

UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

An Individualist Account of the Social World

by

Weidong Sun

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE

DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

GRADUATE PROGRAM IN PHILOSOPHY

CALGARY, ALBERTA

APRIL, 2024

© Weidong Sun 2024

Abstract

Human lives involve remarkable forms of social organization. Not only do they work together towards common goals, but they also divide themselves into mutually exclusive, and sometimes opposing, groups. A comprehensive theory of social phenomena should help us understand and appreciate the complexity and diversity of the social world. Towards building a comprehensive theory of social phenomena, this thesis argues that the key to a theory's success lies in an in-depth investigation of two closely connected but ultimately separable concepts: "reasons" and "norms." This thesis attempts to show that our social world can be satisfactorily explained in terms of "motivating reasons" and "norms," neither of which requires any prior understanding of the nature of human collectivity. In contrast, collectivists, such as Margaret Gilbert and John Searle, describe our social world in terms of collective, group-centric concepts such as joint commitment, shared intentionality and we-reasoning. Taking joint commitment as an example, this thesis defends the singularist approach against collectivism by developing a novel singularist framework, the MR-N (Motivating Reason-Norm) framework and show how the MR-N framework can be used fully describe any collective concept and, in particular, the concept of joint commitment. As a result, the diverse range of social phenomena that can be described using the concept of joint commitment can also be described in terms of the MR-N framework. This thesis then briefly considers a popular singularist theory proposed by Michael Bratman, who seeks to combine a theory of planning together with a theory of law proposed by H. L. A. Hart and compares Bratman's singularist theory to the singularist MR-N framework.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank John Baker, my previous supervisor, for his remarkable insights. It is through our countless exchanges of ideas that I was motivated to consider various ways of making sense of the complexities of human interactions. With his support, I was able to finally arrive at a comprehensive framework for understanding the social world in which we live.

I am also indebted to Jeremy Fantl, my current supervisor, for his guidance and invaluable feedback. Thanks to him, I was able to further refine my ideas and retain the focus of my thesis.

I want to express my appreciation to Nat for her encouragement and support during the time of writing of this thesis.

Last but not least, I would like to acknowledge the support of Richard Zach and Ann Levey who have helped me a lot with personal and official matters.

Preface

This thesis is an original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Weidong Sun.

Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Preface	iv
Chapter 1 – Introduction	1
Section 1.1 – Backgrounds.....	3
Section 1.2 – The case for collectivism	5
Section 1.3 – Shared intentions	6
Section 1.4 – A short singularist response	9
Section 1.5 – Roadmap.....	13
Chapter 2 – Introduction of the singularist framework.....	16
Section 2.1 – Exposition of the notion of groups.....	16
Section 2.2 – Identification of the questions	18
Section 2.3 – The order of presentation	20
Chapter 3 – Motivating Reasons	22
Section 3.1 – Reasons for action.....	22
Section 3.2 – Motivating reasons.....	22
Section 3.3 – Motives	23
Section 3.4 – Assessment of the relevant circumstances	25
Section 3.5 – Features of the theory of motivating reasons	26

Chapter 4 – Norms	29
Section 4.1 – Taxonomy of norms.....	29
Section 4.2 – Deontic norms	31
Section 4.3 – Constitutive norms	35
Chapter 5 – Norm-related Concepts.....	39
Section 5.1 – Application of a norm to a circumstance	40
Section 5.2 – Knowledge, compliance and endorsement.....	41
Section 5.3 – Relationships between knowledge, compliance and endorsement	47
Section 5.4 – Revisit of motivating reasons	48
Section 5.5 – Acceptance of norms.....	50
Section 5.6 – Definition of applies to and binding on.....	51
Section 5.7 – Applicability of norms and different types of norms.....	52
Section 5.8 – Relationship between norms and motivating reasons	58
Chapter 6 – The Business School Examples.....	59
Section 6.1 – Group 1.....	59
Section 6.2 – Group 2.....	62
Section 6.3 – Group 3.....	66
Section 6.4 – Coming about of an agreement, a pact or a joint commitment.....	69
Section 6.5 – Differing opinions within a group	72
Chapter 7 – Practicality of Norms.....	75

Chapter 8 – Gilbertian Joint Commitment	82
Section 8.1 – Introduction of joint commitment.....	82
Section 8.2 – Analysis of joint commitment.....	83
Section 8.3 – Response to Gilbert’s charges against singularism via an analysis of shared intention	90
Chapter 9 – Concluding Remarks	93
Section 9.1 – Other singularist theories.....	93
Section 9.2 – Conclusion	95
References	97

Chapter 1 – Introduction

This thesis largely falls within the domain of “the philosophy of social phenomena,”¹ which is a branch of philosophy primarily concerned with the explanation of various social phenomena such as cooperation. Although most people have an intuitive understanding of social phenomena that they encounter in daily life, many struggle to describe them in a precise way, let alone theorize about them. In this thesis, I am primarily concerned with describing and theorizing social phenomena.

There are roughly two classes of theories in this field: singularist and collectivist theories. Collectivist theories postulate some kind of irreducible collective entity, such as a plural “we,” a “joint commitment” or a “shared, collective intentionality” that cannot be fully explained in terms of “the individual,” i.e., in terms of each individual or what properly belongs to each individual. Singularist theories, on the other hand, are theories that do not postulate any irreducible collective entities. For instance, members of a small but close-knit political party are jointly committed to back their candidate in the upcoming election. From a singularist perspective, this joint commitment can be fully explained in terms of concepts such as personal commitments, the rules of the party or the reasons each member has to act. On the other hand, collectivists would argue that there is a sense of “togetherness” shared amongst the party members that cannot be fully explained in terms of “the individual.” Members of the small party are doing something as a group rather than as individuals who happen to agree to work together.

¹ The philosophy of social phenomena goes by different names, such as “the philosophy of social ontology.” Here, I follow Gilbert terminology. See Gilbert 2013, p. 1.

Underlying the two classes of theories are two competing philosophical views. The first view I call collectivism, which is the view that irreducible collective entities are practically indispensable for describing certain types of social phenomena. Singularism, in contrast, is the view that collectivism is false, i.e., every collective entity that is used to describe social phenomena can be fully explained in singularist terms in a neat and precise way.

Why are we interested in singularist theories? In philosophy, there is a widely accepted principle called Ockham's razor, which says that "entities are not to be multiplied beyond necessity." According to this principle, collectivist theories are, other things being equal, inferior to singularist theories since they rely on an additional kind of entity—the collective entity.² Margaret Gilbert, a famous contemporary collectivist, acknowledges the validity of Ockham's razor and notes the following:

It might be good if, as theorists, we could fully describe our social world...in terms of singularist concepts... However, if singularism fails, we should not be afraid to introduce a non-singularist concept of joint commitment. (Gilbert, 2013 p. 10).

It is preferable, therefore, to describe our social world in purely singularist terms. However, as Gilbert (2013) argues, singularist theories so far have failed to meet this challenge.

My primary goal in this thesis is to show that singularists are able to meet this challenge—theories that do not postulate any irreducible collective entities indeed have

² Some collectivists deny that they are postulating mysterious entities such as a "collective mind" (Gilbert, 2023). Nevertheless, they maintain the thesis that collectivist concepts are not neatly reducible.

the potential to fully describe our social world in a neat and precise way. To this end, I aim to present a comprehensive singularist framework for describing and theorizing social phenomena.

Section 1.1 – Backgrounds

Since I will be defending singularism, collectivism is the position that I will be arguing against. Margaret Gilbert develops her collectivist theory in a number of works (1989, 2006, 2009, 2013, 2018, 2023). Her theory is centred around the concept of “joint commitment,” which can be understood roughly as a decision of multiple people to do something together.³ According to Gilbert, the parties involved in a joint commitment are jointly committed to do an act, ϕ , as “a single body” and “emulate, by virtue of the actions of all, a single ϕ -er” (Gilbert 2013, p. 7). As such, joint commitments cannot be conceived in terms of the personal commitments of each party⁴ involved. Gilbert goes on to apply this concept to describe a large variety of social phenomena.

Gilbert’s theory of joint commitment is not the only collectivist theory on offer. John Searle (1995, 2002, 2010) presents a collectivist theory that does not emphasize joint commitment. Instead, it emphasizes concepts such as “social institution” and “collective intentionality.” Although, I take many inspirations from Searle when designing my framework, in this thesis, I will not discuss in detail Searle’s collectivist theory nor his main arguments in favour of collectivism.

³ See Gilbert 2006, Chapter 7, p. 125-164 for a detailed description of joint commitment.

⁴ I assume, throughout this thesis, that the relevant parties are human beings, though they do not have to be. The question about what could possibly constitute a “relevant party” is a topic for another occasion.

Not only does my singularist framework compete with collectivist theories, but it may also be compared to other singularist theories, such as Michael Bratman's (1999, 2014, 2022). I do not have time to discuss Bratman's theory in detail, but I will say a few words why I believe my framework is superior to Bratman's in [Section 9.1](#).

It should be noted that my framework and other singularist or collectivist theories, in areas where they overlap, are designed to articulate the same social phenomena. If everyone's intuitive understanding of the social phenomena is correct, then, arguably, the most meaningful debate to be had is the debate about how to describe these social phenomena in a precise and unambiguous way. I recognize that, in practice, expediency is sometimes preferred over precision. As a result, although singularist theories are theoretically superior to collectivist ones, collectivist terms and concepts may still be used in certain areas of practical application. After all, as Margaret Gilbert correctly observes, it is common for people to use "plural terms" such as "we," "union" or "unity" when intuitively *thinking about* the relationships between individuals.

However, there is an important difference between intuitively *thinking or perceiving* something, such as social phenomena, and fully *describing or theorizing* about them. People may intuitively think or perceive things in collectivist terms, but when it comes to scholarship in social sciences and humanities, I believe singularist theories such as mine are superior.

Moreover, my singularist framework does something that its predecessors do not do. Due to its relative simplicity, my framework is particularly helpful in interdisciplinary contexts. It is likely for people working in different disciplines, speaking different languages or hailing from different cultures or societies to misunderstand one another.

Complex collectivist concepts are most helpful in situations where participants of the conversation share a high level of prior understanding of the social phenomena in question and the terminologies commonly used to describe them. For instance, when I refer to a particular social phenomenon by using the phrase “joint commitment,” philosophers of social phenomena are likely to understand exactly what I mean. A psychologist or sociologist, on the other hand, may have difficulty trying to figure out which phenomenon I am referring to. This is where my framework comes in handy. A person who communicates in terms of my singularist framework can be more easily understood by others, thanks to the framework’s relative simplicity.

I hope that my framework will not only be an important point of reference when settling the debate about whether singularism is theoretically viable, but it will also be a useful theoretical tool, especially for interdisciplinary or cross-cultural studies.

Section 1.2 – The case for collectivism

Why collectivism? I believe the main intuitions in favour of collectivism, which many collectivists including Searle and Gilbert emphasize, are the following.

As a matter of fact, people often speak in collectivist terms, and it is natural to refer to what is familiar. More importantly, it seems impossible at first glance that anyone can fully describe our social feelings such as “the feeling of acting together” in purely singularist terms.⁵

⁵ I tend to think of the feeling as something akin to “qualia,” i.e., subjective conscious experience.

