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AUGUR AUGUREM VIDENS... BELIEF AND MAKE-BELIEVE IN SOCIAL LIFE

abstract

Lévy-Bruhl thought that the primitive mind could not really distinguish itself from the 'collective mind' of the community it was immersed in; the post-modern mind, by contrast, though arguably no less forcibly pressed into the Procrustean bed of various collective beliefs, is very well in the position to dissociate itself from the 'us' whose position it sometimes pretends to represent. Are such beliefs, then, really anyone's beliefs or are they merely 'make-believes'? Though Gilbert in her 'Joint commitment' does not explicitly address this question, I try to reconstruct, from the text of her book, her possible answer to it.

keywords

belief, individual, collective, pretence

*Vetus autem illud Catonis admodum scitum est,
qui mirari se aiebat, quod non rideret haruspex, haruspicem cum vidisset.
Quota enim quaeque res evenit praedicta ab istis?
aut, si evenit quippiam, quid adferri potest, cur non casu id evenerit?*
Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De divinatione*, II, 24, 51f.

(But indeed, that was quite a clever remark which Cato made many years ago: “I wonder,” said he, “that a soothsayer doesn’t laugh when he sees another soothsayer.” For how many things predicted by them really come true? If any do come true, then what reason can be advanced why the agreement of the event with the prophecy was not due to chance?
English by William Armistead Falconer)

Margaret Gilbert’s *Joint commitment* (2014) is an impressive piece of contemporary social philosophy. One of its many merits is that it brings to the fore not just perennial truths about social action but, also, certain characteristic traits of the present age. One of such traits is what I should like to call the “evanescence of the individual”.

More accurately this should, perhaps, be called the demise, or, better still, the obliteration of the individual, except that it is not always easy to say who the obliterating agent is.

Take, by way of an example, a matter as harmless as class syllabi to be prepared by the instructor for her students at a university. A class syllabus is no doubt a very useful thing for both parties involved, and it makes sense that it should contain such fields as “expected teaching effects” or “social skills acquired during class”.¹ In a course on contemporary social philosophy, getting introduced to Gilbert’s thought would be one of the most important “teaching effects” to expect. But at Gdańsk, Poland, instructors are discouraged, by the anonymous authors of the respective electronic forms, from giving their own wording to whatever they fill such fields out with, and required, instead, to use standardized, predefined expressions and quasi-algebraic symbols like “J23”, or “B52”, mysteriously supposed to be

1 These titles do not sound very idiomatic in English, as they are translated from Polish, see further on above.

comprehensible to the students.² (Thanks Goodness, instructors are still allowed to write their books and papers in their own words, rather than in prefabricated building blocks; but for how long yet?...). It is not known who ever invented such constraints: the University authorities, the Polish government, the European Commission, some other, anonymous and elusive, bureaucrats? Probably not any mere Ortega y Gasset's "masses" since long prevailing over "that single individual" whom Kierkegaard championed a century before Ortega y Gasset and whom he was wont "with joy and gratitude [to] call [his] reader" (Kierkegaard 2009, p. 92). The issue is more redolent of Kafka's *Castle* than of *The revolt of the masses*.

However, the issue Gilbert broaches is far more serious than all that. If I express my beliefs in ready-made phrases, no matter how linguistically objectionable or stylistically maladroit I find them, the beliefs expressed are still *mine*, an *individual's*. Gilbert, by contrast, examines *collective* beliefs and she finds that

X, Y, and so on, *collectively believe that p*, if and only if X, Y, et al. are jointly committed to believe as a body that p (Gilbert 2014, p. 71).³

An old-fashioned epistemologist could take exception⁴ to the very idea that believing (an epistemic *state*),⁵ collective or not, could be the matter of a *commitment*, normally, he would think, a prerogative of acts, actions, and perhaps dispositions to such. But for Gilbert it is precisely *collectively* (on the *definiendum* side of the above definition) and *jointly* (on the *definiens* side) that make the difference.

What, then, is it for a "population",⁶ or simply a group of human individuals, to be "jointly committed to believe as a body that p"? This is, clearly, *the* question to which Gilbert's book as a whole is an answer – and it is not within the purview of this article to deal with *it*. But to start from the basics, right in the Introduction Gilbert tells us that

[f]or any joint commitment, the parties are jointly committed to *phi as a body*, where "phi" stands for the relevant verb. [That is:] they are jointly committed to emulate, *by virtue of the actions of all*, a single phi-er. For example: they are jointly committed to emulate, by virtue of the actions of each, a single believer of the proposition that justice is the first virtue of institutions (Gilbert 2014, p. 7).

