
NEIL W. WILLIAMS

University of Sheffield

neilwilliamwilliams@gmail.com

AGAINST ATOMIC INDIVIDUALISM IN PLURAL SUBJECT THEORY

abstract

*Within much contemporary social ontology there is a particular methodology at work. This methodology takes as a starting point two or more asocial or atomic individuals. These individuals are taken to be perfectly functional agents, though outside of all social relations. Following this, combinations of these individuals are considered, to deduce what constitutes a social group. Here I will argue that theories which rely on this methodology are always circular, so long as they purport to describe the formation of all social groups, as they must always presuppose a pre-existing collectivity. Such methodology also produces various distortions in our theories, such as voluntarism. I focus on the workings of Plural Subject Theory as laid out by Margaret Gilbert in *On Social Facts* (1989). I show that the formation of a plural subject always requires communication, and that communication always requires a pre-existing collectivity. I examine the elements within Plural Subject Theory which protect Gilbert from these accusations of circularity, and argue against them. I finalise by suggesting that what Plural Subject Theory, and social ontology in general, requires as a theoretical starting point is not atomic individuals and their combinations, but rather combinations of already socialised or embedded individuals.*

keywords

Atomism, plural subject theory, voluntarism, social ontology, group formation

“A brief hypothetical account of the transition from the state of nature to a social state ... First nature (or God) produced a rational or reasoning being. Such being moves by virtue of acts of will ... This being was endowed with ideas of its own desires such that ‘I want a drink’ was understood to provide reason to move towards a drink. Now more than one being of this kind was produced. What ideas could these beings be endowed with that might enable them to live together harmoniously?”
(Gilbert 1989, 414).

1. Introductions and Distortions

Theorisation necessitates abstraction: to gain traction on the messiness and complexities of reality we must abstract away from it. Not all abstraction is legitimate however, and one must be assured in an investigation that the chosen abstractions do not distort the aspect of reality under examination. This paper argues that such a distortion is at work within the methodology most common in contemporary analytic philosophy of society. The abstraction in question is neatly demonstrated in the epigraph: though its story is “crude” it is none the less taken to “make sense” (OSF, 415). Such methodology relies on the assumption that one can legitimately abstract away from society a *primordial atomic individual*, and then see what combinations of these individuals create a social group.

“Methodological Individualism” was first suggested by Weber as a scientific and “un-ideological” basis of a science of society (Weber 1922/1978, 13-16). It was simply the assertion that society should be understood via the intentions, actions and beliefs of individuals. In actual fact, the methodology at work within much contemporary philosophy of society is more akin to methodological atomism understood in a Hobbesian sense, which sees human beings as capable of coming into full maturity outside of any societal interaction (Hobbes 1651/2003, 102). Whether individualism or atomism the important methodological assumptions I am questioning are these: (i) that we can feasibly consider an asocial human agent as our primary unit of investigation, and (ii) that we can consider combinations of these individuals to deduce what is intuitively required to produce a “social group”. With these methodological commitments, the main question of societal philosophy becomes: “What makes a collectivity out of a sum of living beings?” (Gilbert 1989, 2).

I take it that, by definition, the majority of “summative accounts” take this methodology to be correct. Summative accounts argue that all talk of groups can be reduced to talk of individuals, and that groups don’t *really* exist as

anything other than a combination of individuals¹. Methodological atomism makes the summative theory of groups very plausible – a methodology that places such weight on the atomic individual will be more likely to produce an individualistic ontology of society as an output. In this paper however, I focus exclusively on the “Plural Subject Theory” (PST) forwarded by Margaret Gilbert. PST is a rarity: a *non-summative* account of social groups achieved through investigative atomism of the kind sketched above. A plural subject is a kind of collective intentionality, a subject made by a “unity”, a “pool or sum of wills dedicated, as one, to a certain ‘cause’” (Gilbert 1989, 409). Plural subject-hood is not reducible to the singular intentionality of the persons so connected². I focus on Gilbert’s account precisely for this reason, for I take it that if I can show that Gilbert’s non-individualistic account shows distortions due to her atomistic methodology, then summative accounts certainly will. In particular, focus will be on Gilbert’s *On Social Facts* (1989), which stands as the formation and bedrock of PST³.

