formation of the collectivity. I will refer to collectivities of this kind as negotiated collectivities. In the second conception, the “we” is one that is formed as a result of circumstances encountered, often separately, by the parties who come together; these parties might enter the enterprise willingly, but that they face the choice of entry is not itself a product of their own activities; member-eligibility in this second sort of “we” is in an important sense determined by circumstance alone. The “we” is constructed by the participants’ actions, but the need for its existence is created exogenously. I will refer to collectivities of this kind as circumstantial collectivities.

How the Two Conceptions are Alike, how Different

Both types of collectivity are constructed in the world as a result of actions and performances of collectivity members. And so they are “founded” entities, not “discovered” ones, as a grouping of rocks might be. A grouping of rocks can be a “they”, but they cannot be a “we.” There can no “we” if there are no self-conceptions of “we” under which individuals act.

Now this claim might be viewed as at best parabolic. After all, wolves and dogs hunt together. And when they do, surely they constitute a “we”.

But equally surely, they do not act under any “we”-conceptions. Indeed, they cannot act under any self-conceptions of any kind. I think, however, that my contention is strictly accurate. An entity that can have no conceptions of any kind, cannot act under any self-conceptions, and consequently simply does not act. It merely behaves. An action is a piece of behavior that is performed under some conception, and often involves self-conceptions. And so, to the extent that we have to acknowledge that dogs and other mammals act, we must acknowledge that they are in a position to entertain conceptions, and perhaps self-conceptions. And to the extent that we are unwilling to acknowledge that members of other species conceptualize, we must deny them the power to act.

As complements of nonidentical sets are in turn nonidentical, the things that fall outside the extensions of each of these (nonidentical) conceptions are also nonidentical. We are playing a game of chess. Our individual moves add up to a “classic” and well-documented game well known to chess enthusiasts. Neither of us intends to play that particular game, although individually one of us or the other intends each of the individual moves that add up to play of that game. While in some extenuated sense of the term “we” play the classic game – the same sense in which we are a “they” – there is no true collectivity that does so. Similarly, even where there are genuine “we”s on a soccer pitch, their performances do not add up to the actions of a single “we”, for their performances are not collaborative. Instead, there are multiple “we”s, each of which trying to frustrate advancement of the other’s goals.

Now, to explain the noncollectivistic nature of these undertakings, each of the conceptions says something different. Under the first conception, the play of one of the games described in the last paragraph is not carried out collectively because the relevant collaborative intentions are not present. And according to the second conception, they are not collaborative undertakings because the relevant “we”-conceptualizations are not in evidence.

And so it is clear that there are two distinct routes by which a “we” can come, at least initially, to take action on the ground. The first is via relevant intentions, and the second via relevant conceptualizations.
Collectivity, Socio-cultural Identity and Ethnographic History

When historians examine historical records, narratives, artifacts and other documents, what do they see? Indeed, what are they looking for? Presumably, they are examining the skeletal remains – the residua – of interactions amongst organism, mind, environment and society. And from these things they are presumably seeking to reconstruct what the lives of those who left these things behind were like, how they understood themselves, how this emerged from what came before and how it put pressure on what came next. And all this in service of enlarging our own self-understanding. They are in some sense trying to achieve a grasp of what it’s like to have lived then and there, and using that understanding to shed light on our condition today, here and now. But what does it mean to say they are trying to reconstruct a self-understanding or perspective that is not their own? For that matter, what does it mean to achieve a self-understanding of one’s own? And why does it matter – what is the point of achieving it? These are foundational philosophical questions for these disciplines, and ones that we can by no means settle here. Their importance for us lies in how these questions make contact with taxonomies of collectivity. And clearly at least some part of what it is to do ethnographic history is to achieve some illumination of what it is to be part of some collectivity removed from one’s own.