Allow me to put this into perspective by giving an example. In team sports, such as hockey or football, team members are working towards the same goal. Members often feel that they are acting as a team, as a unit, or as an unbreakable one. Personal grievances and complaints are set aside. To describe such a team purely from each individual's perspective seems contrary to the *spirit* of teamwork.

In addition, it seems implausible to describe group beliefs in terms of individual beliefs since, as Gilbert (2023) argues, it is neither necessary nor sufficient for the majority of the members to believe something in order for the group to believe it.

Furthermore, there is a problem with group action. Take the act of “voting” for example. A group, as a whole, may vote for a particular candidate, despite the fact that no individual member of the group can be said to be voting for that candidate.

Another important and commonly used collective term is “shared intention.” Gilbert (2013) argues that the most popular singularist accounts of “shared intention” fail to meet three central criteria of adequacy and are therefore inadequate or incomprehensive as theories of social phenomena. I will briefly go over Gilbert's argument in the next section and offer a full response in Chapter 8 by arguing that my account does meet the three criteria.

Section 1.3 – Shared intentions

When it comes to understanding and theorizing “shared intentions,” Gilbert (2013, p. 101) notes that “probably the most prevalent perspective” adopted by singularist theorists is what she calls the “personal intention perspective.” She then

argues that the “personal intention perspective” fails to meet “three central criteria of adequacy for an account of shared intention” (p. 102) and are, therefore, inadequate.

To begin, Gilbert clarifies the kind of personal intention that is relevant to the discussion—what she calls “correlative personal intention.” She defines “correlative personal intention” as an intention to contribute as best he can to the collectively intended outcome. Suppose that two people share an intention to go to a park together. Each person’s personal intention to go to the park is a “correlative personal intention.” Are personal intentions necessary for shared intentions? Gilbert’s answer is “no.”

Consider the following example. Suppose that Alice and Bob are hiking together. They agreed to hike to the top of the hill and thereby formed a collective intention to do so. However, halfway into the hike, Alice, without informing Bob of her change of heart, unilaterally intends to quit. Bob, not being aware of Alice’s intention, also intends to quit without informing Alice. Gilbert contends that, despite their change of hearts, Alice and Bob can still be said to have the collective intention to hike to the top of the hill, despite the fact that neither of them has a personal intention to do so. Therefore, we have a case in which no party has a correlative personal intention, but the collective intention still holds. Thus, Gilbert proposes the disjunction criterion.

Disjunction Criterion: “An adequate account of shared intention is such that it is not necessarily the case that for every shared intention, on that account, there be correlative personal intentions of the individual parties” (Gilbert 2013).

Existing singularist theories, such as the one endorsed by Michael Bratman, consider correlative personal intentions to be necessary building-blocks of shared intention. These singularist theories fail to meet the disjunction criterion and are

therefore inadequate as theories of “shared intention” and, by extension, as theories of social phenomena.

This example brings out another feature of shared intentions. That is to say, some kind of mutual acknowledgement, or concurrence, is required for shared intentions to be rescinded. Thus, Gilbert proposes the concurrence criterion and the obligation criterion.

Concurrence Criterion: “an adequate account of shared intention will entail that ... the concurrence of all parties is required in order that a given shared intention be changed or rescinded, or that a given party be released from participating in it” (2013).

On the flip side, one is free to unilaterally rescind or alter one’s personal intentions. This suggests, according to Gilbert (2013, p.108), that there must be something other than mere personal intentions at the core of any shared intention. One such missing element is obligation, Gilbert observes. It is due to the existence of a certain type of obligation owed by and to one another that renders unilateral decisions to quit invalid.

Obligation Criterion: an adequate account of shared intention will entail that each party to a shared intention is obligated to each to act as appropriate to the shared intention in conjunction with the rest.

By virtue of this obligation, each party is in a position to demand certain actions as appropriate to the shared intention and is in a position to rebuke the other parties if they fail to perform these actions within an appropriate timeframe. Since obligations that inhere in shared intention cannot be explained in terms of personal intentions alone,

Gilbert argues that personal intentions cannot fully explain shared intentions as singularists seem to suggest.

According to Gilbert (2023), personal intentions are neither necessary nor sufficient for shared intentions. As a result, popular singularist theories, such as Michael Bratman's, that try to explain shared intentions in terms of personal intentions will fail to meet the three criteria. They are, therefore, inadequate or incomprehensive as theories of "collective intentions" let alone theories of social phenomena.

In response to Gilbert, I will show that the MR-N framework incorporates not only what might be construed as "personal intentions" but also another class of concepts called "norms." The combination of these concepts, I argue, will satisfy any criterion that any reasonable account of shared intention might postulate. More generally, the MR-N framework can be used to describe all kinds of social phenomena, including phenomena featuring the "shared intention" that Gilbert has in mind. Specifically, in Section 8.3, I will offer an account of "shared intention," formulated in terms the framework, that will satisfy Gilbert's three criteria.

Before we go into details, first, allow me to quickly respond to the other worries posed by collectivists regarding the intuitive appeal against singularism and the problem of theorizing "group action" and "group belief" in purely singularist terms.

Section 1.4 – A short singularist response

With respect to the intuitive appeal of collectivism, it is undeniable that people in a group sometimes feel that they are acting as a group, as a unit or as one. Thus, we

are intuitively leaning towards account these notions in collective terms. However, when it comes to theoretical inquiries, what is arguably more important is *not* what people intuitively regard themselves as doing, but how we can explain their behaviours. Occasionally, I hear stories about parents who claim and believe that they deeply love their children but who also abuse their children in the name of “love.” It might be true that the parents do experience a sense of affection towards their children, and it might also be true that they *feel* that they are acting out of “love.” However, their actions are perhaps better explained with reference to other factors such as their psychological fear or insecurities. My primary goal here is to describe social behaviours in a systematic way, a way in which what people subjectively take themselves to be doing is not essential to the description. Therefore, although collectivism can be intuitively appealing, for the sake of theoretical clarity, it is more than worthwhile to investigate into the possibility of describing and theorizing our social world in purely singularist terms.

Next, let us consider a case of group action. Political scientists, such as Philip Pettit (2003), have examples of election in which a group, as a whole, votes for a particular candidate, but no member of the group is voting for that candidate.

Without going into any detail, we can describe this scenario in terms of motivating reasons and norms as follows. There exists a set of norms that governs the election. In accordance with the norm, the attainment of certain states of affairs constitutes “a group’s voting for a particular candidate,” say candidate 2. Each member of the group has sufficiently strong motivating reasons, by virtue of their various motives and their assessment of the circumstances, the details of which I will later discuss, to embark on a series of actions that constitutes, in accordance with the norm, “voting for a

candidate who is not candidate 2.” Due to possible discrepancies between norms governing “group voting” and “individual voting,” a group may be said to vote for a particular candidate while at the same time no member of the group can be said to be voting for that candidate.

Here is a more concrete example. Suppose the votes, by order of priority, look like this:

Voter A: Candidate 3, candidate 2, candidate 1, candidate 4

Voter B: Candidate 1, candidate 2, candidate 4, candidate 3

Voter C: Candidate 4, candidate 2, candidate 3, candidate 1

Let us assume that top-priority votes count as four points, second-priority three points, third-priority two points and forth-priority one point. Tallying the points, Candidate 2 wins with nine points, ahead of other candidates with seven points each. Thus, Candidate 2 is the one that the group votes for. Moreover, none of the voters votes for Candidate 2 (as their first priority). Hence, we have a case in which a group is voting for a candidate that no member of the group is voting for. This example can be subsumed under my general description, in terms of motivating reasons and norms, of group voting.

Moving on to group beliefs, collectivists, such as Gilbert (2013, 2023) and Searle (1995, 2010), argue that group beliefs *cannot* be reduced to personal beliefs. I grant their claim, at least on narrow interpretations of “group beliefs.” However, this does not, by any stretch of logic, imply that these concepts cannot be explained in purely singularist terms so long as we do not restrict ourselves to only one species of singularist term, i.e., the term “personal belief.”

Indeed, as Gilbert (2023) maintains, “a group believes a proposition, p , if and only if members of the group are jointly committed to believe p .” Thus, according to Gilbert, “group beliefs” can be explained without remainder in terms of “joint commitment,” but “joint commitment,” I will argue in [Chapter 8](#), can be explained in purely singularist terms.

More generally, Gilbert, across multiple works (1989, 2006, 2009, 2013, 2018 and 2023), has attempted to show that, on the basis of “joint commitment,” one can describe a large variety of social phenomena. If the concept of joint commitment, which is generally believed to be irreducible, can in fact be reduced to purely singularist terms, then every collective social concept and by extension every social phenomenon that can be adequately explained by joint commitment can also be explained satisfactorily in purely singularist terms.

If this were to be my whole answer, however, one may not be completely satisfied. This is because I would have considered only a specific account of group beliefs and shared intentions, i.e., Gilbert’s account. For one thing, there may be other, different accounts of these notions. Furthermore, there are a number of singular and collective concepts that have yet to become the focus of our discussion, such as responsibility, expectation and so on, that may also pose a threat to singularism. Hence, a more general response is called for.

Nevertheless, one of my goals is to offer a singularist framework that can be used to adequately explain joint commitment in purely singularist terms.

Although I plan to use the concept of joint commitment as a medium for defending singularism, this represents a rather obscure and indirect way of doing so. A

more general and direct way, and perhaps a more natural way, is to show that singularist theories can readily describe social phenomena without having to use any complex collective concept, such as the concept of joint commitment as a medium. I will be doing singularism some justice by showing how singularist theories function in a way that they are naturally designed to function by showing how the framework can be applied to concrete scenarios, which I will do in [Chapter 6](#).

Section 1.5 – Roadmap

In light of the above considerations, my thesis will proceed as follows.

In Chapter 2, I will set the stage by introducing the notion of “groups.” I will briefly explain how questions about social phenomena in general can be translated into questions about “groups.”

In philosophical circles, people are accustomed to what is known as “conceptual engineering”⁶ and the use of carefully defined technical terms. In light of this, I will present my framework in the following way:

- (1) I identify a short list of core technical concepts that will form the backbone of the singularist framework, namely, motivating reasons and norms.
- (2) I provide a relatively simple definition of these core concepts, together with a number of auxiliary concepts.

⁶ According to David Chalmers (2020), conceptual engineering is commonly understood as a process of “designing, implementing, and evaluating concepts.”

- (3) I offer an account of how I intend these technical concepts to function and, in particular, how they relate to one another.

In short, motivating reasons have to do with to a person's motive to do something. Norms, on the other hand, primarily concern social rules or conventions. Before coming together to reclaim the plurality of the social world, motivating reasons and norms are first conceived separately from one another as independent concepts. For this reason, I would be happy to call my framework the "MR-N framework."

I will introduce motivating reasons in Chapter 3, norms in Chapter 4, and a list of norm-related auxiliary concepts in Chapter 5.