Finally, I must indicate the nature of the distortion such methodology creates. Here I focus mainly on a distortion which can be called *voluntarism* within Gilbert’s theory. As shall be shown, the methodology at work leads Gilbert to investigate almost exclusively small voluntaristic groups of two or three people, who perceive themselves to be a unit. Examples include mushroom pickers (Gilbert 1989: 36-41), social travellers (Gilbert 1989, 161-164) and – importantly – conversers (Gilbert 1989, 433). Gilbert takes these small groups as “paradigmatic” of all social groups (Gilbert 1990), and as the origins and beginnings of all larger groups (Gilbert 1989, 235)⁴. The formation of these groups are the formation of plural subjects (See §2). Thus the conclusions drawn from investigating these small, voluntaristic groups can be extended to *all* social groups (Gilbert 1989, 149). Gilbert accepts this voluntaristic nature as a necessary part of PST: “if there is a plural subject, *then* each set of persons has *volunteered* his will for a sum of wills” (Gilbert 1989, 413, emphasis mine). Seeing as all social groups are plural subjects (Gilbert 1989, 204, 233), this means all social groups are voluntaristic. This leads to odd theoretical

1 Summative accounts include Quinton (1976), Keeley (1981) and Bratman (1999). See Gilbert (1989, 257-288) for discussion on the nature of summative accounts in relation to a plural subject account.

2 Plural subjects will be better defined in section 2. Gilbert forms PST against the assumptions of “singularism”, which sees individual intentionality and agency as the only kind of intentionality and agency there can be (Gilbert 1989, 12).

3 Readers will be referred to more recent examples of Gilbert’s work when necessary.

4 Gilbert maintains this dedication to the importance of small groups in more recent work (Gilbert 1990; 2000, 14-36; 2008, Chapter 6). Due to the methodology under question, such small units of investigation are common in contemporary philosophy of society (see Bratman 1999, 93-108).

conclusions such that we can always leave a group (Gilbert 1989, 426), and that those in power are always somehow representative of the people (Gilbert 1989, 206). Gilbert admits and highlights this conception of society with frequent comparisons to Rousseau's social contract theory (Gilbert 1989, 198, 206, 415-6; 2008: Chapters 4, 5 and 10). At best such voluntarism creates a theory that is bias towards the ideal of western, democratic societies, and at worst it avoids, trivialises or removes from investigation families, organisations and societies that are repressive, coercive or dictatorial.

At a theoretical level, such distortions may seem harmless, but Gilbert's primary aim is to develop a collectivity concept that can be applied in the social sciences (Gilbert 1989, 2-3), and which can be extended to (at least) sociology, anthropology, political philosophy and psychology (Gilbert 1989, 436-41). Indeed, such distortion is carried over into Gilbert's more recent work developing a PST account of political obligation (2008). The PST account argues that membership to a group is *always* at some level intentional (2008: 168), that *any form* of government can be backed by joint commitment (2008, 180) and that a population has an obligation to comply with political institutions *whatever they are* (2008, 256). As such, these distortions should be taken seriously.

Primarily, I focus on conversation as an example of the formation of the plural subject. I combine contemporary linguistics with Gilbert's theory, to show there is a circularity inherent in her notion of plural subject-hood (§2). I argue against Gilbert's objections that language is an asocial phenomenon (§3), and suggest in conclusion that the best way to break the circularity in question is to concede that society is not a plural subject (§4). Throughout, I attack the notion of the atomic individual, and suggest that instead, PST should take *the already socialised individual* as its primary investigative unit.

2. Conversations and Actions

When discussing the *formation* of plural subjects, Gilbert investigates how "normal human beings with whatever capacities these have" combine to form plural subjects, the proper referent of "we" (Gilbert 1989, 175). This is methodological individualism in action: an investigation into how human agents outside of a plural subject combine to form one. I focus on the example of *conversation* for two reasons. Firstly, it is an oft used example (Gilbert 1989, 170, 200, 410, 433; Gilbert 2008, 101, 118, 173) of the small and "ephemeral" (Gilbert 1989, 215) nature of the social groups Gilbert investigates. Secondly, Gilbert makes it a requirement that agents must have "made certain things clear" (Gilbert 1989, 162), prior to the formation of the plural subject. This indicates she needs some notion of

communication prior to the plural subject, or for conversation to be the primary plural subject. This being the case, problems with conversational plural subjecthood will resonate through Gilbert's theory.