What sort of collectivity is one trying to illuminate in an ethnographic work? Is one trying to illuminate what it is to take part in a friendship among people who lived long ago and far away, or to take part in business partnership there, or to undertake membership in a sewing circle? Of course. But none of this can be illuminated on its own: it must be set within the context of the wider cultural environment in which it flourished. For example, the variety of relations between homosexuals in a homophobic time and place is practically guaranteed to be different from the variety that will emerge between homosexuals in a culture with little or no homophobia. Cultural membership is crucially fundamental. And so the collectivities that provide this fundamental cultural identity must be illuminated if we are to make any progress in illuminating other group memberships. Membership in such collectivities is rarely negotiated. So if we are to make progress in understanding negotiated memberships, we have first to understand membership in the unnegotiated – the circumstantial – collectivities.
Kwame Anthony Appiah views socio-cultural identity as a matter of choice. He suggests that one can be a “cosmopolitan” – one can view or conceptualize oneself as a citizen of the universe, with all the moral duties attendant upon such a self-identification. This is doubtful. More likely, how one conceptualizes one’s socio-cultural memberships is seldom a matter of choice and depends in large part upon circumstance, and particularly upon the difficulties and dilemmas one acknowledges oneself as facing – acknowledgments that one may not have much choice in making. While it makes good sense to think of many of these memberships as willing or voluntary, this does not preclude their being also a matter of circumstance. Socio-cultural identity is therefore better conceived in terms of an interlocking and overlapping set of circles of belonging, of the sort suggested by the account of identities Amartya Sen renders. On Sen’s account, we belong to many collectivities, all at one and the same time.

Still, Sen writes: “We are all constantly making choices, if only implicitly, about the priorities [my emphasis] to be attached to our different affiliations and associations. The freedom to determine our loyalties and priorities between the different groups to all of which we may belong is a peculiarly important liberty which we have reason to recognize, value and defend.”

Either way – whether we agree with Sen or with Appiah – we will recognize socio-cultural identity as a matter of “we”-conceptualizations, performed on something like a “need-to-know” basis. And it is rather infrequently a matter of fellow feeling first, although subsequently some fellow feeling, acquired in the process of promoting the welfare of the collectivity to which one has attached, might serve to succor and deepen the ties already wrought via we-conceptualization. Typically, the members of one’s socio-cultural circle are not all personally known to one another. We view ourselves as members of extended families, religious groups, book clubs, community organizations, political parties, frequent-flyer circles, benevolent associations, and many other things. Many of these are not united by personal understandings or face-to-face negotiations. In fact, we belong to many of these without any acknowledgment of the terms of

---

7) Ibid., p. 5.
membership, or any need to familiarize ourselves with such terms. These entities are “we”s by virtue of the conceptualizations performed here and there, now and then, in the face of a dilemma or an event of historical moment.

**Competing Articulations of Collectivity**

Pettit and Schweikard distinguish between joint action and group agents. Joint actions, on their view, are undertaken by what in our terms would be strictly negotiated groups (governed by joint intentions under a common knowledge condition, largely in agreement with Bratman). They think that, by contrast, *group agents* can arise only if there is a mechanism for forming and modulating a roughly consistent set of group judgments or group beliefs, but that this condition is very rarely met. Collaborative undertakings are thus, in most instances, the outcome of joint action and not the work of group agency. Pettit and Schweikard have created no space of any kind for the circumstantial collectivities we have been tracing out.

The articulations of different forms of collectivity that I have canvassed here thus far – including my own – all take seriously the connection between psychological activities and actions, as such, and social organization. There is another school of thought – exemplified in work by T. Brewer and S. Shockley – on the question of how to articulate differences between forms of collectivity, and this school stresses norms and obligations more than mental acts. And once again, this school of thought owes a great deal to the work of Margaret Gilbert on joint commitment. By stressing...

---


9) This contention is motivated by a very specific conception of agency, on which agents are entities that must (by the nature) form judgments and are subject to epistemic norms. I have challenged this notion of agency in M. Thalos, “Sources of Behavior: Towards a Naturalistic, Control Account of Agency,” in Don Ross, et al. (eds.), *Distributed Cognition and the Will* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 123–167. But as agency is not at issue in this context, the dispute does not exert much pressure here.

the structures of normative relations, and their distinctions, these articulations mute once again, though rather differently, the distinction between collectivities that arise through personal interaction, on the one hand, and those that arise no thanks to personal acquaintance, on the other. Indeed, the school of thought according to which it is membership-structuring norms that define collectivities deliberately halt the tracking of collectivities (as I’ve been advising) via their etiology.

