

Book Review

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Bryce Huebner: *Macro-cognition: A Theory of Distributed Minds and Collective Intentionality*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, 304 pp.

Reviewed by *Bill Wringe*

The idea that there are ‘group minds’ might strike a philosopher of a certain stripe as a metaphysical horror, reminiscent of the worst excesses of nineteenth-century speculations in sociology, psychology, anthropology and philosophy. Such philosophers are, perhaps, less likely to be found among readers of this journal than elsewhere in philosophy, but they are widely represented within contemporary philosophy, and especially its analytic branches. In *Macro-Cognition* Bryce Huebner sets out to make a case for the existence of group mentality in a way which is designed to appeal to naturalistically-minded philosophers who might share this initially skeptical outlook.

Huebner, distinctively, addresses questions about collective mentality by drawing on recent literature within cognitive science. He argues that we should only countenance the existence of collective mental representations when doing so gives us some explanatory purchase on the capacities of complex multi-person systems, which we cannot achieve simply by focussing on the representational capacities of members of individuals who make up those teams. Putative examples of such multi-person systems are CSI teams and participants in some – but only some – kinds of large-scale collaborative scientific research. (Huebner suggests that whereas research in particle physics in institutions such as CERN is organised in ways that support attributions of collective mentality, research in molecular biology is not.)

Huebner thinks we should be parsimonious in our attributions of collective mentality: we should avoid positing collective mental states in situations where collective behaviour ‘results from an organizational structure set up to achieve the goals or realise the intentions of a few powerful and intelligent people’ (31); where ‘collective behavior bubbles up from simple rules governing the behaviour of individuals’ (32); or where ‘the capacities of the components belong to the same intentional kind as the capacity, which is being ascribed to the collectivity and where the collective computations that are carried out by the individuals who compose the collectivity’ (73).

Bill Wringe, Bilkent University, Philosophy, Ankara 06800, Turkey,
e-mail: billwringesemail@gmail.com

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These principles illustrate how far Huebner's approach is from that of many recent authors who have focussed on analyses of group agency in discussing collective intentionality, including French, Gilbert, Rovane, Tuomela and Pettit and List. For as Huebner explains in chapters two and three, many of the kinds of systems, which authors of this sort might take to be paradigmatic instances of collective agency will fail to meet these strictures.

Huebner discusses the Manhattan Project in some detail. Carol Rovane (2004) has taken this to involve an interesting case of group agency because individual members of the teams at Oak Ridge National Laboratories (ORNL) will often have been involved in deliberation from the point of view of the project as a whole. For Huebner there is no collective intentionality here: the behaviour of the scientists involved fails at least the first two of his constraints: it resulted, he claims from an organisational structure aimed at realising J. Robert Oppenheimer's goals.

This example brings out an assumption which seems implicit in Huebner's work and which runs counter to much other work on collective intentionality. For Huebner, as for many cognitive scientists, representational states are explanatory posits: we are justified in asserting their existence when, and only when they do some non-superfluous explanatory work. This approach has yielded a great deal of insight in the study of the mind. However, several authors have suggested that there is something unsatisfactory, or limiting about viewing mental states as theoretical posits. They suggest that this involves commitment to a 'spectatorial' conception of the mind (Hutto 2004). An alternative view of mentality suggests that our concepts of mental states are designed to subserve the goals of interpretation and interaction. Tad Zawidzki has recently described this as the 'mindshaping' approach to our everyday conception of the mental (Zawidzki 2013). On this way of thinking of the mind, it is not obvious that the constraints, which Huebner imposes on attributions of collective intentional states are appropriate. From the point of view of someone who has to interact with ORNL it may make sense to conceive of it as a collective agent even if its capacity for collective behaviour can be explained in terms of its organization to serve Oppenheimer's goals.

Huebner might respond by suggesting that we cleave our conception of the mental in two, and that there is room for a purely explanatory conception of the mental as well as one fitted for interpretative processes. It is unclear to me how successful this strategy is likely to be; but it is one which might appeal to readers with a cognitive science background. It is less clear whether it will serve all the purposes to which Huebner might like to put it. For in at least part of the book – that in which he deals with the interesting and growing literature within experimental philosophy concerning the extent to which our folk conception of the mind is compatible with ascriptions of mental states to collective entities – he seems to be committed to the idea that the notion of a representational state

which he is drawing on is at least implicit in our everyday notion of mentality, rather than being a theorist's repackaging of that idea.

Leaving this on one side, we might see Huebner as being concerned with making a case for the importance of the notion of collective representational states within a cognitive science of collective systems. Here his concerns with explanatory parsimony would be entirely appropriate. However, despite the importance of pioneering work by authors such as Ed Hutchins (1996), to whom Huebner appeals at a number of points, it is unclear how interesting a science of collective cognitive systems is likely to be. One lesson one might draw from the examples which Huebner gives of what he takes to be genuine instances of collective cognition is that they are enabled by highly specific mechanisms in particular cases. (Consider, once again, the distinction between cognition in high-level particle physics and molecular biology with which I began, or between CERN and ORNL, which I discussed earlier.) This being so, one might wonder whether there will be any interesting general truths about such systems. (It seems notable that Hutchins himself has a background in and draws on methods from anthropology – a particularising discipline par excellence.) If we think that science aims at providing us with general laws we may conclude that a science of collective cognition has little to tell us. If so, there may be a stronger case for sticking with an interpretive conception of the mind in the study of collective intentionality than Huebner allows.

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