If the above were to be taken as a definition, the objection of circularity would spring to mind, "jointly committed" occurring on both sides of "that is".⁷ However, jointly committing oneself

² Such problems, in all fairness to Gdańsk University instructors, appear idyllic as compared with the plight of a growing number of real-life job seekers whose cv's are read first and, in most cases, *only*, by computers running "applicant tracking system" software.

³ Page references to the aforementioned edition. See, too, p. 137 ("The members of a population, P, collectively believe that p if and only if they are jointly committed to believe that p as a body"), and p. 173, where an essentially equivalent definition is given ("A population, P, believes that p if and only if the members of P are jointly committed to believe as a body that p"). With respect to belief, "one might say either, 'Population P believes that p,' or, equivalently, 'The members of population P (collectively) believe that p', Gilbert explains (p. 165). On p. 192 Gilbert applies the same idea to axiological beliefs ("The members of a population P share value V (in the sense they share the belief that item I has certain value) if and only if the members of P are jointly committed to believe that as a body that item I has that value").

⁴ Gilbert comes to terms with this on pp. 153f.

⁵ Or a cognitive one, as Gilbert prefers to call it (p. 163).

⁶ See p. 165.

⁷ See p. 141 where Gilbert successfully, to this writer, disposes of another objection of circularity, that pertaining to "believe".

being a human matter, it is impossible to do so without having an ever so ingenuous idea of what one is doing (i.e., precisely, jointly committing oneself) in mind beforehand.⁸ As Gilbert carefully explains:

[If Andrea and Heinrich have a joint commitment, it is because] Heinrich expresses to Andrea his readiness to be jointly committed to espouse the relevant goal as a body, in conditions of common knowledge, and Andrea does likewise. The joint commitment is then in place.

Note that in order to enter a joint commitment with another person *one must know* [italics W.Ż.] what a joint commitment is. One could not otherwise express one's readiness to enter such a commitment. This does not mean, of course, that the phrase "joint commitment" is part of one's vocabulary (Gilbert 2014, p. 32).

and still less does one need to know and subscribe to a *theory* of joint commitment as sophisticated as Gilbert's. Yet still, it remains that the joint commitment comes into being as soon as, and no sooner than, all parties have expressed their readiness to be jointly committed [and, probably, have taken note of each other's expressions of readiness]⁹ (*ibidem*, and p. 47f.). This is a hermeneutic, rather than vicious, circle, and the former is – it has been said –¹⁰ victorious.

Concerning the concept of "expressing one's readiness to be jointly committed", Gilbert prudently does not engage in much further analysis:

It is not clear that there is any very helpful way of breaking down the notion of expressing one's readiness to be jointly committed. It could be said that one makes it clear that *all is in order as far as one's own will is concerned* for the creation of the relevant joint commitment. Importantly, one understands that *a necessary condition of the creation of the joint commitment is corresponding contributions from the other parties* (Gilbert 2014, p. 48).

More problematic, in this writer's view, is another part of the above quasi-definition of "joint commitment", i.e. the part where Gilbert says that the parties involved "are jointly committed to emulate, *by virtue of the actions of all*, a single phi-er. [e.g.]: they are jointly committed to emulate, by virtue of the actions of each, a single believer of the proposition that justice is the first virtue of institutions" (Gilbert 2014, p. 7). What are the relevant *actions* of a believer like that in her capacity of a believer? A *single* believer – and Gilbert is probably right when she says that it is substantial for her theory that the parties to a joint commitment should emulate a *single* performer of whatever they are committed to –¹¹ first and foremost *believes* (which is not, strictly speaking, an action)¹², for instance that justice is the most valuable virtue of institutions. But parties to a joint commitment, not having quite literally a common mind,¹³ cannot emulate that believer *as a body*.¹⁴ Clearly, they can emulate her (the exemplary believer)

8 "The concept of [joint commitment] is implicit in everyday discourse" (p. 174) – not just discourse, also everyday practices.

9 "In conditions of common knowledge" (pp. 32, 154).