There are four stages to the formation of the plural subject, each of which must be met in turn for the plural subject to be formed:

1. *Quasi-readiness*: Each agent must be independently prepared or "set up" to engage in a joint action A with another agent. This is "a state or disposition of the will, a kind of readiness to act when appropriate conditions obtain" (Gilbert 1989, 186).
2. *Common Knowledge*: The quasi-readiness of each participant must be communicated, must be what Gilbert terms "open*" (asserting that humans have the concept of "openness*" by default (Gilbert 1989, 191)). "It is *common knowledge* among A, B and C that p, if and only if (by definition) the fact that p is open* to A, B and C, and (2) A, B and C have noticed this" (Gilbert 1989, 195).
3. *Joint Readiness*: An addition of (1) and (2): "a set of persons are jointly ready to share in action A in circumstances C if and only if it is common knowledge among them that they have mutually expressed their quasi-readiness so to share" (Gilbert 1989, 198).
4. *Pooling Wills*: This is the creation of a plural subject: "[O]ne who expresses quasi-readiness to do A in C in effect *volunteers his will* for a pool of wills to be set up so that in certain circumstances, that pool will be dedicated to a certain end" (Gilbert 1989, 198)⁵.

With these stages in mind, I turn to a contemporary theory of communication, Relevance Theory (RT), forwarded by Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995). In RT communication occurs by a speaker making information accessible in the audience's "cognitive environment". The cognitive environment is a combination of the agent's *cognitive abilities* (the biological, perceptual, linguistic and conceptual abilities that agent has) with the *physical/sensory environment* that agent is located in. The cognitive environment is the set of facts and assumptions accessible or "manifest" to the individual. Communication occurs in the overlap between two or more cognitive environments. It works by making certain things *mutually manifest*, which is a useful way of thinking of Gilbert's "openness*" requirement (See Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995, 36-45).

5 More recent incarnations of PST keep these distinct stages (Gilbert 2008, 96).

The combination of the two theories is illuminating. To begin a conversation, agents must be receptive and ready to engage one (1). This quasi-readiness must be communicated in order to attain (2) and (3). RT, as an *ostensive* theory of communication, sees any act of communication as carrying with it a necessary recognition of the participant's *intention* to communicate. Communication is not accidental; by beginning to communicate we make our readiness to communicate mutually manifest. Something mutually manifest is common knowledge (2)⁶. The overlapping of cognitive environments is an excellent account of "joint readiness" (3). This creation of a *mutual cognitive environment* perhaps explains Gilbert's contention that we need to be considered an "us" in a sense *before* we embark on a full "pooling of wills" and a shared goal ("I suggest that A and B must need to be in a position appropriately to think of themselves as 'us' in order for A to intelligibly to set out to tell B something" (Gilbert 1989, 215)). The two agents can then embark on the joint goal: to converse (4) (Gilbert 1989, 170). *Conversing* is the manipulation of this shared cognitive environment, the making mutually manifest certain facts, assumptions, problems, and so on.

This account transfers to non-conversational joint action. Take moving a sofa together. The sofa must be manifest in my individual cognitive environment as something that I am ready to move with you (1). I must then make this intention manifest to you, and vice versa (2). The fact that this is manifest to both of us means it is *mutually manifest* – we have created an overlap of cognitive environments (3) and can proceed to the joint action of moving the sofa together (4).

Considering contemporary theories of communication sheds much light on Gilbert's account. RT not only fits with PST, but it elaborates the notions of communication that PST requires for its account of plural subject formation to be plausible. However, RT works on the basis that communication presupposes a commonality in *cognitive abilities* which allows participant's cognitive environments to be similar enough for overlap to occur. Such cognitive abilities are usually considered linguistic or conceptual and require a society to bestow such commonality. For PST a society is a plural subject, and so for the formation of a plural subject to presuppose society would entail circularity. To avoid this circularity, PST must show that the cognitive abilities required for plural subject formation are *asocial*.

⁶ Common knowledge is a complex topic, but I take it this RT account of common knowledge can be successfully applied to most, eg Lewis (1969, 52-57).