In response to the collectivism's appeal, to show how my framework can be used to describe scenarios involving groups and collective concepts, I will walk through a series of concrete examples in Chapter 6. These examples are inspired by Searle's Business School examples (1995, 2010), which Searle introduces with the goal of showing that the notion of collective intentionality cannot be reduced to individual intentionality. Although I will not make a direct argument against Searle, by adapting the Business School examples for my own use, I offer a glimpse into how my framework describes collective intentionality in purely singularist terms, how it explains the concept of agreement and how it addresses issues related to personal and group beliefs.

Before making an argument about joint commitment, I need to establish an important preliminary result. This result deserves a chapter dedicated to it. Hence, in Chapter 7, I will defend the proposition that any collectivist concept that does not admit a singularist partial description is impractical. A notion of collective duty will be used as an example to help make the case.

In Chapter 8, I will show that the central concept of Gilbert's theory, i.e., the concept of joint commitment, can be fully described in terms of my singularist framework. Roughly speaking, a case of joint commitment can be understood as a case involving a special kind of group featuring a special kind of norm, in which each member of the group is motivated to act in accordance with the norm.

Finally, in Chapter 9, I will begin by saying a few words about Bratman's singularist theory as a potential competitor to my MR-N framework before discussing potential impacts of the MR-N framework on the field of philosophy, sociology and beyond.

Chapter 2 – Introduction of the singularist framework

Section 2.1 – Exposition of the notion of groups

Since we are interested in the philosophy of social phenomena, the first concept I am going to introduce is a concept of a “group.” People often speak of “societies,” but the word “society” has a connotation of being large and broadly encompassing. I prefer the flexibility of the word “group.” A group can be comprised of any number of people (more than one).

By introducing the notion of a “group,” I plan to transform a discussion of social phenomena into a discussion of the ways in which people behave in relation to groups. For instance, if two people are walking together, we may think of them as a group engaged in some kind of activity in relation to one another.⁷ Thus, by accounting for groups in general, we can account for social phenomena.

What are groups? According to Stephanie Collins’ tripartite model (2019), a group can be a highly organized *collective* with a decision-making body and a governing structure, or a *coalition* with shared goals or aspirations, or a *combination* that is neither an organized collective nor a coalition of shared values. A lot of atypical groups will fit into this category. Examples of *combinations* include “the international community,” “the people in a particular pub,” or “me, you, and Shakespeare” (Collins 2019, p. 20), none of which supposedly features a decision-making body or a shared goal or aspiration

⁷ I came up with this example together with John Baker, my previous supervisor who unfortunately fell ill before this thesis can be completed. I am greatly indebted to his wisdom and support.

according to Collins. The tripartite model can be a useful starting point, but to account for the uncertainties surrounding the third kind of group, *combinations*, we need to look for another categorization.

Besides the tripartite model, there is another categorization that I am going to propose. According to it, we have what I call “activity groups” and “similarity groups.”

An *activity group* is a group comprised of people who are engaged in some kind of interactive activity. The word “activity” is merely a convenient label. What really matters to an activity group is the presence of some kind of interaction amongst the group members. For instance, the people who participate in a chess tournament together form an activity group because they are interacting with one another in accordance with the rules of chess and the rules of the tournament. To consider another example, a crowd lining up at a security checkpoint makes up an activity group as well since the crowd is waiting in line in an orderly fashion and are interacting with one another in subtle ways.

A *similarity group*, on the other hand, is a group comprised of people who share certain attributes. Members of a group may share the same or similar social, cultural, political or economic identities, share the same or similar sentiments or affective attitudes towards the same or similar objects, persons, events or states of affairs, share the same or similar goals or objectives, or share the same or similar past experiences.

If one prefers, the set of all right-handed people can be counted as a group as well, as vacuous as this may seem. However, for our present purpose, I will only focus on groups that are socially or philosophically interesting.

Section 2.2 – Identification of the questions

There are roughly two kinds of questions we can ask about groups.

Take group memberships for example. Group memberships can be determined in a non-voluntary⁸ way. This is especially the case for groups having a clear organizing structure. In an organized group, memberships are often determined by rules, requirements, conventions or norms. These rules and requirements are usually not to be determined by any individual who is seeking to join the group. Yet, they are binding on every group member. Thus, any comprehensive account of social phenomena will have to include an adequate explanation of rules, conventions or norms. My framework will introduce, as a core technical concept, the concept of “norms.”

Secondly, we observe that a person may decide on his own free will to join a group, stay inside a group or leave a group. What explains a person’s decision to join or leave a group? We need to consider a person’s goals, desires, motives and so on. We need to know what motivates a person to act. Motivating factors are “personal” in the sense that they belong only to and serve as guides only for the person who possesses them. That is to say, the goals, desires or motives, among other similar things, that are possessed by others only belong to others but not to me, nor do they serve as guides for my action unless I also happen to possess them. Thus, motivating factors are “agent-relative.” Any theory of social phenomena will have to address these “agent-

⁸ Non-voluntary is sometimes contrasted with involuntary. Here, I want to ignore the part about personal preferences altogether. Hence, I use the word “non-voluntary.” An example of a non-voluntary membership is the membership of an ethnicity group. No matter my opinion, there will always be people who will see me as an Asian.

relative” motivating factors. Hence, I will introduce to my framework another core technical concept which I dub “motivating reasons.”

Here is an important observation. Rules, conventions or norms, on the one hand, and individual desires and motives, on the other, are independent from one another and can be studied in separation from one another. For one thing, the existence of rules, conventions and norms is independent from any individual’s desires and motives. That is to say, the fact that a rule, convention or norm exists, in some sense of existence that I will explain later, does not by itself in any way imply (necessarily) that any individual desires (or detests) or is motivated to comply (or not to comply) with it. Conversely, the fact that an individual desires or is motivated to do something, does not by itself in any way imply that there exists a rule, convention or norm, garnering the endorsement of people other than the individual himself, that supports or opposes the goals or objects of these desires and motives. Therefore, it is possible to consider desires and norms separately, and it is preferable, for the sake of clearer understanding, to discuss them separately.

As an exercise, let us consider the following scenario. In this scenario, a powerful agent (or an authority) has the ability or power to dictate whether someone belongs to a particular group. Upon reflection, we see that there are at least two possible ways of telling the story.

First, a person may have his membership revoked on no basis other than the fact that the powerful agent is motivated (for whatever reason) to expel the person from the group. I am kicked out of a group simply because the authorities are motivated to kick me out and have the ability to do so. A bouncer may prevent me from joining a club

simply because he holds a personal grudge against me. What is relevant to this version of the story is none other than the desires or motives of an individual. Rules, conventions or norms, on the other hand, play no role whatsoever.

Second, the powerful agent may enjoy the right to kick me out by virtue of the existence of certain rules or norms. For instance, members of the group may agree to delegate certain authority, such as membership authority, to a person or a committee. That person or committee thus acquires the authority to decide who gets to be a member, and each member is required to obey the decisions of the person or committee. In this version of the story, what is relevant here are rules, conventions or norms. Desires and motives, on the other hand, play no part in this story.

Traditionally, singularist theories tend to focus on desire and motives. Game-theoretic account of cooperation is a case in mind. A prominent singularist, Michael Bratman (2013) also focuses on individual desires and motives. He formally introduces rules, conventions and norms only relatively recently by referring to Hart's theory of law as he does in his book in 2022.

Section 2.3 – The order of presentation

The outline of the MR-N framework will be divided into two chapters. Each chapter is dedicated to one of the two core concepts: motivating reasons and norms. It is through these two core concepts that I will be able to describe all kinds of social concepts, such as the concept of joint commitment, and explain many varieties of social phenomena, without having to postulate any irreducible collective entities. I believe that

these two concepts, in some shape or form, for rationales stated in the previous section, will be necessary for any comprehensive singularist theory of social phenomena.

Moving on to motivating reasons. The structure of motivating reasons is similar to the structure of internal reasons presented by Bernard Williams (1979). Readers who are familiar with Williams' work will find my chapter on motivating reasons relatively easy to follow. An extension of Williams' theory will come in the form of an expansion of, in Williams' words, elements that can go into a person's "motivational set." These elements I will conveniently call "motives."

On the other hand, the concept of "norm" that I will introduce in Chapter 4 may come across as more unfamiliar. This chapter will be followed by Chapter 5, in which I introduce a number of norm-related concepts such as application, knowledge, endorsement and compliance. I anticipate these chapters to be more engaging and more difficult to follow compared to Chapter 3 on motivating reasons.

Chapter 3 – Motivating Reasons

To talk about motivating reasons, we need to talk about *reasons for actions* first.

Section 3.1 – Reasons for action

Philosophers often distinguish between at least two kinds of reasons for action: “motivating reasons” and “normative reasons” (sometimes also known as “justifying reasons”). Roughly speaking, “motivating reasons” are typically regarded as facts or considerations that motivate a person to act. As for “normative reasons,” they are typically regarded as facts that are counted, in accordance with some norm or standard, to support or justify some act. Some philosophers (Baier 1965; Alvarez 2010) also postulate explanatory reasons, which are reasons that explain a person’s action.

Searching for a theory of reason for action that is suitable for my present purpose, I have decided to offer unique a theory of motivating reason that is tailored to my goal. The theory will consist of three important ideas: (i) a person’s motivating reasons, (ii) his motives and (iii) his assessment of the relevant circumstances.

Section 3.2 – Motivating reasons

It is generally conceived that an agent’s “motivating reasons” are facts about the circumstance that motivate the agent to act. This a fact-based account of reason for action, according to which reasons are facts (of the circumstance). I am going to adopt

this fact-based account for my framework and call it “motivating reason.” To borrow an example from Maria Alvarez (2017), the fact that a joke is funny is a motivating reason to tell it.

There are at least four basic components to a motivating reason: an agent, an act, ϕ , a circumstance, c , and a purported fact, f , of the circumstance, c . Combining these together, we have the following definition.

Motivating Reason: An agent, situated in a circumstance, c , has a *pro tanto* motivating reason in c to ϕ if and only if there is a purported fact, f , of c such that the agent counts f as a consideration in favour of his ϕ -ing. We say that f is a *pro tanto* motivating reason for the agent to ϕ .

It should be noted that the purported fact, f , does not have to be an actual fact. I will explain this in detail in [Section 3.5](#).

Section 3.3 – Motives

Motivating reasons are closely related to a person’s *motives*, such as the person’s desires. For instance, by virtue of Alice’s desire to win a game of chess, Alice counts the fact that a particular move, e.g., Queen to b4, will eventually lead to a forced checkmate to be a consideration in favour of her playing that move. If Alice does not have a desire to win, then she would not have a motivating reason to play that move. Hence, if facts were to constitute a reason for a person to act, then that person would have to have a *motive* (sometimes a desire) that is suitably related to the fact.

My understanding of motives is inspired by Bernard Williams' conception of motivational sets.⁹ A motive closely resembles an element of a person's motivational set.

Common types of motive include, but is not limited to, the following:

1. Present desires for immediate satisfaction or future satisfaction.
2. Patterns of behaviours such as the following.
 - a. Patterns of emotional reactions and affective attitudes towards certain objects, states of affairs, or events.
 - b. Character quirks and traits such as stubbornness, rebelliousness and curiosity.
 - c. Other patterns of instinctive, automatic or instantaneous action or reaction.
3. Psychological effects of various kinds such as priming effect, implicit or explicit association.
4. Responsiveness to peer pressure.
5. Responsiveness to norms (also principles, rules, conventions and etc.). For convenience, I call them *norm-inspired* motives.