10 See Maddox (1983)

11 Otherwise her definition of joint commitment would be circular, see note 7.

12 But on pp. 32f. Gilbert tells us that she construes "doing something" – and, presumably, "action" – broadly, so as to include such psychological states as belief; see also p. 193.

13 Gilbert explicitly abjures the "scary monster" of a "group mind" (p. 119), cf. pp. 9f. and 135.

14 Alternatively: *as a unit or as one* (p. 33). The scope of "as a body" in Gilbert sometimes gives rise to doubts. Emulate-as-a-body or emulate a phi-er-as-a-body?

severally, each for one's own account, but that is clearly not what Gilbert is aiming at. At this point (not any definite page in her book but strewn all through her work), Gilbert turns phenomenologist –¹⁵ she starts working with examples, to no small part quite illustrative and convincing ones. This one is particularly clear:

What is it to be jointly committed to *x as a body* [...] [It is] to be jointly committed to bring it about as far as is possible that the parties emulate a single *x-er*. [...] Suppose that John and Doris are jointly committed to believe as a body that Doris, who is ill, will get well. What must each of them now do, in order that the joint commitment is fulfilled? It is not the case that each must personally believe that Doris will get well, something it would be hard if not impossible for either one deliberately to bring about. Rather, in the appropriate circumstances – in particular, when they are together – each is to act in such a way that together they emulate a single believer of the proposition that Doris will get well.

This we know already. But here comes the new part:

Among other things, whatever he or she personally thinks, neither will in the other's presence baldly declaim that Doris will not recover (p. 348).

This is quite congruent with such explanations as this:

[T]he joint commitment will be fulfilled [...] if those concerned say that *p* in appropriate contexts, with an appropriate degree of confidence, and do not call *p* or obvious corollaries into question. Their behavior generally should be *expressive of the belief that p*¹⁶, in the appropriate contexts (p. 176)

or this one (suppose that the joint commitment is to believe, *as a body*, that an item has a certain value):

This would be achieved by each of the committed parties doing such things as: confidently stating that item *I* has value *v*; refraining from calling this or its obvious corollaries into question; suggesting by actions and emotional expressions that item *I* has value *v*; not, therefore, acting contrary to the shared value, nor reporting such contrary actions with bravado. Thus, were each of the parties the mouthpiece or representative of a single person, *one would judge that single person to believe* [italics W.Ż.] that item *I* had value *v* (pp. 193f.).

There are more direct ways of creating that impression, for example, letting an actual mouthpiece or representative of a body say such things as “The United States believes that those responsible for these dreadful acts must be punished” (p. 131) or “The campus improvement committee believes that there needs to be a café on campus” (pp. 139, 146), or “The union believes that management is being unreasonable” (p. 164), or “We believe that

¹⁵ She mentions with irony “analytic philosophers, established purveyors of clarity and rigor” as those who have ignored collective belief (p. 132).

¹⁶ This is a critical juncture Gilbert passes by without ceremony: whose belief? An individual's or a collective's? Or generic, perhaps?

the conservation of species is an important goal” (p. 172). But the problem is that while the mouthpiece or representative can be, and more often than not is, actual, “that single person” (the one body as which the parties to the joint commitment try to act) cannot – it is to remain merely fictional, or at best hypothetical (but against this see Christian List’s contribution to SRSSP, as well as his and Philip Pettit’s publications on the topic). It is for this reason, perhaps, that the question whether the single persons that there actually are, i.e. the parties to the joint commitment, for their own part do or do not believe that item I has value v (or whatever they are jointly committed to believe) must recede and is overshadowed by the question if the parties to the joint commitment *behave* (p. 141) in a certain way, such as “refrain [...] from calling [the proposition they are jointly committed to believe] or its obvious corollaries into question” (p. 193), or from openly, “without preamble”,¹⁷ denying it (p. 137). Such behaviour lays one open to rebuke from the other parties to the joint commitment concerned, the “standing to demand conforming [to the joint commitment in question] and to rebuke for non-conformity” (p. 8) being one of the best-explained¹⁸ and most often recurrent elements of Gilbert’s theory¹⁹ – and finally even to a kind of ostracism as an “outsider” and no longer “one of us” (p.177, cf. pp. 120, 172).

Yet it is precisely that evanescent question – of whether the parties to a joint commitment (have to) believe severally that which they are jointly committed to believe – that is most interesting in the context of the “evanescence of the individual”, mentioned early on in this essay. The way Gilbert addresses this question (and she does so quite often in her book) shows (in Wittgenstein’s sense) how less and less important it is getting.