For a plausible assessment of Gilbert's methodology, one must first distinguish what cognitive abilities an asocial human agent would possess, and what such an agent can only gain through societal interaction. Searle (1995, 127-47) distinguishes between *Deep* and *Local* "Background" in this regard, using the terminology to separate the capacities and abilities we have *naturally* (Deep) and those which we have *culturally* (Local). Though Searle focuses on capacities, abilities and predispositions, I focus solely on which *concepts* (or "cognitive abilities") can be considered to be natural. It is the placement of certain concepts into Deep or Local Background which is crucial to this discussion⁷.

Deciding which concepts are natural, and which cultural, is a matter of discussion and discovery⁸. But, to prevent us from simply placing concepts where our theories need them to be, we can present certain feasible criteria. I suggest that the primary candidates for "natural" concepts would be (i) something which can be said to arise from the ordinary use of our biological and/or sensorimotor abilities. Lakoff and Johnston (1980, 56-60) call these *naturally emergent* concepts, and suggest spacial and temporal concepts as paradigm cases (UP, DOWN, FORWARD etc.). To this I would add (ii) concepts which could arise through the perception of and interaction with a non social environment (LIGHT and DARK, perhaps DAY and NIGHT or natural kinds such as MOUNTAIN). *Deep Background* will contain the concepts that are indicated by these criteria. *Local Background* will contain the concepts we can only gain by virtue of being in any society, or a particular society.

The majority of Gilbert's dyadic examples presuppose conversation, and thus language. I will assume, for the moment, that a language presumes a society (See §3). What possible plural subject-hood is possible without language? That is, what *shared cognitive environments* are possible? If I teleport a tribesman from a tribe as yet unaccountably and blissfully ignorant of Western culture, could I get him to enter into a plural subject with the simple joint intention to move a sofa? See ing as we share only Deep Background, how could I communicate my intent, and so get from quasi-

7 I borrow Searle's terminology but not his notion. There are deep flaws in Searle's conception which I do not wish to inherit. Suffice to say, I am committed to at least a significant part of the Background being conceptual and linguistic, which Searle's non-representational Background does not allow for.

8 I am drawing a theoretical line here, not an actual one. It see ms "Local" Background will always shape and effect "Deep" Background. Recent empirical data shows that different cultures have radically differing conceptions of see mingly asocial concepts such as SPACE (Nisbett and Miyamoto 2005). Mallon *et al* (2009) recently used such evidence to argue against contemporary philosophy's reliance on *intuition*, an argument which would find much purchase in Gilbert's theory.

readiness (1) to a plural subject (4)? Perhaps by some fluke of gesture, or by virtue of recognition of shared Deep Background, I could make my intention mutually manifest, and so entreat him to “join forces” (Gilbert 1989, 163). Beyond this most rudimentary physical joint action, what actions could we participate in without significant education on his part or mine?

The majority of Gilbert’s dyadic examples presuppose that agents have *previously been in a society*, which is even more of a problem. The teleported tribesman and I shared one salient piece of Local Background: that we both *had* a Local Background. We were both born and raised within a society. If I instead teleport a Wildman, who has never before seen a human soul, how would I go about entering into a plural subject with *him*? Would he know what it is to *cooperate* or *communicate*? Had I accidentally teleported him into a tiger’s pen, and was forced to communicate the salient fact that there was a tiger sneaking up on him from behind, could I? Communication relies on the recognition of *intention*. Would the Wildman have even this concept? Would he know that my desperate gestures and shouts were the act of a human *agent* intended to *convey* something? Judging from the prior criteria, the answer would be no. *Cooperation, communication, recognition of intention*, each necessary to even begin *thinking* about joint intention (1), have no reason to emerge spontaneously in the Wildman’s Deep Background. We would have to (somehow) embark on a great deal of education before this poor man and I could even begin to make things mutually manifest to one another. But what would this education be if not *socialisation*?

This then, is my central point: in order for PST to work it must presuppose that participants are (or have been) inhabitants of a larger, societal, plural subject. In order for PST to describe anything but the most rudimentary joint actions, it must presuppose participants live in the *same*, or relevantly similar societies. Simply put: the *more* cognitive overlap we share, the *more* joint actions we can engage in, and the *easier* it is to form a plural subject. If there is *no* cognitive overlap, we *cannot* engage in the formation of a plural subject.