The last type of motive, responsiveness to norms, is worth mentioning. This motive is connected to one's attitude towards certain norms. If a person wholeheartedly endorses a norm, he is likely to commit himself to comply with that norm and thereby

⁹ See Williams 1979.

acquiring a motive to act in accordance with the norm. I will say more about this “norm-inspired” motive in [Section 5.4](#).

Section 3.4 – Assessment of the relevant circumstances

The third component to my theory of action, besides motivating reasons and motives, is a person’s *assessment of the circumstances*, which include, among other things, that person’s understanding of causal relationships and his predictions about future state of affairs.

For example, I want to finish writing a paper before tomorrow morning, and the only way for me to accomplish that goal, I fathom, is to stay awake for longer. It is by virtue of this assessment that I consider the fact that drinking some tea can help keeping me awake as a motivating reason for me to drink some tea. Thus, a fact may be supported by a person’s assessment of the relevant circumstances in order for the fact to constitute a motivating reason.

For a different example, suppose that I am a prisoner in a prisoner dilemma, deciding whether to betray my co-conspirator. Suppose that I believe that my peer prisoner is likely to betray me. I come to this belief only by means of an assessment of the other prisoner’s personality and the situation that he might find himself in. With this assessment in mind, my belief that I will be betrayed by the other prisoner may constitute a motivating reason for me to betray him as well.

In addition, an agent may count a fact, *f*, as a motivating reason only because he believes that *f* will lead to another fact, *g*, and the agent has a desire to bring about *g*.

Here, the agent assesses the relevant circumstances by applying his understanding of causal relationships.

To summarize, an agent counts f as a consideration in favour of his ϕ -ing only by virtue of his motives and in light of his assessment of the relevant circumstances.

Section 3.5 – Features of the theory of motivating reasons

A fact-based theory of reason suitable to be a part of a comprehensive theory of social phenomena is likely to have the features listed below. Theories that are not fact-based are likely to have a slightly different but similar set of features.

A comprehensive theory of social phenomena is likely to include a theory of reasons for action, and a fact-based theory of reason designed specifically to be a part of a comprehensive theory of action is likely to have all of the following features.

(1) Having a motivating reason does not imply that a person is sufficiently motivated to act. It only implies that he is at least slightly nudged to act in a certain way. Motivating reasons are *pro tanto*. This is because *pro tanto* reasons are more fine-grained than *pro toto* or all-things-considered reasons.

(2) The fact, f , does not have to be an actual fact. It can be a “purported fact” that the agent believes to some extent to have some possibility of being actualized. For example, although I can only vaguely remember reading the weather forecast last night

that there is a fifty percent chance of rain today, this still constitutes a motivating reason for me to bring an umbrella.^{10 11}

(3) The principle “reason implies can” is rejected. The principle “reason implies can” says that, for an agent to have a reason to φ , he must be able to φ in some sense of “being able to.” For my present purpose, however, to have pro tanto motivating reasons to φ does not necessarily imply that the agent is able to φ . A person may be in favour of doing something that he in fact cannot do. He might end up doing other things still, even though they are not exactly what he had initially intended to do. An example would be a person’s attempt to make a basket in a crooked basketball game. Even if the basket is smaller than the ball (it is physically impossible for the ball to go in), I would argue that the person still has a motivating reason to make the basket. There is no better way to explain why the person does what he does except for the proposal that he has motivating reasons to do something impossible.

(4) In order for a purported fact, f , to constitute a motivating reason, an agent needs to be aware of f , but he does not need to be consciously aware of it. Imagine that a group of people is walking towards the same destination. The fact that a crowd is

¹⁰ A note on the usage of the phrase “purported fact” or “possible fact.” Suppose there is a chance of rain today, and, as a result, I have a motivating reason to bring an umbrella. According to this account of motivating reason, what I am preparing for is an outcome, the state of raining, which has some possibility of being actualized. Hence, I really want to say that “the fact that it ‘will’ rain is my reason to bring the umbrella.” Unfortunately, the word “will” simultaneously fulfills two functions: (1) to signify that I am describing a (possible) (future) state of affairs and (2) to convey a sense of certainty (about the future). Hence, to avoid invoking the sense of certainty, I am forced to avoid the word “will” and instead say something like, “the fact that it *might* rain in the future is a reason for me to bring an umbrella” or “the fact that there is a *chance of rain* is a reason for me to bring an umbrella.” Strictly speaking, however, it is “the state of raining” that I am preparing for, not “chances” or “possibilities” per se.

¹¹ Is it a belief that is a motivating reason, or is the motivating reason what is believed? I would say instead that it is a “purported fact” that is the motivating reason. Thus, usually, a motivating reason is what is believed, not the belief itself. In theory, however, a purported fact can also be the fact that a person (possibly the person himself) believes something. We have to be very careful when we say the latter.

going straight through an intersection counts for an agent as a consideration in favour of his going straight as well, and the agent has, therefore, a *pro tanto* motivating reason to go straight. However, the agent, mindlessly following a crowd, may fail to recognize this. For a different kind of example, I may not be consciously aware of the fact that an object enters my peripheral vision, but I am, perhaps subconsciously, aware of the object. The presence of this particular object may, under certain circumstances, constitute a motivating reason for me to act in a certain way, even though I am not consciously aware of the object's presence. That said, some kind of awareness is still required for a fact to constitute a motivating reason.

Chapter 4 – Norms

Let us move on to a discussion of norms. Norms are crucial for understanding concepts such as duties, rights and obligations. Obligation, in particular, is an essential component of joint commitment according to Gilbert.

I believe my theory of norms is more suitable as a basis for a precise and comprehensive theory of social phenomena than the theory of law proposed by H. L. A. Hart in 1961 due to my careful separation of motivating reasons from norms, which enables direct observation and study of otherwise obscure norm-related phenomena.

Section 4.1 – Taxonomy of norms

In his 1978 article, “On Taking the Moral Point of View,” Paul Taylor announces that he is going to use the word “norm” to refer to two kinds of systems.¹²

The first kind may be thought of as “grading or ranking criteria for the application of such predicates” such as “good,” “bad,” “desirable,” “fair,” “courageous” and the like. I call these “evaluative norms.”¹³

The second kind may be thought of as “criteria for the application of such deontic terms as ‘must,’ ‘obligatory,’ ‘permissible,’ ‘right,’ and ‘wrong.’” I call these “deontic norms.”

¹² Taylor uses both “norm” and “principle” without differentiating between them. Here, I am only using the word “norm.”

¹³ The word “evaluative” or “evaluation” is to be distinguished from a person’s desiring or valuing certain things.

In addition to evaluative norms and deontic norms, there is a third kind of norm that Taylor does not mention, and that is a *constitutive norm*. Constitutive norms specify the criteria under which an act or procedure is counted as an act or procedure of a certain kind. For example, a person's uttering something like "I promise you to do such and such" counts as making a promise. To *marry* someone in a traditional way and to be considered "married," one has to follow a certain procedure as specified by the relevant tradition. Only by following such a procedure can a couple be counted as (traditionally) married. Thus, this tradition can be seen as providing criteria for counting a certain kind of procedure as "marrying," and it is, at least in part, a constitutive norm.

In summary, there are three kinds of norms: evaluative norms, deontic norms and constitutive norms. Although the three kinds are theoretically distinct, they are closely related to one another. If a norm stipulates that an act of "deliberately telling what one believes to be false" *constitutes* lying, then this norm can be thought of as a constitutive norm. If the norm further stipulates that the person who has lied is *obligated* to apologize for lying, then the constitutive norm would have a deontic component. Moreover, if the norm stipulates that the person who lies is a coward, then the norm would have an evaluative component as well.

A norm that has deontic components is sometimes called a deontic norm, evaluative components an evaluative norm, and constitutive components a constitutive norm. A norm may have multiple kinds of components, in which case it may be called any kind of norm.

Sometimes, we find it useful to combine certain evaluative norms, deontic norms or constitutive norms into a single compound system, which we then call a norm

(simpliciter). Thus, a norm so construed may have constitutive components, deontic components or evaluative components. From this point on, whenever I refer to a “norm,” I refer to a norm in general, which may have constitutive components, deontic components or evaluative components.

There are many ways in which norms can be framed or promulgated. For example, they can be framed or promulgated, among other things, as standards, conventions, rules, principles, manuals, guides, laws, regulations, contracts, agreements or accords. That is to say, when people refer to these things, it is likely that at least parts of what they are referring to are what I call norms.

I will mostly focus on deontic norms for my present purpose.

Section 4.2 – Deontic norms

Deontic norm: A *deontic norm* is a system that *recommends*, *requires* or *forbids* certain acts under certain circumstances.¹⁴

Some deontic norms expressly state that certain acts are “permitted.” Yet, I did not say a word about permission in my definition of deontic norms. To understand why, we need to better understand the word “permit.” There are at least two senses of “permit” in this context. First, deontic norms may expressly permit certain acts and, at the same time, forbid those acts that interfere with the doing of the permitted acts. For

¹⁴ It is possible to use a different set of words than “recommend,” “require” and “forbid.” For instance, we can replace the word “forbid” with “prohibit” or the word “require” with “obligate.” We can also add to the set more words such as one that expresses the meaning of “recommend not to.” Alternatively, we may characterize deontic norms in terms of what one ought, ought not, should, should not, must, must not and may or may not do. My choice of the set consisting of “recommend,” “require” and “forbid” will suffice for my present purpose.

instance, a norm endorsed by a group of pro-choice people may expressly permit abortion and, at the same time, also prohibit certified practitioners to deprive eligible patients their opportunity to have an abortion. For easy reference, let us call this kind of permission “active permission.” On the other hand, deontic norms may also be said to “permit” certain acts simply by remaining silent. If a norm says nothing about whether I should or should not do a certain act in a certain circumstance, then I am permitted by that norm to do that act in that circumstance. In other words, I am free, in accordance with the norm, to do the act, and other people are also free, in accordance with the norm, to interfere. For example, the rules of chess say nothing about how someone ought to play football. For convenience, let us call this kind of permission “passive permission.” Active permissions are often expressly stated and emphasized whereas passive permissions are almost never reported.

Furthermore, active permissions are always connected to some kind of recommendation, requirement or prohibition whereas passive permissions are not. If this is the case, we can account for active and passive permissions simply by referring to recommendations, requirements and prohibitions, all of which are featured in my definition of deontic norms.

Here is why I think this is indeed the case. As a general guide for communication, words and clauses contained in a communicatory statement are typically assumed to be stated with purpose. Hence, if a permission is expressly stated and emphasized, this often (but not always, of course) suggests that this permission is stated with purpose. That purpose can be none other than the fact that our freedom to do what we are permitted to do is at risk of being denied. To promote or secure that freedom, the norm

then stipulates, explicitly or implicitly, that any act that interferes with the doing of the permitted act is not recommended or is outright forbidden. Notice that permissions are explained in terms of recommendations and prohibitions. Therefore, cases of active and passive permissions can be accounted for without referring to the word “permit.”