In the Introduction she says clearly: “I do argue that [...] when we²⁰ [collectively] believe something no one of us needs to believe that thing” and provides a footnote mentioning chapter 7 of her book (p. 9) as the relevant reference; but in chapter 7 itself she is less bold and unambiguous as far as the “no one” part of above clear statement is concerned.

For instance, arguing for a “no” as an answer to the question whether *most*²¹ [italics W.Ž.] members of a group must believe that such-and-such in order for it be true that they collectively believe it, Gilbert employs the example of a poetry discussion group thinking

17 A “preamble” could be something like “We believe collectively that item I has value v, but speaking personally and for myself, I should say...” see e.g. p. 171.

18 But also, having a considerable explanatory power within Gilbert’s theory of collective belief. That is, a substantial part of what (on this theory) collective belief is, is “something that gives the parties to it the standing to rebuke one another for certain types of behaviour challenging that belief,” see e.g. p. 172, where this type of behaviour is described as “bluntly [i.e. without a preamble like ‘speaking just for myself?’] expressing a view contrary to [what we collectively believe]”.

19 The present writer cannot help wondering if this element of Gilbert’s theory is not applicable to some cultures more and to some others less, for instance, if it is not “truer” in application to cultures influenced by the diverse versions of Protestantism. Against this seems to militate the circumstance that Gilbert precisely for this element of her doctrine at crucial places invokes the authority of Emile Durkheim (on whom she fathers collective epistemology in general, pp. 166f.) and his theory of *faits sociaux* (e.g. pp. 132, 177). Be it as it may, this hypothetical cultural relativity of the “standing to rebuke” seems to escape Gilbert’s notice. What does not, is the important fact that despite the quasi-moral flavour of the rebuke here intended, a joint commitment can be to morally reprehensible acts (pp. 121f.) – and thus there is no (?) *prima facie* moral obligation to act on a joint commitment *qua* such.

20 English works with “we” in such contexts, a pronoun with strong moral overtones (see preceding note) whereas other languages have much less engaging “collective subject” pronouns or constructions: German “*man*”, French “*on*”, Italian “*si*”, Polish “*się*”. These are rendered as “you”, “one”, or “they” in English, but none of these is exact. See Ortega y Gasset (1981, p. 15) on the Spanish “*se*.”

21 It is instructive to see how, in Gilbert’s text – and this is no “rebuke” directed at her text, for which this author has no standing, but rather a praise for how faithfully she is therein representing certain tendencies of our age – the classical quantifiers “all” and “none” get sometimes, quite frequently in fact, replaced with multal and paucal quantifiers, such as “most”. “All” and “none”, however, take individuals more seriously than “most”.

collectively that a poem is a powerful one. In this group, she says, there is *just one* member who does not find that poem all that good, and even this person nodded her head in approval at the critical moment of the group's making up their minds, thereby expressing her readiness to see the view she personally disagrees with as the established view of the group (pp. 168f.). A group where "all" less one is no longer "most" has two members, by the way.

But then, as if heedless of her cautious quantifying with the multal "most", she goes on to assert: "In this informal type of case [...] there may be a collective belief that p without all or most – or indeed any [italics W.Ż.] – members of the population in question believing that p" (p.169). This is, indeed, a "stark", as she herself puts it, conclusion. But if the matter is any different in more formal kinds of cases she does not make quite explicit. Here is a seminar on human rights – a formal entity, presumably – which enters a joint commitment to believe that the notion of group rights is viable. The members of the seminar are under the obligation, derivative of that joint commitment, "to express that belief at least within the confines of the seminar when it is in session" (p.176). But when they are "at large", and a friend approaches one of them with his doubts concerning group rights, the member of the seminar in question is ("presumably", as Gilbert cautiously puts it) free to give him her mind even without a preamble like "personally speaking..." (p.177). Now since there had been no mention of "her" before and "she" is entirely arbitrary, we are entitled, by Universal Generalisation, familiar to logicians, to conclude that *all* parties to the seminar and its concomitant joint commitment may, personally speaking, dissent. Is this what Gilbert means?