Gilbert is quite comfortable with the notion that conversation (Gilbert 1989, 154), or at least communication broadly construed (Gilbert 1989, 215), is prior to and required for group formation. This does not lead to a “paradox” for Gilbert, who sees the possibility of a linguistic social isolate quite plausible (Gilbert 1989, 217, See §3). However, what investigating PST through the lens of contemporary communicative theory has revealed is

that all communication requires an overlap of “cognitive environment” which requires salient commonalities in the Background. PST cannot account for shared Background without presupposing that the inhabitants already inhabit a social collective of the type PST was meant to explain. What this circularity reveals is that for PST to work it needs, and in some sense already takes, the notion of an *already socialised individual* as its primary methodological unit, rather than the atomic individual. I now turn to objections to the claim that communication is necessarily social, before sketching a non-circular PST in the final section.

3. Objections and Abstractions

The plural subject theorist could answer my accusation of circularity with two objections. Firstly, one might say that a participant does not need to have *inhabited* a society (or other plural subject) in order to form a plural subject. A participant needs only the *concept* of a plural subject. On this claim the concept of a plural subject is hard-wired into us, part of our Deep Background. Gilbert suggests that the benevolent creator of the epigraph would need to bestow “an innate concept of a plural subject” (Gilbert 1989, 167), or a certain kind of “mutual recognition” (Gilbert 1989, 217) to move from an asocial state to a social one. The role this innate concept of plural subject-hood plays in group formation is implicit through most of Gilbert’s work, but occasionally emerges explicitly:

I do, of course, posit a mechanism for the construction, so to speak, of social groups. And this mechanism can only work if everyone has a grasp of a subtle conceptual scheme, the conceptual scheme of plural subjects. Given that all have this concept, then the basic means for bringing plural subject-hood into being is at our disposal (Gilbert 1989, 416).

Gilbert needs to assert the nativism of a plural subject concept because it is the only way her account of group formation can work without circularity. There is no argumentation for this position, only assertion. I assume that we cannot simply assert innate concepts to save our philosophical system unless we have a reasonable causal story for how they would emerge naturally. Such an assertion is certainly not a defence against a claim that it is the methodology which creates the theoretical gaps which these nativist assertions are made to plug.

“Plural subjecthood”, as a concept, does not meet the criteria I sketched above for naturally emergent concepts. It is not a result of our sensorimotor abilities, and an asocial agent has no need or ability to produce it in engagement with an (asocial) environment. For Gilbert’s account to work

the concept must just be a “given”. The burden is on Gilbert to explicitly argue why this is the case. Moreover, assume for a moment that Gilbert is correct. Asserting that human beings have an innate concept of collectivity is tantamount to asserting that human beings, *qua* human beings, are social creatures. Human beings have evolved within, or are otherwise specifically adapted for, social groups. Why then should philosophy take as the methodological unit of investigation an *atomic* and *asocial* human? Is it not bound to create distortions in a theory if the primary methodological unit is an animal outside of the habitat it is adapted to, a human normally considered at best an oddity and at worst pathological?

The second, more substantial objection that the plural subject theorist could offer is the assertion that language is not necessarily social. If language is not necessarily social, then the fact that communication is necessary for plural subject formation does not have to be circular. Gilbert clearly saw how crucial it was for PST to develop an asocial theory of language, dedicating a whole chapter to the task (Gilbert 1989, 58-146). This chapter is split between attacking Wittgensteinian arguments against private language, and asserting a PST account of group language formation. Here I pick out only one strand of the argument: the congenital Crusoe intuition. The congenital Crusoe figure is a social isolate with full grasp of a private language. For Gilbert’s account of language to function this figure must be plausible. Moreover, this fully functioning but socially isolated individual is precisely the atomistic individual which I am arguing against. If this figure is plausible, then the methodology in question is unproblematic.

The Crusoe figure, perhaps because it is presupposed in her methodology, is a conceptual certainty for Gilbert:

the claim ... that it is logically impossible to have a language if one has not participated in group life ... [is] counterintuitive on the face of it. It appears we can at least conceive of a congenital Crusoe – a being socially isolated throughout his life – who was initially endowed with, or invented, a language of his own (Gilbert 1989, 59).

Gilbert assures us this is pre-theoretical or “untutored” intuition. It is “intuitive” for her that this figure can use language (Gilbert 1989, 73), and often if an opposing argument reaches the “counter-intuitive” “anti-Crusoe conclusion” then this “counts against it” (Gilbert 1989, 89-90), and one should become “immediately suspicious” (Gilbert 1989, 95) of such a theory. This intuition works as a motivating feature also: on developing what she finds to be an “intuitive” or “natural” model of language (Gilbert 1989, 93-4) – essentially Platonic – “one datum” in its favour is

its avoidance of the anti-Crusoe conclusion (Gilbert 1989, 95).