I choose to include the word “recommendation” in my definition of deontic norms. Is “requirement” and “prohibition” not enough? Having “recommendation” is not necessary but is nevertheless useful because not all so-called “requirements” and “prohibitions” are absolute. Sometimes, it makes sense to say that a person “complies with” a norm, even though that person does not in fact do what he is “required” by the norm to do. A norm may say something like, “you are advised to follow the set procedures when dealing with this machine, and you are at your own risk if you choose to ignore the procedures.”

There are at least two ways of interpreting this norm. The first way is to say that the norm only offers a recommendation, not a “hard” requirement, and the norm grants the person the freedom to act one way or another. On the second interpretation, the norm does prescribe a “hard” requirement, but attached to the requirement is a list of conditions under which the requirement can be waived. For example, as parts of the “hard” requirement, it says that, in cases where “you are responsible for your own risks,” however this phrase is interpreted by the norm, you are exempt from following the set procedure when operating that machine.

Both interpretations are possible, but the one that uses the word “recommendation” is arguably more intuitive. This is why I include the word “recommendation” in my definition of deontic norms.

What familiar concepts can we partially recover from my definition of deontic norms? In general, by virtue of a norm, a person may have, acquire or lose standings, rights, privileges, duties, obligations, deservingness and so on. Under a simplified interpretation of standing, right, privilege, duty, obligation and deservingness, I have a standing or right to do what the norm permits me to do and forbids others to hinder me from doing or blame me for doing; I have a duty or obligation to do what the norm requires me to do and permits others to remonstrate with me for failing to do. I deserve to have done to me what the norm permits others to do to me. We can at least partially recover familiar concepts such as standing, right, privilege, duty and obligation from my simple definition of deontic norms.¹⁵

Like norms, deontic norms can also be framed or promulgated in various ways. They may be framed or promulgated as standards, conventions, rules, principles, manuals, guides, laws, regulations, contracts, agreements and accords, just to name a few. This is because these things can, at least in some situations, *recommend*, *require* or *forbid* certain acts under certain circumstances. The rule of chess stipulates, among other things, that you are *required* to move a chess piece if you have touched that piece on your turn. The principles of act utilitarianism stipulates that a person is *required* to do those acts that maximize net pleasure.¹⁶ Laws typically *require* that a case be heard in a lower court before it can be heard in a higher court. The user's manual of a machine may *recommend* following a certain procedure when operating that machine. These are examples of deontic norms.

¹⁵ Notably, a famous legal theorist, Wesley Hohfeld (1917), has a reductionist theory to similar effects.

¹⁶ There are many variants of utilitarianism. I am only picking one example.

Although deontic norms can be framed or promulgated in various ways, it is not the case that every standard, convention, guide, principle, rule, law, contract, agreement, accord and so on has deontic components in all situations. For instance, you and I may agree that the sun will rise tomorrow. By reaching this *agreement*, we mutually acknowledge our acceptance of the same proposition. This kind of agreement, barring extraordinary circumstances, does not count as a deontic norm.

I also want to point out that norms, especially deontic norms, are not always easily noticeable. We can be so accustomed to having certain rights provided by certain norms to the point where we often fail to recognize the norm's presence. It might be difficult to imagine a world in which social conventions forbid certain people, e.g., slaves, to drink water whenever they are thirsty. However, limitations of our imagination should not hinder us from counting as a norm something that is supposed to be counted as a norm.¹⁷ Systems of oppression, which may deprive people of "basic" human rights, may constitute deontic norms as well, even though they are at odds with widely accepted norms of our time. In short, norms that people fail or refuse to acknowledge can nevertheless exist and be counted as norms under my definition.

Section 4.3 – Constitutive norms

¹⁷ As a side note, interestingly, there is a deontic norm that I am applying in the background. I used the expressions "should" and "supposed to" in the sentence "limitations of our imagination *should not* hinder us from counting as a norm something that is *supposed to* be counted as a norm." The expressions "should" and "supposed to" signify the existence of a deontic norm (promulgated as a general guide). The deontic norm, in the form of a general guide, recommends (or perhaps requires) counting anything that satisfies a set of criteria as a kind of thing that the set is purportedly designed to be sufficient conditions for. Since I have defined deontic norms to be a system that recommends, requires or forbid certain acts under certain circumstances, I should, on the basis of this general guide, count any system that satisfy this criterion as a deontic norm.

Constitutive norms have the basic structure “X counts as Y in circumstance c.”¹⁸

Take the familiar social norm about promising for example. The norm specifies the criteria under which 1) certain acts performed under certain circumstances constitute “the making of a promise,” 2) certain states of affairs or events constitute “the breaking of a promise,” and 3) people who “make a promise” are the “promisors” and those who receive the promise are the “promisees.” To consider a concrete example, my utterance of the sentence in the presence of John “I hereby promise to you, John, to pay you a visit” would constitute an act of “making a promise,” in which I am the “promisor” and John the “promisee.”

Deontic norms and constitutive norms can be closely related to one another. For example, a deontic norm may stipulate that I ought to keep my promises. Yet, how do you know if someone is making a promise? This is where constitutive norms kick in. If I say to you something like, “I’ll see what I can do,” am I making a promise “to see what I can do”? In some situations, the answer is “yes,” but in other situations I may simply be taken as showing a perfunctory gesture without making any real commitments. We need constitutive norms to determine whether I am making a (genuine) promise in the relevant circumstances since constitutive norms specify the criteria under which a certain act or procedure, e.g., a speech act, counts as an act or procedure of a certain kind, e.g., making a promise, in the relevant circumstances.

¹⁸ Searle in his 1964 article, *How to Derive “Ought” From “Is”*, offers an account of what he calls “social institution.” Social institutions, according to Searle, can be systems of constitutive rules or systems of regulative rules. For Searle, regulative rules regulate antecedently existing behaviours whereas constitutive rules create or define new forms of behaviours. Examples of regulative rules include systems of (polite) table manners which regulate eating, and examples of constitutive rules include rules of chess which define a new kind of activity which could not exist before the rules are set. I use many terminologies different from Searle does. What Searle (1964) calls “evaluative statements,” which contain the word “ought” (43-44), are what I call “deontic statements.” Systems of regulative rules on Searle’s account are evaluative norms on my account.

The connection between constitutive norms and deontic norms has been explored by many authors including Searle (1995, 2010) and Hindriks (2013). In particular, Searle (1995, pp. 40-43 and 100-01; also 2010) contends that what he calls “constitutive rules” have deontic powers. Indeed, Searle argues that the statement “one ought not to steal,” which Searle takes to be a “constitutive rule” of the institution of private property, can be taken as saying that “to recognize something as someone else’s property necessarily involves recognizing his right to dispose of it” (1964, p. 57). Here, the so-called “constitutive rule of private property” fulfills the role of constitutive norms by “recognizing something as someone’s property” and fulfills the role of deontic norms by giving a person a *right* “to dispose of” his private property. We can see from this example how closely related deontic norms and constitutive norms are. Hindriks (2013, p. 648), inheriting Searle’s terminology, argues that the notion of a constitutive rule needs to be complemented with that of what he calls a status rule, and status rules specify the *normative powers* that are characteristic of a particular thing. Hence, constitutive norms and deontic norms can be closely associated with one another.

However, it is not the case that every constitutive norm is closely associated with a corresponding deontic norm. For example, an object formed via a chemical bond by two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom constitutes a “water molecule” according to norms of chemistry. Knowing that certain things constitute “water molecules” is important in its own right (for chemistry exams maybe?). What people should or should not do with a “water molecule,” however, is a different story.

If we are determined in searching for deontic norms that are somewhat associated with this particular constitutive norm, we very likely will find some. For

instance, we may be able to identify a deontic norm that says, “you are *recommended* to call something a ‘water molecule’ if that thing is formed via a chemical bond by two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom.” This norm can be seen as a deontic norm about definitions and name-calling, which is a norm distinct from the *constitutive norm* of chemistry, but which, if we prefer, can also be combined with the constitutive norm of chemistry to form a (compound) norm. Nevertheless, this constitution norm can stand on its own without having to rely on a deontic norm for it to be meaningful.

Chapter 5 – Norm-related Concepts

In this chapter, I will introduce a few concepts that are necessary to the proper understanding of norms. In doing so, I will be, again, engaging in conceptual engineering. The primary goal is to reduce ambiguities when talking about norms.

In Section 5.1 and 5.2, I will focus on concepts the usage of which often requires that a person (or a group) be the “subject” of an English sentence and a norm be the “object” of that sentence. I will first, in Section 5.1, introduce a preliminary concept of “application,” i.e., of what it means to say that a person “applies” a norm to a circumstance.

In Section 5.2, I will discuss three of the most important concepts: knowledge, endorsement and compliance. I will define what it means to say that a person “knows about” a norm, “endorses” a norm and “complies with” a norm. Following this discussion, I will define what it means to say that a person “subscribes to” a norm. I will discuss the relationships between knowledge, endorsement and compliance in Section 5.3.

Having discussed endorsement, in Section 5.4, I will return to a particular kind of motivating reason—a kind that has to do with a person’s *norm-inspired* motives. In Section 5.5, I will briefly mention a popular phrase, i.e., “acceptance of a norm.”

In Section 5.6 and 5.7, I will focus on those concepts the usage of which requires that a norm be the “subject” of an English sentence and a person (or a group) be the “object” of the sentence. I will define what it means to say that a norm “applies to” or “is binding on” a person (or a group).

Section 5.1 – Application of a norm to a circumstance

There are many possible interpretations of the word “apply.” There are important differences between a person’s applying a norm to a circumstance, his complying with a norm in a circumstance, and a norm’s being applicable in a circumstance.

The first sense of “apply” is commonly used in mathematics: you have a mathematical formula, and you apply that formula to see the result. The same can be true for norms that consist primarily of abstract formulas.

Apply: For a person to *apply* a norm to a given situation is for him to attempt to find out what the norm says in that situation. When it comes to deontic norms, I attempt to find out what the norm recommends, requires or forbids me or others to do. When it comes to constitutive norms, I attempt to find out whether a particular thing constitutes another thing. When it comes to evaluative norms, I attempt to find out whether a particular thing has a certain quality. We say that such an *application* of a norm is *successful* if and only if the person is able to find the answer.

It should be noted that finding out what the norm says does not imply that I am inclined to agree with the norm’s verdicts, nor does it imply that I am motivated to act in accordance with the norm. By successfully applying the norm of Act Utilitarianism to a situation, I find out what the norm requires me to do in that situation. However, whether I have motivating reasons to do what the norms requires me to do is still unanswered.

Next, I am going to talk about three of the most important technical concepts: knowledge, endorsement and compliance.

Section 5.2 – Knowledge, compliance and endorsement

Knowledge: A person *knows about* a norm in a circumstance, *c*, if and only if he, in *c*, has sufficient knowledge about the norm's contents. When it comes to deontic norms, he knows, or knows in principle how to figure out, what the norm recommends, requires or forbids him to do in ordinary circumstances. When it comes to constitutive norms, he knows, or knows in principle how to figure out, whether something constitutes another in ordinary circumstances. When it comes to evaluative norms, he knows, or knows in principle how to figure out, whether something is regarded as having certain qualities such as goodness, courageousness and so on in ordinary circumstances. It should be noted that, to satisfy this knowledge condition, not only does a person need to know that the norm exists, but he also needs to know about the norm's contents.