Classification according to aetiology is perhaps not always desirable. And where aetiology-based classification proves infelicitous, it is of course advisable to adopt a different form of classification. We might be well-served in certain instances, for example, by a classification according to some sort of structure or essence. So what are the prospects for such a taxonomy?

T. Brewer offers the distinction between aggregations and associations, meant to capture a difference in the nature of the obligations among them. Aggregations, on this typology, are rule-bound groups organized around a cooperative activity that serves the pre-existing individual interests of members. There is reason for aggregation only when two conditions are met: some scheme of cooperation could meet the pre-existing individual interests of prospective members better than non-cooperation; and this form of cooperation is subject to free rider problems. Aggregations require for their survival that most members make sacrifices which each would prefer not to make provided that he could continue to enjoy the full benefits of membership. These required sacrifices are the obligations of membership.\(^{11}\)

Still, Brewer feels the need to discuss the origins of such collectivities. He continues: “What is needed in order to create an aggregation is an all-purpose means of taking on mutual obligations to limit actions in accordance with principles to which no member has a prior internalist commitment. One such mechanism is an exchange of conditional promises”.\(^{12}\) So promise-making is one form of entry into an aggregation. It is an easy – as Brewer puts it, an “undemanding” – form of entry. (So, while Brewer’s

\(^{11}\) Brewer (2006), op. cit., 567.

\(^{12}\) Ibid.
distinction does not require its patrons to identify the aetiologies that give rise to different forms of collectivity, it invites this identification.) And it is in an important sense voluntary (again a reference to the supposed aetiology.) Brewer suggests business partnerships as important examples of this form of social grouping.

By contrast, the member of associations (on Brewer’s typology) take their defining cooperative activities to be valuable in themselves:

Associations are built on internalist commitments to goods that are shared in two senses: each associate affirms the goods, and the goods essentially involve coordinated action with other associates. What associates take to be good, in other words, is some kind of coordinated activity with their fellow associates, and not some independent result that might be produced by this activity.13

Thus associations are bound together by mutual (and independent) attachments to (and the attendant obligations to promote) these shared goods, as well as by mutual acceptance of (as well sometimes as obligations to) rebuke for failures to promote these goods. Brewer proceeds then to remark on the aetiology of associations: “Given that associations are built on a self-consciously shared affirmation of particular goods, they typically involve some kind of group deliberation, though this can be more or less formal”.14

So friendships turn out to be associations, on Brewer’s taxonomy. But when we turn to larger groups, such as nations or ethnic groups, the issues are more thorny. Would-be members of a wealthy nation might be prepared to make promises for the sake of entry. But natives have made no such promises. Commitments to national goals and values vary in the citizenship, as well as preparedness to promote national goals or rebuke others for failure to do so. Indeed, a citizenship may encompass a group with no common denominator of values that is not also a common denominator among human beings universally. Finally, any given citizen-member may or may not, on any given occasion, be involved in the negotiations called for by their constitutions or other authoritative structures.

These observations add up to this: there is no one unitary sort of membership-structuring norm that governs nations or cultures. (Cultural and

14) Ibid.
national markers tend merely to track descent, not shared traits or characteristics.) And this observation directs attention again upon that microcosm of so-called associations – the friendship. It directs us to notice that some friendships are simply less demanding than others. And the level of demandingness does not seem to be reliably related to the kinds of values shared by the friends. So, for example, some friend-pairs understand, say, punctuality violation as an appropriate ground for rebuke, but not others. And this might have nothing whatever to do with what the friends would say is the basis of their friendship. (This is quite typical in fact: friendships that are based on very different shared values look quite similar when it comes to comparing the accepted grounds for rebuke. And that from the point of view of grounds for rebuke, many friendships resemble many business partnerships.) So it would seem that there is no one unitary relationship-structuring norm that governs friendship very generally, distinguishing it from business partnership. So it follows that it is not the values themselves – their specifics – that give friendships their distinctiveness. It might well turn out that the only feature that the entities Brewer wishes to characterize as associations share in common is just a certain sense of “we” – a conceptualization of the group as a collectivity. And Brewer’s taxonomic categories, distinguishing between the less and the more “demanding” will prove an unhelpful guide to the patterns of collectivities on the ground.