The first question is to ask is whether the Crusoe figure is in anyway *actually* possible. Recent empirical evidence suggests that it is not. Evidence indicates that children who do not learn language during the “critical period” of development (around 3-13) do *not* develop full linguistic ability (Pinker 1994: 38-9). Without learning a language within this period, we lose the ability to learn *any* language completely, even when subsequently placed in a linguistic environment (Pinker 1994, 290-2). Pinker cites the case of “Genie”, a so called “wolf-child” who was discovered at the age of 13. Genie was without language and severely impaired in her ability to learn one (Pinker 1994, 291). Generative linguistics suggests that though we have a biological ability to develop language when in a linguistic environment, and within a certain key time frame, children that cannot interact with a language during this time *cannot* and *do not* develop one independently, spontaneously or by intellectual effort alone. Though Gilbert’s argument is primarily conceptual rather than empirical, I suggest we should at least be sensitive to empirical facts in our theorising, especially when developing concepts for use in the social sciences. Though the Crusoe figure may be a *conceptual possibility*, it is not a *nomological possibility*.

Indeed, the Crusoe figure may not be as *conceptually* possible as Gilbert thinks. When imagining the conceptual Crusoe figure, one imagines a socialised individual, *like us*, but without society. Of course it see ms plausible that such a figure could develop language independently. Equally, if we picture the social isolate as *just like us* but outside of society, it see ms very plausible to imagine that they could form groups with ease when other humans are introduced. Now try and consider someone with *only* Deep Background. Is it plausible that this person would spontaneously develop the tendency to attribute signs to objects? Can a human entrenched in society imagine the mental life of someone who has never before interacted with another human? It would be, doubtless, not at all *like us*. In order to even ascertain whether the Crusoe figure is conceivable, a great deal more fleshing out of this figure is required by Gilbert⁹.

Despite empirical invalidity, and conceptual inadequacy, Gilbert perhaps deserves an answer as to why she finds the Crusoe-figure so intuitive. I take it that Gilbert’s view, and that of Winch whom she argues against, fall down either side of the same hurdle. Winch gives us an individual incapable of intentional action outside of society. This is clearly undesirable, but in response Gilbert gives us an individual with a fully functioning vocabulary

⁹ Considering Gilbert’s earlier paper on asocial language (1983), Sharrock and Anderson have a similar response: “Doubting whether someone can invent a language for themselves involves raising rather more deep and complex questions than those which can be met by the response ‘Well, I can imagine someone doing it!’” (1986, 554).

and conceptual apparatus, despite having never seen another soul. This is an equally radical view. I suggest that if we make a simple distinction, between *concept* and *language*, we gain a much more feasible picture. With this the appeal of the private language argument falls away. If one conflates *concept*, *language* and *intention* (Gilbert 1989, 68), the conceptual Crusoe argument becomes more plausible simply because it is unintuitive to deny the Crusoe figure *all* of these. But separate *concept* and *language* and one finds that we can have a plausible Crusoe figure possessing *concepts* and *intention* (with Deep Background) but not necessarily *language* (without Local Background). Gilbert requires an argument for a conflation which is simply assumed.

The account of group language formation that Gilbert gives is very similar to the plural subject formation already looked at. It simply involves social isolates, each with their own private language, figuring out what words they shall use publically (Gilbert 1989, 132-142). Language formation, like group formation, is voluntaristic and intentional¹⁰. It *only* makes sense if we already assume the linguistic capacities of the social isolate. Gilbert then begs the question when she assumes that the congenital Crusoe “has a language”. Against a similar accusation Gilbert answers:

If we start from the standpoint of what is acceptable intuitively, however, there is no need of an argument to show that those who write off language-using isolates have no right to do so. In other words, this question may indeed be begged, until it is shown that such statements are incoherent or otherwise inadmissible. More precisely, some flaw must be clearly shown in the picture [of congenital Crusoe] that I have sketched (Gilbert 1989, 99).