We also say that a person has knowledge about the norm if and only if he knows about the norm.

There are many different ways in which people commonly express the meaning of "knowledge about a norm." For example, we might say that a person is familiar with the norm or that he understands, recognizes, grasps, is informed of the norm. However, not every utterance of these expressions can be interpreted as "knowledge about a norm." Context can be important too.

Knowledge about a norm can come in varying degrees. Hence, we might say that a person knows a lot about a norm or that he knows little about a norm. Exactly how much knowledge is enough to say that a person “knows about a norm” depends on the norm itself and the context under which knowledge claims are made. Subtleties surrounding this issue are topics for a different occasion.

Compliance: A person *complies with* or *acts in accordance with* a norm in a circumstance, *c*, if and only if he conducts himself (intentionally or accidentally), in *c*, as the norm prescribes. When it comes to deontic norms, he, in *c*, does what the norm requires him to do, refrains from doing what the norm forbids him to do and is strongly inclined to do what the norm recommends him to do. When it comes to constitutive norms or evaluative norms, he, in *c*, counts something as another or regards something as having a certain quality.

Here are a few common expressions that people use to convey the same or similar meanings. To say that a person follows, sticks to, adheres to, abides by or conforms to a norm is often to say that he *complies with* it or *acts in accordance with* it.

It should be noted that compliance, according to my definition, only requires that a person do what the norm tells him to do. It says nothing about why a person does so. Unfortunately, the word “compliance” might invoke a connotation of endorsement. In order to avoid this connotation, I introduce the expression “act in accordance with,” which is interchangeable with “compliance.” Of course, connotations of endorsement can also be “cancelled” by saying something like “a person is *forced* to comply with a

norm.” We can deliberately invoke the connotation of endorsement by using such expressions as “willing compliance.”

Endorsement: A person *endorses* a norm in a circumstance, *c*, if and only if, he, in *c*, has a positive attitude towards the norm, respects the norm, is inspired by the norm or believes it to be worth having or so on.

Endorsement is closely related to motives. A person who endorses a norm in a circumstance, *c*, is very likely to have, in *c*, a particular motive and thus also has, in *c*, a motivating reason to act in accordance with the norm. For instance, if I really believe that a norm is “good,” then I am very likely to be motivated to act in accordance with the norm *for the norm’s sake*.

In real-life, some people might *claim* that they endorse a norm, but they do not *seem*, in the eyes of an outside observer, to be motivated at all to do what the norm requires (or recommends) them to do.

Let us call the norm in question, n_1 , and a person who makes such a claim, p . There are at least three possibilities. The first possibility is that p is indeed motivated, to a lesser extent, to do what n_1 requires him to do, but he is not sufficiently motivated to act. It may also be the case that p fails to satisfy the endorsement condition for n_1 , i.e., p does *not* have a positive attitude towards n_1 , respect n_1 nor believe n_1 to be worth having. He may be outrightly lying about his endorsement of n_1 .

Thirdly, and more importantly, it is likely that p does endorse a particular norm, call it n_2 , which is different from n_1 . Contrary to n_1 , which requires p to do something (under certain circumstances), the norm n_2 does *not* require p to do anything (under any circumstance). In short, n_2 is just like n_1 except that it only applies to others but not to p himself. Since n_1 and n_2 are very similar, when p claims that he endorses n_2 , other people misunderstand him as claiming that he endorses n_1 . They regard p as a “hypocrite” as a result, but p , strictly speaking, is not a hypocrite, and he most certainly does not think of himself as a hypocrite.¹⁹ Endorsement comes in varying degrees. We might say that a person wholeheartedly endorses a norm or that he hardly endorses the norm. In general, I want to set the bar high enough so that people who are counted as endorsing a norm are likely, upon deliberation, to develop a *pro tanto* motivating reason to comply with the norm, one that is strong enough to have some impact²⁰ on the person deliberation and decision-making.

There are a few things that do *not* count as endorsement but may be confused with endorsement. It does *not* count as endorsement of an existing norm if I merely believe both of the following: 1) that the existing norm could be replaced by a different norm that I prefer over the existing norm and 2) that the cost of making such a replacement outweighs the benefits. In this case, it cannot be said that I endorse the existing norm, even though I am, in some sense, content with the status quo.

¹⁹ The person, p , may be the only person who endorses n_2 . Being the only person to endorse a particular norm will have real-life implications, but this is a different issue.

²⁰ The phrase “some impact” is very vague. The vagueness is intended as everything depends on the contexts.

Does unquestioned compliance count towards endorsement? I believe so. Cultural norms are often learned and taken up by a person by means of observation, imitation and repetition.²¹ Neither observation, imitation, nor repetition requires that a person ever question or reflect upon the norm that he is complying with. Jones might believe, for instance, that women should always wear a hijab in public. “This is the way things have always been and will always be,” Jones thinks to himself.

Does endorsement or compliance require that a person publicly announces their endorsement or compliance? Can a person be said to endorse or comply with a norm despite the fact that he claims verbally that he does *not* endorse or comply with it?

For endorsement, it does not matter so much what a person says—it is how he actually feels that pertains to endorsement. Hence, endorsement does not require verbal consent. What about compliance?

The answer depends on whether the norm in question permits disingenuous public denouncement. Imagine that there is a group of people who endorse racial discrimination. Given how strongly the public is opposed to discrimination and the fact that discriminatory practices can often be carried out in disguise, it is sensible for them to agree to a norm that permits group members to publicly denounce discrimination, so long as the members do in fact discriminate in accordance with the norm. In this case, it is not required that a person announces his approval of the norm, nor is he required to refrain from announcing disapproval.

Finally, it would be useful to have a term that combines knowledge, endorsement and compliance together. I introduce the notion of “subscription.”

²¹ See Haidt (2001) and Fiske (1999).

Subscription: A person *subscribes to* a norm if (but not only if) he knows about it, endorses it, and complies with it. A person is a subscriber of a norm *only if* he complies with the norm in at least one circumstance.

Knowledge and endorsement are necessary for subscription, but compliance-at-all-times is not necessary. Instead, it is only required that the person complies with the norm at least once.

What about a person who is fully disposed to comply with a norm but does not have any opportunity to comply? Could he be a subscriber or not? There are two perspectives from which we may approach this question. In real-life, people in general are unable to accurately predict the future. Hence, if an agent can confidently say that the person will indeed comply with the norm if an opportunity does present itself, then for that agent the person would be counted as a subscriber. On the other hand, if we were to take the perspective of an outside observer, which is the default perspective, and if a norm does not “apply to the person” under any circumstance, then I see no benefit in counting this person as a subscriber.

Finally, it is important to remember that “knowledge,” “knows about,” “compliance,” “complies with,” “endorsement” and “endorses” are technical terms. When used as technical terms, the objects of “knows about,” “complies with” and “endorses” can only be norms. Therefore, when we say something like “David *knows about* the fact that there exists a norm that protects wildcats,” it is immediately understood that we are

using the commonsense understanding of the phrase “knows about” rather than the technical understanding.

Section 5.3 – Relationships between knowledge, compliance and endorsement

Let us explore the relationships between knowledge, compliance and endorsement. In fact, none of them imply one another.

First of all, it is easy to see that knowledge does *not* imply endorsement, nor does it imply compliance. For example, knowing about the norm of slavery, a person may disapprove of it and refuse to comply with it. Hence, knowledge about a norm does not imply endorsement nor compliance.

Secondly, endorsement does *not* imply knowledge, nor does it imply compliance. Endorsement does not imply compliance because a person may be coerced to act against his will. This is obvious.

It is much less obvious why endorsement does *not* imply knowledge. How could a person endorse a norm that he does not even know about? As counter intuitive as it may seem at first glance, allow me to illustrate with an example. Suppose that Alice really likes wildcats. Assume that there is a wildcat-conservation society that Alice has never heard about before. Bob, who is a member of that society, meets Alice at a party and tells her about this wildcat-conservation society. After hearing about what the society does, which is partly to conserve wildcat habitats, Alice expresses her willingness to become a member of the society, despite the fact that she does not yet know much about the norms of the society, e.g., about the rules that regulate

memberships and so on. In this particular example, we can assume that Alice demonstrates her endorsement of the norms of the society by expressing her willingness to become a member. Thus, the period during which Alice endorses the group norms begins at the moment she becomes aware of the norms' *existence* rather than the moment she becomes sufficiently knowledgeable about the norms' *contents*. It is sufficient knowledge about a norm's contents that determines whether a person knows about a norm.²² Let us consider another example. Suppose I am aware that there exists a norm that protects my rights as an employee of a university. Even if I am not aware of the details about my norm-given rights, I can nevertheless be said to believe the norm to be worth having, i.e., I can be said to endorse the norm since I know that the norm works in my favour. Although knowing just a little bit might be enough for me to endorse a norm, it does not count as knowledge about a norm. Therefore, I can endorse a norm without knowing about it.

Thirdly, compliance does *not* imply knowledge, nor does it imply endorsement. Compliance with a norm does not imply endorsement because a person may be forced against his will to comply. Compliance does *not* imply knowledge because a person may unknowingly comply with a norm that he does not yet know about. Compliance may be purely coincidental.

Section 5.4 – Revisit of motivating reasons

²² There is no such a thing as the *de re* and *de dicto* distinction when it comes to the technical terms "knowledge," "compliance" and "endorsement." The only sensible interpretation is *de re*. For example, it only makes sense to say that there exists a norm such that Alice *knows about* (*complies with* or *endorses*) it, and it does not make any sense to say that Alice *knows about* (*complies with* or *endorses*) the fact that there exists a norm.

In [Chapter 3](#) on motivating reasons, I briefly mentioned a particular type of motive related to norms.

This type of motive has been described by Taylor (1978, p. 35). He says that “[to have this norm-related motive is] to commit oneself to using [that norm] as a principle of practical reason in one’s deliberation and decision-making.” In other words, this motive often takes the form of a particular kind of commitment—a commitment to comply with the norm for the norm’s own sake.

If you are serious about your endorsement of a norm, then you are willing to commit yourself to act in accordance with it. You may also remind yourself to adhere to the norm and to resist temptations to act to the contrary. You may feel ashamed or guilty for failing to comply with the norm. You are motivated to act in accordance with the norm.