It turns out that classifying groups according to the nature of the bonds holding members together is quite difficult business – indeed, notoriously difficult. In the next section we will revisit the Gesellschaft/Gemeinschaft distinction, which will provide an occasion to repeat the caution.

Collectivity, Society and Modernity

The German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies (1855–1936) is best remembered for a distinction between two types of social groups parallel to two purportedly basic forms of human will: the essential will, which is an organic or instinctive driving force; and arbitrary will, which is deliberative and goal-oriented.15 Groups that form or organize around essential will Tönnies called Gemeinschaft (often translated as community). Groups in

---

which membership is organized or sustained by some instrumental and explicit goal he termed *Gesellschaft* (often translated as *civil society*). Tönnies held that *Gemeinschaft* is best or most perfectly exemplified by the family and *Gesellschaft* by the state.

Individuals in *Gemeinschaften* are regulated by shared norms that dictate the appropriate behavior and responsibilities of members of the association, to each other and to the association at large (there is a “unity of the will”).

*Gemeinschaften* are broadly characterized by a moderate division of labor, strong personal and family ties, racial and ethnic homogeneity and relatively simple organizational structures. In such societies, because there is a strong collective sense of loyalty and belonging, codes of conduct require little or no external enforcement.

*Gesellschaften*, by contrast, lack shared norms of conduct and are maintained instead by individual self interest. They are associations in which, for the individual, the larger association never takes on more importance than individual self interest. A modern business is alleged a good example of Gesellschaft, where the workers, managers, and owners may share very little by way of concerns, beliefs and motivations. Unlike *Gemeinschaften*, *Gesellschaften* emphasize secondary relationships rather than familial or community ties, and there is generally less individual loyalty to the association as such. Social cohesion in *Gesellschaften* presumably derives from the glue of an elaborate division of labor, which results in a profound and typically insurmountable material dependency of individuals upon one another and the system of organizations under which their labors are coordinated.

Today, of course, there are few if any pure *Gemeinschaften*; and arguably there have never been (nor did Tönnies ever pretend) any pure *Gesellschaften* – except perhaps in the thought experiments made famous by Thomas Hobbes and John Rawls. And so there is some question as to whether the typology can be of any service in the employ of science. The typology I am advocating between negotiated and circumstantial collectivities, by contrast, is much more useful in this sense. And, on the ground, it is quite easy to determine whether some association originated from explicit negotiations or purely from challenges that had to be faced by a “we” whose members had not before the time of formation been known to one another.

16) Ibid., p. 22.
The larger trouble with the typology of Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft is that, given enough time and success, an association of the former type will be transformed into one of the latter – but with no clear boundaries for this transformation, and equally no sense of a “phase” change. Relatedly, there are no criteria for when an association of either type comes into existence or simply passes away. None of this is true of the contrast between negotiated and circumstantial collectivities, which are characterized by we-intentions and we-conceptualizations, respectively, whose existence conditions can be made quite precise.

The Gemeinschaft/Gesellschaft distinction is arguably the precursor to the more contemporary distinction between individualist and collectivist societies. Numerous measures are now deployed to diagnose societies, with the diagnostic tools being statistical measures applied to aggregations of answers to a range of survey questions. Still, R. G. Collingwood’s description of the collectivist mind is hard to improve upon:

The individual counted for nothing except as the member of his guild, his church, his monastic order, his feudal hierarchy. Within these institutions he found a place where he was wanted, work for him to do, a market for his wares. He could devote himself to fulfilling the duties assigned him by his station in that great organism within which he found himself lodged.17

The Renaissance, according to Collingwood and others, broke with this culture. It gave birth to modern individualism, expressed in ‘the freedom of discovering that one can leave one’s ordained place and march out into the world without being struck dead by an offended God’.18

One may either lament this development (as does Collingwood) or celebrate it (as does Michael Oakeshott). And one may further measure, as already noted, the degree to which the “march to freedom” has progressed among members of a given society. What is hard to avoid is the fact that the individualist quest for freedom led to decoherence of certain activities of mind – the aesthetic, religious, scientific modes. But – according to Collingwood – God was offended, for this freedom was bought at the price of an internal conflict, which is the disease of modernity. The curse

of modern individualism is, therefore, the deep cause of the miserable condition – this fragmentation – of modern consciousness.