A similar impression arises on the occasion of Rose, who, while acknowledging "that she and her friends collectively believe a certain thing [adds] without a sense of fault, that she, *personally*, does not believe it" (p.140). Again, since Rose seems to be an arbitrary selected member of a gang of friends collectively believing in something-or-other, the question arises whether we may apply Universal Generalisation, and conclude that in fact none of these friends personally believes, or needs to believe, that thing.

There are, too, different "populations" comprising the very same individuals, for instance a court of law and a poetry reading group, that may have (collectively) two different opinions on the merits of a certain poem (read for enjoyment by the latter population, and in the context of a legal action by the former one) (pp. 170f.) – again, need it be the case, we may ask, that nearly half of the individuals involved personally hold the one opinion on the poem and another half the other, or is another distribution conceivable, for instance, that one of the opinions is held by no one personally? Something like this is conceivable, to Gilbert, for collective intentions: Olive and Ned may collectively intend to climb a hill, while neither of them has the corresponding individual "contributory intention", as Gilbert calls it, i.e. neither intends "personally" to climb all the way to the top – maybe as a result of the first difficulties (pp. 103f.). "[A]s a *conceptual matter* [italics W.Ż.] when two or more people share an intention, none of them need to have a contributory intention" (p. 103) – does the plural form of the verb "to need" indicate that *all* the individuals involved may *at the same time* not have the contributory intention?²²

Given the current trend to the obliteration of the individual, the question "Does anyone of us really and sincerely believe what we collectively believe in virtue of a joint commitment?" is not always properly askable, or, indeed, intelligible. Certainly, for anything that "we" collectively believe, there have always been and there will always be quite a few among "us" who do not really share this belief personally, this is no news; but... are they just a few, or are they more – most, or even *all* of those who are party to that collective belief? One can almost

22 Something analogous for collective beliefs: Mark and Roz, p. 137.

hear a voice mumbling off-record: “We’re too busy peddling various ‘corporate identities’, so who cares?...”. Gilbert does not press the question too hard. She does, it is true, at length discuss, and in this writer’s view successfully²³ refute, what she calls “rejectionism” (pp. 133ff.), a position that maintains that the collective belief in the sense of her theory is not at all belief but just a pallid “acceptance”.²⁴ She stresses that collective beliefs are – as are the individual ones – adopted and given up for *epistemic* reasons (pp. 148ff.) or that they cannot be taken on at will (the relevant joint commitments can, pp. 155f.). But she remains mildly non-committal and soft-contoured on various critical issues.

Olive and Ned (pp. 103f.) make one feel sorry, as do Roz and Mark (p. 137): parties to collective intentions or beliefs none of them personally shares. In Poland under Communism (1944–1989) we collectively believed Marxism-Leninism, with (next to) no one believing it personally, with all the practical consequences of that pretended belief, *somewhat* more vexatious than a hill left unclimbed, and with a collective schizophrenia to loom large for generations yet. “But does any one *really* believe what we believe?” “How silly to ask such questions!...” Gilbert observes with Durkheim (the “coercive power of collective beliefs”, pp. 131, 157, 160, 172, 177) that people are often “educated” (by officiously asserting what they do not yet believe²⁵ and by rebukes if they refuse to assert it, or, worse still, assert the opposite, or report such counter-assertions with bravado, p. 193) into internalizing beliefs they are jointly (with someone else) committed to believe.

It would be ironic if such “educated” ones were ultimately to be the only ones to individually believe collective beliefs, the rest just paying lip-service²⁶ to them or at best “going through the motions” of believing them, Cato’s soothsayers (“augurs”), T.S. Eliot’s hollow men. Also, one wonders if such “populations” are not doomed to failure, in a rather short run. In Innocent III’s times few influential Catholics believed what “the Church” believed, and the edifice was toppling; yet a certain Francis of Assisi did believe – and he saved the Church, according to the pious legend. Maybe every collective, to survive, needs its own St. Francis? This question is as much philosophical as it is empirical.

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23 Too complex to go into here, but see the first paragraph on p. 144.

24 As in assuming something “for the sake of argument” without actually believing it (p. 134, including note 11) though this is probably not the kind of acceptance in terms of which Gilbert’s theory of collective belief is most fairly interpreted (see pp. 146f.), even if one believes in/accepts “rejectionism”.

25 Pascal’s Wager includes a related idea of educating oneself (note well: *oneself*) to believe by behaving like a believer.

26 Isaiah 29:13.