Such a statement amounts to little more than an assertion that her intuition is correct. I am now in a position to answer the challenge here laid out with not one but three “flaws” in the congenital Crusoe conception. Firstly, it goes against contemporary empirical evidence. Secondly, it is not conceptually motivating without more work. Thirdly, it rests without argument on a conflation of *concept* and *language*. Though it is plausible to assume that humans are *conceptual* and *intentional* creatures outside of society, there is no reason to think that they are *linguistic* or *communicative* creatures outside of society, which is what Gilbert needed to provide to avoid the circularity

¹⁰ Chomsky, in particular, has staunchly denied the empiricist conception that language formation is an intellectual achievement, preferring the notion that it is akin to organ growth (See Pinker 1994, 297-332). Chomsky’s ‘poverty of the stimulus’ argument focuses on why it is implausible to consider language an intellectual creation (See Chomsky 1980, 310-24 and 2000, 3-19; Cook 1991; Pinker 1994, 262-297).

I identified. This places the burden of proof rather forcibly back onto the plural subject theorist.

This examination of the implausibility of the congenital Crusoe figure doubles as an argument against methodological atomism. Taking an empirically impossible and conceptually flawed unit as the basic building block of a theory is going to lead to the distortions I have illuminated, and (no doubt) others. Once again I suggest that what PST and other theories of social ontology require as the primary methodological unit is the *already socialised individual*. This amounts to accepting the circularity I have shown. Plural subjects require an already present collectivity for their formation. In the final section I offer one plausible way for PST to diffuse this circularity, and the distortions the methodology entails¹¹.

4. Options and Conclusions

The primary methodological unit needed for PST to work must be the *already socialised individual*. As this is conceptually and nomologically plausible, I take it to be preferable to that which it replaces: the non-plausible atomic individual that much philosophy of society presupposes. This ultimately amounts to little more than the argument that we should take human beings as they have always existed – as entrenched in social reality – as our primary investigative unit in the social sciences¹². I take it such a position would be uncontentious if it wasn't for the circularity which it apparently

11 In order to clarify the argument here it will serve to compare it with the useful distinctions put forward by Pettit (1993). Pettit suggests that there are two separate issues that are often conflated in social ontology: the individualism/collectivism issue (1993, Chap 3), and the atomism/holism issue (1993, Chap 4). The collectivism/individualism question revolves around whether our intentional agency is impaired by social regularities (the collectivist position), or unimpaired (the individualist position). As I understand it my paper is neutral on this issue. I am concerned here about the issue of voluntarism only in as far as it pertains to the suggestion that we in some real sense *choose* to enter the society or family we find ourselves in. I am neutral here as to whether our ability to act autonomously within these social groups is impaired in any way. This being said, I think there are many issues that come to the fore when we consider our lack of choice in this regard, which may affect our autonomy. Pettit avoids these questions by narrowing his investigation to “autarchy”, or the minimal requirements for an agent having rational intentional states (1993, 120). It may surprise the reader to learn that the paper is also neutral on the atomism/holism issue, at least as it is described by Pettit. Pettit's concern is whether interaction with others is required for full human rationality (the holist position), or whether an asocial creature can develop full rationality outside of human interaction (the atomist position) (1993; 1998). Though we both argue against atomism, we do so for different reasons. It may be plausible to suggest that a truly asocial individual is still fully capable of thinking, even if impaired in any number of other ways. I have suggested that an asocial individual would still have the resources to be an intentional individual (“I see no way of arguing that a Robinson Crusoe, even a Robinson Crusoe isolated from birth, could not think or follow rules” (Pettit 1993, 179)). The point at issue within this paper is whether or not such an asocial individual would have the cognitive resources to form, or participate within, a social group. The answer to that, I have argued, is no. In this sense I am a holist about group formation and participation, even if I am not (necessarily), one about human rationality. There is, no doubt, reason to believe that holism about one leads to holism about the other, but this is a discussion best left for another day.

12 The position I have arrived at here is, as I take it, not dissimilar to the intuitions relating to embedded individuals which drive the phenomenological investigations of (for instance) Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, as well as the work of the Pragmatist John Dewey.

entails. So I now finalise by sketching a non-circular and non-distorted research possibility for PST.