Once again, one can either lament or celebrate the development, accordingly as one celebrates or laments the proliferation of expertise, intellectual specializations and disciplines, both within and without the university. And one may ask: does this decoherence vis-à-vis human experience and activity serve as the basis of the dissolution of, or instead provide a foundation for, social cohesion? But social cohesion too is a difficult thing to define, let alone measure. And the concept is neglected among theorists as well. But there might well be reasons, on the horizon, for thinking that the concept of collectivity can help with solidifying the notion of social cohesion.

Fernando Rajulton et al., have broken ground in this area by articulating a measure of social cohesion in terms of a combination of aggregated behavioral measures covering political (voting and volunteering), economic (occupation, income, labor force participation) and social (social interactions, informal volunteering) measures. Many of these behaviors arguably result from the work of the circumstantial collectivities we have been describing. And it remains to be seen whether voting or volunteering behaviors (say) are better promoted through negotiated collectivizations or instead through circumstantial collectivizations.

Groups, for Good or for Ill

While “society” is ordinarily either a neutral term or a term of approval, “groups” frequently fall intellectually out of favor, perhaps because among the best-confirmed features of in-groups are discriminations against outsiders and negative biases in judgment against them, that is, lower valuations than the evidence would tend to warrant. (Few social facts are better attested in daily life.) Indeed the pioneers in the social psychology of groups believed that there can be no in-group without an out-group. “We are what we are because they are not what we are”.20


But while the negative characteristics of groups are indisputable, they should not be assumed to be defining features. Perhaps the cardinal (and most admirable) effect of group identification is heightened cooperation within the group, no doubt facilitated by adoption of group norms, and motivation by group goals. Other – more mixed – effects include: judging oneself to be more similar to other group members and dissimilar to non-members than one really is (accentuation), seeking unanimity at all costs (groupthink), favoring group members over nongroup members in bestowing benefits or judging worth (favoritism), using first-person pronouns, emotional contagion, and depersonalization.21

Social researchers agree that groups are formed via a range of different routes. These include (but are not limited to): common interests that can only be achieved by working together (“interdependence”22), shared experience, face-to-face interaction,23 the perception of a common fate,24 membership in merely ad hoc categories,25 and perhaps most surprisingly, exposure to the pronouns “we”, “our” and so on.26 None of these routes logically requires the existence of out-groups. M. Brewer maintains that, in particular “the perception of common fate and shared distinctiveness may be achievable without reference to specific out-groups, although the presence of out-groups may influence the nature or intensity of affect or emotions attached to in-group membership”.27

My contribution here has been to divide the routes by which groups come into existence into two basic kinds, according to whether the route involves personal interactions. This means that groups that form in response to shared fate might fall into either one of my two categories, depending upon the origins of their acknowledgement of that shared fate. And similarly with those groups that form in response to ad-hoc categorization. And this in turn means that my typology cross-cuts the acknowledged categories because it utilizes criteria that involve historical accidents which may or not be typical in the acknowledged categories. Thus my typology is at once more specific than the acknowledged list of routes, and more general.

Collectivity and Place

Leslie Poles Harley quotably remarked: “the past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.”28 There is a profound truth in this, but also a profound self-deception. To be sure, many of our predecessors lived quite differently. But equally, we move about in daily life as if many of these predecessors were our very own neighbors – for good or for ill. We are organisms surrounded and sustained by the artifacts, ideas, technologies and narratives of our predecessors. Our very identities are intertwined with these things.