It is worth pointing out that there is a different kind of motive, distinct from the “norm-inspired” kind, that comes from a person’s unquestioned compliance with a norm. In her book, *The Grammar of Society*, Cristina Bicchieri (2005) presents a detailed discussion of what she calls “social norms.” In particular, she tells a story about how certain norms can give rise to conforming behaviours, especially norms of the cultural or social kind that are often endorsed unquestioningly by people who are long immersed in the relevant cultures or social traditions. According to Bicchieri (2005, p. 5), these norms are stored in a person’s memory as “default rules” for behaviour and will be complied with when the person is exposed to certain “contextual stimuli” that reminds him of a familiar circumstance in which the “default rules” is known to apply. This pathway from “contextual stimuli” to motivation happens spontaneously and automatically. In other

words, a person who has memories of acting in a certain way under certain circumstances, call them *c*, will be tempted to act in the same way in circumstances that remind him of *c*. The person's tendency to follow the "default rules," which likely exhibits a pattern, constitutes a motive. This is the "pattern of behaviour" kind of motive that I have discussed, which is distinct from the norm-related kind that I am talking about now. The (purported) fact that the present circumstance is similar to *c* is a motivating factor for this person to act in the same way as he does in *c*. Although this motive is associated with norms, it is the "pattern of behaviour" kind of motive rather than the "norm-inspired" kind.²³ This is because there is a lack of conscious effort to embrace the norm in question.

Section 5.5 – Acceptance of norms

Another common expression is "acceptance of a norm." There are at least two kinds of stereotypical acceptance: willing acceptance and unwilling acceptance. On a common interpretation of willing acceptance, a person willingly accepts a norm only if he knows about and endorses the norm. On the other hand, on a common interpretation of unwilling acceptance, a person unwillingly accepts a norm if he knows and complies with the norm but does not endorse it.

In addition, when it comes to unwilling acceptance, it is usually implied that a person is "forced" to comply with the norm in question. In short, to be forced to comply

²³ Notably, Bicchieri argues that what she calls "social norms" cannot be reduced to "patterns of behaviour." I am not arguing against this claim. I am simply suggesting that the particular kind of motive that Bicchieri refers to is classified as a kind of motive labelled by the phrase "pattern of behaviour." Bicchieri acknowledges that a great variety of motives are related to "social norms."

is to suggest that a person has sufficient motivating reasons to comply, but these motivating reasons have nothing to do with the fact that the person is inspired by the norm and is willing to endorse it. In general, to force a person to do something, whether it is complying with a norm or joining or leaving a group, one has to provide sufficient motivating reasons for the person to do so. Only motivating reasons can motivate a person to act, according to the framework that I advocate.

Section 5.6 – Definition of applies to and binding on

In this section, I will define what it means to say that a norm “applies to” or is “binding on” a person or a thing²⁴ and what it means to say that a norm *is applicable* in a circumstance.

A constitutive norm is *binding on* or *applies to* a person or thing, *x*, in a circumstance if and only if *x* constitutes another thing in that circumstance according to the norm.

An evaluative norm is *binding on* or *applies to* a person or thing, *x*, in a circumstance if and only if *x* has some particular qualities in that circumstance according to the norm.

A deontic norm, *n*, is *binding on* or *applies to* a person, *p*, in a circumstance, *c*, if and only if there is some person, *q*, such that at least one of the following is true: 1) *n*

²⁴ This notion of “a norm applies to a person or thing” should be distinguished from the notion of “a person applying a norm (to a situation)” that I discussed in Section 5.1.

recommends, requires or forbids p to do a certain act in c or 2) n recommends, requires or forbids q to do a certain act in response to what p does or does not do.

A norm *is applicable* in a circumstance if the norm is binding on some person or thing in that circumstance.

For convenience, we say that a norm is binding on a person *simpliciter* (without qualification) if and only if the norm is binding on that person in some ordinary and realistically obtainable circumstances.

Not only can norms be binding on an individual, but they can also be said to be binding on a group or community as well. A norm is binding on a group (or community) if and only if every member of that group (or community) is bound by the norm.

Otherwise, we say that the norm is binding on a particular subgroup.

Let me illustrate with a simple example. A public library may have a norm (a rule) that forbids speaking loudly in certain areas. This norm is binding on me (or applies to me) only if I am inside those areas.

Most importantly, norms cannot exist in a vacuum. A norm cannot do anything objectively or independently of the people who know about it, endorse it or comply with it. A norm is exactly what its subscribers think it is. Hence, a norm is binding in a circumstance if the subscribers of the norm uniformly consider the norm to be applicable in that circumstance. I am not postulating any mysterious metaphysical or ontological object that is a norm.

Section 5.7 – Applicability of norms and different types of norms

Broadly speaking, in what circumstance does a norm apply to a person? Some norms apply to a person regardless of the circumstances. For instance, norms that forbid someone to arbitrarily harm another person apply in almost all circumstances. Some norms, on the other hand, only apply to a person in very limited circumstances. For instance, the rules of chess apply to a person only in circumstances where that person is playing chess. A manual applies to a person only in circumstances where that person is operating the machine for which the manual is designed. Visitor guidelines apply to a person only in circumstances where that person is within the perimeter of the site. Norms of courtesy apply to a person only in circumstances where that person intends to be polite.

Of all the circumstances in which norms apply, there is a particular class of circumstances that is worth mentioning: circumstances in which a person may or may not know about or endorse a norm. Why are they worth mentioning? Imagine that a norm is binding on you, but you have never heard about it. you may be socially condemned as a result. Imagine that people might condemn you for failing to comply with a norm that you disapprove of, despite your opinions on the matter. Since these scenarios can be quite concerning, I want to say a word about them, specifically about the relationships between a person's knowledge about or endorsement of a norm and the norm's being binding on that person. The discussion will mostly focus on deontic norms since requirements and prohibitions tend to cause more disturbances than mere evaluations or constitutions.

To begin, it can be helpful to classify deontic norms into different types. Firstly, there are (deontic) norms that may be binding on a person regardless of whether that

person knows about them, endorses them or acts in accordance with them. Call them type-1 norms for quick reference. Secondly, there are norms that may be binding on a person only if that person knows about them. Call them type-2 norms for convenience. Thirdly, there are norms that may be binding on a person only if that person endorses them. Call them type-3 norms for quick reference.

Let us consider some examples.

Some norms are binding on a person regardless of whether that person knows about them, endorses them or complies with them. An easy example would be laws and regulations. In some parts of the world, there exist traffic regulations by virtue of which drivers are required to bring their vehicle to a complete stop before a “stop sign.” Regardless of whether you know about the traffic regulations or understand the words written on a “stop sign,” you are required by law to comply with the traffic regulations.²⁵ Hence, traffic regulations are often norms of type-1.

Norms that are proclaimed to be “universal” are often of type-1 too. Here is a highly controversial example. There exist norms that forbid people to have an abortion.²⁶ Let us call them pro-life norms. Suppose that Bob is a subscriber of one of the pro-life norms, i.e., Bob knows about, endorses and complies with the norm.

Suppose that Alice had an abortion at some point in the past of her own free will. Upon learning that Alice has willingly had an abortion, Bob comes to believe that Alice has done something wrong. Bob thinks to himself, “Alice is such a terrible person, a

²⁵ We must distinguish between the law itself and the enforcement of the law. The fact that a law is not strictly enforced in every case does not imply that the law itself does not apply in every case.

²⁶ I am aware that the topic of abortion can be controversial. However, for the purpose of this thesis, I am not taking a stance on abortion. An important “unstated” objective of my framework is to promote cross-perspectival thinking.

murderer no less. I have the right to remonstrate with her, which is exactly what I will do, and my pro-life friends would definitely do the same in my position.” With these thoughts in mind, Bob draws up a plan to confront Alice.

I argue that the pro-life norm featured here is a type-1 norm. I do not pretend to know fully well about the norm that Bob and his friends subscribe to. The argument I am going to present is merely an inference to the best explanation. Here is how it goes. The fact that Bob believes that he has a right to remonstrate with Alice is at least partial evidence of the fact that the pro-life norm that Bob and his friends subscribe to permits them to remonstrate with someone like Alice, who has chosen to have an abortion of her own free will. In addition, Bob does not care whether Alice knows about or endorses the norm that he and his friends subscribe to. Thus, the best explanation for why Bob believes this way is that the pro-life norm that he and his friends subscribe to is a type-1 norm. The norm is binding on a person, Alice, regardless of whether Alice knows about, endorses or complies with it.

Now, suppose that Alice is pro-choice, i.e., that Alice believes that she has the right to have an abortion. Would it be unfair for Alice to endure such a harsh criticism from Bob? From Alice’s perspective, Bob’s criticism of her is baseless. However, I argue that Alice’s opinion on this matter does not change the fact that the norm applies to her. I am using the following proposition.

Proposition 1: Those who subscribe to a norm are in the best position to assess whether the norm is binding on someone in a particular circumstance.

Here is why I believe this proposition to be reasonable. Firstly, the person who makes such an assessment needs to know a lot about the norm. Secondly, to ensure

charitability, it is preferred that the assessor be in favour of the norm. Thirdly, a person who does not in fact comply with the norm is at risk of being hypocritical, such as passing harsh judgments on others while being overly lenient with himself. Hence, it is the subscribers of a norm who are in the best position to make such an assessment about a norm's applicability in various circumstances. Therefore, if Bob and his pro-life friends uniformly believe that the norm they subscribe to applies to Alice, then I argue that the norm does indeed apply to Alice.

Since matters on abortion can be highly controversial. I want to make a few additional comments. First of all, I should not be understood as taking a stance on abortion here. Whatever stance a person takes on abortion, my example fulfills its purpose. Secondly, what Alice does in any given situation is entirely a function of her own motivating reasons. The fact that the pro-life norm applies to Alice has nothing to do with whether Alice will be motivated to comply with the norm. On the assumption that Alice is pro-choice, if Alice happens to live in a community in which most people are pro-life, then there is a good chance that Alice will suffer severe social consequences for failing to comply with the widely accepted norms of her community—the pro-life norms. In this scenario, although Alice has no (motivating) reasons to comply with the pro-life norms for the pro-life norms' own sake, she might have other motivating reasons to refrain from having an abortion. This is to say that she might be facing tremendous external, social pressure to comply. On the other hand, if the community in which Alice lives is predominantly pro-choice just as Alice is, then Alice would *not* have a lot of *pro tanto* (motivating) reasons to refrain from having an abortion if abortion is what she really wanted to have. Nonetheless, if Alice moves or travels somewhere, she might run

into pro-life people. Even in this second scenario, as long as there is a realistic possibility that Alice be urged to comply with the pro-life norms, it is sensible to say that the pro-life norms still apply to Alice in general.

Moving on to type-2 norms, these norms are binding only on those who know about it. Let us consider an example of a type-2 norm. Cultural norms and customs may have constitutive components, evaluative components and deontic components. Here, I am referring to the deontic components only.

An outlander, having just arrived at an unfamiliar land, wants to establish mutually beneficial relationships with the locals. Unfortunately, the outlander knows nothing about the local customs. As a result, when meeting with the locals for the first time, he does something that the locals would normally consider to be rude, such as failing to shake the hand of someone reaching out to him²⁷, despite the fact that the outlander does not intend to be rude.

What is at issue with this example? First of all, according to the local customs²⁸, if a person does not intend to be rude, he may be said to be required or strongly recommended to shake the hand of someone who is reaching out to him. The outlander failed to do what the custom requires him to do. Does the norm apply to him?

Fortunately, upon learning that the outlander does not yet know anything about the local customs and that the outlander has no intention to be rude, the locals might “pardon” him; they brush the issue aside as a simple misunderstanding. If the outlander can be “pardoned,” I would argue that the local custom does not apply to the outlander

²⁷ This custom of handshaking is commonplace and can be found in many societies around the world.