I suggest that the simplest way to break the circularity inherent in Gilbert's PST is to deny that society is a plural subject. This is not to say that PST doesn't pick out an interesting, important and useful notion for the social sciences. It is to deny that *all* the social sciences need is PST, or that *all* social groups are plural subjects (Gilbert 1989, 413; 2008, Chapter 8). PST describes exactly what it proclaims to describe: small, voluntaristic, united and self aware groups. Social groups of the sort united by goals or actions. But, as argued above, a) such groups presuppose collectivity, so they cannot be the sole collectivity concept, and b) understanding all of society in terms of PST leads to distortions such as voluntarism (1).

So how *does* the formation of a society work, if it is not described by PST? I take it this is a question that philosophy of society does not have to answer: human beings and society evolved together, and the two are inextricable in a real sense. A human (somehow) born or raised outside of social interaction is – as poor Genie shows – severely linguistically, socially and emotionally disabled. The question should not be “how do societies form, given atomic individuals?” but rather “how do societies function and develop given the interactions of embedded individuals?”

So what *is* society, if it is not a plural subject? Well, this is hardly a question I am expected to answer here, but this exegesis of PST gives some idea of how to move forward. Society is *not* a “social contract” (Gilbert 1989, 198) in the way that Rousseau and PST formulate. Society is something we are born into, not something we choose. Society is better understood as the systems, structures, institutions and hierarchies in place. These affect those individuals born into the environment by shaping their subjective values, expectations, language and concepts: creating the *Local Background*. Already socialised individuals who share overlapping Backgrounds are capable of forming plural subjects. Plural subjects are the agents of group action within a society. Society is *not* a plural subject, but a different kind of collectivity which is the pre-condition of plural subjecthood. Society is *not* a plural subject but a system of overlapping and interacting plural subjecthoods. This is the merest suggestion, but shows how one might progress in incorporating PST into a less distorted investigation of social interactions.

In response to this picture, the plural subject theorist might offer two objections. The first is to claim that our society does show distinctive “plural subject” tendencies, where the population as a whole has collective goals or

actions. A prime example often given is voting¹³. This could be construed as a more normative claim: “Okay”, the plural subject theorist may concede, “most *actual* societies are not plural subjects. But they *ought* to be plural subjects, on the basis of our common collectivity concepts, when they are functioning properly”¹⁴. This would then be a theory which distinguishes between political institutions at the theoretic level, and can only recognise and investigate more (idealised) democratic societies as social groups. This would mean that the vast majority of existent societies could not be investigated by the social sciences, which is not a desirable consequence¹⁵.

The second objection stems from Gilbert’s investigation of the “Kafkaesque” company. Such an organisation – full of employees unaware of one another and without collective thought – is simply *not* a “social group or human collectivity” on Gilbert’s account (Gilbert 1989, 231). The analogous society would be an incredibly dictatorial or repressive regime. If one reads Gilbert as saying that the alienating organisation and dictatorial regime are *not social groups* then the above criticisms apply. If one reads Gilbert as saying they are *not plural subjects* then this essentially agrees with my claim: many (most) societies and organisations are not plural subjects.

I conclude that methodological atomism leads to distortions in PST, which are overcome when the atomic individual is denied. Without this atomic individual the voluntaristic plural subject model of society is no longer plausible. A narrowed but undistorted PST is then free to describe the formation and activity of voluntaristic social groups embedded within society. A final note is required for the plural subject theorist who may concede that I have identified and overcome the circularity and distortion within PST, but at too high a cost. For the picture now is a truly *un-voluntaristic* account, an account that is in danger of losing the agency the original model granted the individual by definition. In response, I suggest that this is not a *theoretical* problem, but a *practical* one. Individual agency within a collectivity is not a given, but something which must be *strived* for, part of that “ancient problem of how to live” (Gilbert 1989, 436)¹⁶.

13 Considering the percentage of the population that actually votes decreases with each election, I believe the claim that society is functioning as a plural subject at these times is not without significant empirical problems.

14 Gilbert (2008, 180-181) offers a similar suggestion.

15 I leave open the possibility that our common collectivity concept is that of the plural subject, and that society is *not* a plural subject, but through misapplication or even manipulation we often mistakenly *think* of society in plural subject terms.

16 A shorter version of this paper was delivered at the *Collective Intentionality VIII* conference (Manchester, 2012), and I am grateful to the comments which it received. I am indebted to Dominic Gregory and especially Joseph Kisolo-Ssonko for their assistance with earlier drafts.

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