Some socio-cultural identities span many generations of individuals. But since it is temporally impossible for the individuals so bound together to negotiate their collectivities in the ordinary timing-sensitive way of give-and-take, the collectivities which these identities signify must be wrought circumstantially. How is this achieved? Jean-Paul Sartre offered a clue when he wrote about human relations to objects:

When knowledge and feeling are oriented toward something real, actually perceived, the thing, like a reflector, returns the light it has received… As a result of this continual interaction, meaning is continually enriched at the same time as the object soaks up affective qualities. The object thus obtains its own particular depth and richness.29

Artifacts thus make good reflectors of our predecessors’ cast of mind. But places – being themselves living, organic and changing things, with their own independent capacities for riveting the gaze of visitors – do so even more vividly and powerfully:

places possess a marked capacity for triggering acts of self-reflection, inspiring thoughts about who one presently is, or memories of who one used to be, or musings on who one might become. And that is not all. Place-based thoughts about the self lead commonly to thoughts of other things – other places, other people, other times, whole networks of associations that ramify unaccountably within the expanding spheres of awareness that they themselves engender. The experience of sensing places is thus both roundly reciprocal and incorrigibly dynamic. As places animate the ideas and feelings of persons who attend to them, these same ideas and feelings animate the places on which attention has been bestowed, and the movements of this process – inward toward facets of the self, outward toward aspects of the external world, alternately both together – cannot be known in advance. When places are actively sensed, the physical landscape becomes wedded to the landscape of the mind.30

Cultural geographers, anthropologists, sociologists and urban planners study why certain places hold special significance for particular people or peoples, to resonate with numerous associations.31 Places said to have a strong “sense of place” are distinctive in character – a distinctiveness that is deeply felt by local inhabitants and by many visitors. “Sense of place” is a recognized social phenomenon, acknowledged as independent of any one individual’s perceptions or experiences, yet understood as very dependent upon the exercise of distinctively human powers of engagement for its existence. A sense of place may derive originally from the natural environment, but more often results from a confluence of natural and cultural features in the landscape, together with a history of the origins of that confluence and the people swept up in it. Sense of place requires a human investment. It is often further enhanced by the writings of poets and novelists, by portrayals in art and music, and more recently, by ordinances and

30) Ibid.
designations aimed at protecting, preserving and sustaining certain revered places (such as the “World Heritage Site” designations used around the world, the English “Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty” controls, and the like).

Thus, as Keith Basso writes, “sensing of place is a form of cultural activity…. It is a process of interanimation.”32 While scholars in a number of different disciplines might have something to contribute to our understanding of this phenomenon, by for example lending insights into its ecological, psychological and evolutionary dimensions, it is only once all of this is framed within the context of cultural activities promoting socio-cultural identity that the full significance of place comes into focus. Significant places are very often associated with a culture, a group or a formative event. And now we can invoke the circumstantial conception of collectivity to explain why. When our collectivity is of the first type – a negotiated collectivity that is founded purely upon intentions and more-or-less well articulated face-to-face negotiations – the associations we have in our minds with that collectivity are typically very localized; they tend to range over the things that are directly linked to working out the intentions and the goals for which that collectivity exists. They serve as reflectors and amplifiers of these negotiations. But when our collectivity is circumstantial – of the type that is founded upon a “we”-conception – the associations we will hold in our minds with that “we” – the qualities with which it resonates and which it amplifies – will range more widely (because it is less focused upon the defining individuals) and is apt to attach to the environs or circumstances that foster or bring that conception about, as well as to those things that maintain and preserve it. This is because they are not firmly anchored in the goals and mission statements, the whens and wherefores and other specifics of the mission, but rather in the courageous responses of individuals to a perceived call-to-action. Hence arises the sense of place.

Deliberately and otherwise, people are forever presenting each other with culturally mediated images of where and how they dwell. In large ways and

32) As Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996) documents, Apache culture is even more profoundly entwined with place: their conceptions of wisdom, moral education and the tribal past are inseparable from the places, the stories and the place names that they share as a community.
small, they are forever performing acts that reproduce and express their own sense of place – and also, inextricably, their own understandings of who and what they are.

As I conceive of it, the ethnographer’s task is to determine what these acts of expression purportedly involve (why they are performed, how they are accomplished, what they are intended to achieve) and to disclose their importance by relating them to larger ideas about the world and its inhabitants. In other words, naturally occurring depictions of places are treated as actualizations of the knowledge that informs them, as outward manifestations of underlying systems of thought, as native constructions wrought with native materials that embody and display a native cast of mind. And it is that cast of mind (or certain prominent aspects of it anyway) that the ethnographer must work to grasp, intelligibly make out, and later set down in writing.33

To the extent that we venerate or value the products of some circumstantial collectivity, we will tend to preserve the associations we have linked with it in our minds – we will preserve and construct institutions (museums, for example) that maintain (for example) the sense of place that might have sprung up alongside it. And we will also craft beautiful objects to help with the work of commemoration. These “anchoring” activities exhibit robustly the entwining of mind and society.34

Conflicted Attachments

If we are unwilling to acknowledge circumstantial collectivities, and the pressures they are capable of exerting, we will be unable to track other important data of historical and ethnographic moment. We will for example fail to see certain conflicts as due to attachment to circumstantial collectivities. Here is something of a sanitized example: a certain indigenous culture practices certain forms of oppression of women. A woman of that culture whose consciousness vis-à-vis women’s oppression has been raised,

34) And so it is within academic culture as well. To the extent that a scholar can reflect the intellectual contributions of predecessors and resonate with ongoing conversations, that scholar’s work will be assimilated into ongoing research. Scholarship that fails to reflect or resonate is typically neglected, and the marginalized scholar must storm the battlements for attention.
might nonetheless feel some loyalty to the ways of her people, even if she disapproves of them as a feminist. We ask: how can a feminist feel drawn to a culture that practices anti-feminist ways? The usual way of answering this question makes distinctions along the lines of emotion versus reason: reason draws her to liberationist ideals, while emotions draw her to something. But what? Without an understanding of the unchosen “we” to which she belongs by dint of circumstance and affiliation, we are hard-pressed to make her cast of mind intelligible. We might say it is loyalty to family or simply to memory that creates conflict in her. But this does not convince. For a conflicted mind might persist even when attachment to family is weak; and loyalty to memory is an attenuated conception or metaphor at best. Without a conception of cultural identity that entwines the individual circumstantially to her cultural group and their ways, the conflicted cast of mind is hard to grasp.

These observations apply equally to the mind of the anti-racist slave-holder and the atheistic observer of religious traditions.

The Place of Collectivity

The role of negotiated collectivities in social life is perhaps too obvious to require discussion. Such collectivities are obviously the causes of numerous human innovations, artifacts, endeavors and social institutions. Circumstantial collectivities are also of fundamental importance, and perhaps of even more importance because their “reach” potential – their scope and sweep – is appreciably wider (essentially unbounded since personal acquaintance is not required for their formation), but their special products are less obvious as their products. Explanation of the phenomenon of sense of place is one such effect, and conflicted casts of mind another, but there are many more. We would be well served by a deeper understanding of the special workings and features of circumstantial collectivities – and the powers they are capable of exerting upon the social landscape. Historians and social and political scientists would no doubt be very well served by a better account of how “we”-conceptions serve to motivate people, particularly in the commission of atrocity. And such an account might also serve to illuminate certain important features of racisms, sexisms, and hatreds of other kinds. Such an account might also have the potential of helping policymakers craft policies and institutions that would curb or otherwise ameliorate the ill effects of certain “we”-conceptions.
Contemporary philosophical accounts of collaborations, collectivity and related things, have been suckled on a very restricted diet of examples. When the restrictions are removed, we can subsequently pose such important questions as: What sorts of collectivities are worthy of promotion, protection and investment? What sorts of collectivities are best able to achieve large social goals – like the end of poverty or war? How autonomous are (for example) circumstantial collectivities in relation to negotiated collectivities? Which sorts of political systems are more closely allied with negotiated collectivities, and which with circumstantial collectivities? And ultimately, since a conception of collectivity is arguably at the base of social life: Which conception of collectivity best serves the needs of a theory of justice? And many others.