²⁸ Customs often have a constitutive component too. Particular to this example, the constitutive component determines what kind of act or gesture constitutes a welcoming handshake and so on.

in this particular instance at this particular time.²⁹ Therefore, the custom is a type-2 norm. However, if the locals would not “pardon” the outlander, despite knowing fully well that the outlander has no knowledge whatsoever about the local customs, then the custom in this case is likely a type-1 norm instead.

Let us move on to type-3 norms. These are norms that are binding on a person only if that person endorses them. A common example would be a religious norm. Some religions do not force people to share their faith. Their norms only apply to those who endorse the religious norms, those who have faith in the religion.

Finally, I will reemphasize the relationship between norms and motivating reasons under the MR-N framework.

Section 5.8 – Relationship between norms and motivating reasons

Under the framework, norms motivate a person to act only by means of motivating reasons. The mere fact that a norm requires, recommends or forbids me to do a certain act under certain circumstances does not necessarily motivate me to either do or not to do it. That is to say, I am motivated to comply with a norm *only if* I have the relevant motivating reasons to comply. There are many possible ways in which I may acquire motivating reasons. For instance, I may be motivated because I endorse the norm, because that I fear punishment, or because complying with the norm satisfies my other desires. This is true for any deontic norm.

²⁹ If the outlander learns about the local customs, then the customs would apply to him. Since the outlander is going to learn at some point, it is sensible to say the following: 1) the custom does not apply to the unknowing outlander, 2) the custom does apply to the knowing outlander, and 3) the custom applies to the outlander (simpliciter).

Chapter 6 – The Business School Examples

We are done with the theory. Before I talk about joint commitment, as I mentioned towards the end of [Section 1.4](#), I want to do singularism some justice by showing how singularist theories such as mine can directly account for social phenomena without having to rely on any complex collective concept such as the concept of joint commitment.

The following series of examples of groups are adapted from the pair of groups featured in Searle's Business School Example (2002, 2010). The examples of groups that I am going to describe are in the order of increasing complexity. The goal to show that complex scenarios that involve a variety of different collective concepts can be described in purely singularist terms via a MR-N framework.

Section 6.1 – Group 1

Group 1: A group of Business School graduates were taught and come to believe Adam Smith's theory of the invisible hand, according to which each person can help humanity by pursuing their own selfish interests and not cooperating with anyone.

Details about Adam Smith's theory aside, Group 1 features a collection of business school students who were taught and come to "believe" a certain theory of economics. How do we interpret the word "believe" in this context? What does it mean to believe a theory? There are a few possible interpretations.

Firstly, the theory of the invisible hand can be interpreted as offering a series of recommendations to people to do certain acts, e.g., to act as selfishly as possible and not cooperate with anyone. On this interpretation, to believe the theory is to endorse the theory, *thought of as a deontic norm*,³⁰ wholeheartedly and enthusiastically³¹. The theory, in this case is regarded as a *deontic norm*.

Let us denote this particular interpretation of “believe a theory” I_N (“ N ” for norm). Since my description of Group 1 is rather sketchy, it is possible to distinguish between three possible expositions of the theory regarded as a deontic *norm*.

Under the exposition, N_u (“ u ” for universal), the norm says that everyone is recommended to act as selfishly as they can and to refrain from cooperating with anyone. The norm, N_u , applies universally to everyone.

Under the exposition, N_p (“ p ” for particular), the norm says that if you desire to help humanity, then you are recommended to act as selfishly as you can and to refrain from cooperating with anyone. That is to say, the norm only applies to those who desire to help humanity.

Under the exposition, N_c (“ c ” for cultivate), the norm says that you are recommended to act as selfishly as you can and to refrain from cooperating with anyone, and you are also recommended to cultivate in yourself a desire to help humanity.

³⁰ The theory of the invisible hand is likely to have both evaluative, deontic and constitutive components. Let us focus on the deontic components for now and call it a “deontic norm” for short.

³¹ It is a separate question why the students come to endorse Adam Smith’s theory. Some may endorse the theory because they are a fan of the person, Adam Smith. Some may endorse the theory because they want to be part of a community, any community in fact, and it just so happens to be a community that is characterized by shared endorsement of the theory of the invisible hand. There are more possibilities that I will not discuss here, but the two above-mentioned interpretations I am going to expand on later.

I will use the notation " I_{Nu} " to denote the scenario in which we adopt the interpretations I_N together with the norm, N_u . " I_{Np} " denotes the combination of I_N and N_p , and " I_{Nc} " denotes the combination of I_N and N_c .

The norms N_u and N_c apply to every student, regardless of their attitudes towards humanity. In addition, on the assumption that the business school students have a desire to help humanity, the norm N_p applies to every business school student also.

Since they all endorse the norm wholeheartedly, the business school students are very likely to have a (norm-inspired) motivating reason to do what the norm recommends them to do by virtue of their endorsement of the norm and the fact that the norm applies to them under the circumstances. As a result, the students have motivating reasons to follow the norm, not as a means to some other ends, but for the norm's own sake.

Now, there is a second interpretation of "believe a theory." We notice that Smith's theory, aside from being a norm, is comprised of a series of philosophical arguments for why, by acting as selfishly as he can and not cooperating with anyone, one can best help humanity. Under this interpretation, students come to believe the theory by being persuaded by the arguments presented in the theory. We call this interpretation I_M .

Under I_M , students regard the purported fact that the best way to help humanity is to act as selfishly as they can and not cooperate with anyone as a motivating reason to do exactly that. This purported fact constitutes a motivating reason for the students only by virtue of their desire to help humanity. Therefore, under I_M , assuming that the students indeed have a desire to help humanity, the students have motivating reasons to act as selfishly as they can and not cooperate with anyone.

Here is an important difference between I_N and I_M . Under I_N , students are eager to defend Smith's theory against charges and attacks. This is because they endorse the theory for what it is, and any proposal that contradicts the theory may be regarded as heresy. The more enthusiastic they are about their endorsement of a theory, the more eager they are to defend the theory against all kinds of criticisms. In contrast, students, under I_M , are more eager to examine critiques of Adam Smith's theory, and they would be more responsive to valid criticisms of the theory. In real life, however, people often simultaneously exhibit both symptoms of I_N and I_M , i.e., they not only endorse the theory but are also interested to know how they can best help humanity.

I hereby propose the membership criteria for Group 1.

One becomes a member of Group 1 by satisfying the following conditions: (1) by being a graduating student at the relevant Business School, (2) by believing the theory of the invisible hand.

Students can decide, freely on their own, whether to become a member of Group 1 so long as they are able to choose on their own free will whether to endorse the theory or to be persuaded by the arguments presented. In addition, members of Group 1 may not "know" each other, and hence, they may not recognize themselves as belonging to the same group.

Let us move on to Group 2.

Section 6.2 – Group 2

Group 2: A group of Business School graduates were taught and come to believe Smith's theory of the invisible hand. Each member of the group believes that each member (including himself) has strong motivating reasons to help humanity by pursuing their own selfish interests.

How does a person come to have strong motivating reasons to act as selfishly as he can and not cooperate with anyone?

In my discussion of I_N , I mentioned that a person who endorses the theory of the invisible hand and think of the theory as a deontic norm in the form of N_u or N_c is likely to have a norm-inspired motivating reason to act as selfishly as he can. Under I_{Np} , the person is additionally assumed to have a desire to help humanity. The strength of his norm-inspired motivating reason is a function of the degree of enthusiasm with which he endorses the norm and, in cases where he understands the norm as N_p , a function also of the strength of his desire to help humanity.

In my discussion of I_M , I noted that, for someone who believes the best way to help humanity is to act as selfishly as he can, he may come to have a motivating reason to do exactly that by virtue of their desire to help humanity. Hence, the strength of his (desire-inspired) motivating reason is a function of the strength of his desire to help humanity and of the degree of certainty with which he believes the theory of the invisible hand, i.e., the claim that the best way to help humanity is to act as selfishly as he can and not cooperate with anyone. For convenience, I may omit the part about refraining to cooperate.

A person may have a wealth of other motivating reasons to act (or not to act) as selfishly as he can and not cooperate with anyone. Since there are so many possibilities, it would be better to talk about them only as they show up.

Having discussed how a person can come to have motivating reasons to act as selfishly as he can, it is time for me to propose the criteria for memberships of Group 2.

One becomes a member of Group 2 by satisfying the following conditions: (1) by being a graduating student at the relevant Business School, (2) by believing the theory of the invisible hand, (3) by having strong motivating reasons to act as selfishly as one can and to refrain from cooperating with anyone, and (4) by believing that each person (in the group) satisfies conditions (1), (2) and (3).

We have discussed conditions (1) and (2) in the context of Group 1, and (3) just above. Condition (4) is self-explanatory. Now, we can ask more questions about Group 2.

Can someone be kicked out of a group against his will? The answer is yes, if other people are made to believe that the person does not believe the theory or is not sufficiently motivated to comply with it. To be a member of Group 2, one would have to earn the “trust” of the others. One has to demonstrate to the others that he is indeed strongly motivated to act as selfishly as he can. Why would someone bother proving himself to others, one may ask? Perhaps he has a desire to be understood and embraced by other people, in which case he has a motivating reason to join the group by virtue of his desire to be understood and embraced by others.

More interestingly, is it necessary that members of the group have a “sense” that they are “members of the same group”? In other words, can we imagine a scenario in

which the students do not recognize themselves as belonging to the same group? I believe the answer is no. Since, in the present context, we would like to assume that groups must have at least two members, to answer this question, we look at the only criteria that presumes the existence of other people, criterion (4). Criterion (4) requires that each person believes that every other person also believes the theory of the invisible hand and has strong motivating reasons to act as selfishly as they can just like he himself does.

Here is a possible scenario. Imagine that the group has at least two members, Alice and Bob, who know each other. However, upon graduation, they each go on their separate ways. There is no guarantee that Alice and Bob will end up acting as selfishly as they can just as they initially intended to do. Upon graduation, each may change their mind about what to do. In this case, Alice and Bob do not think of themselves as peers.

Let us take a step further and assume that both of them will end up helping humanity in the way prescribed by the theory and that they are both certain that each will do exactly that. How would they feel about themselves and their memberships in the group then? Do they feel that they are “acting together”? The answer seems to me to be negative. This is because Bob and Alice may believe the theory on different grounds. Suppose that Bob is a fan of Adam Smith, he believes everything that Smith writes. Suppose that Alice, on the other hand, desires to help humanity, and she believes the theory of the invisible hand only because she is persuaded by Smith’s arguments. Surely, they both believe the theory and are strongly motivated to act in accordance with it. However, Alice might regard Bob as a blind follower of Adam Smith while Bob might think of Alice as a potential “traitor.” Come to think of it, it seems to me that Alice

and Bob may refuse to think of themselves as doing something together, i.e., as members of the same group.

If Alice and Bob believe the theory on the same ground, however, e.g., they are both fans of Adam Smith, then perhaps they would regard each other as peers. In particular, they would be members of a similarity group. They have mutual knowledge of the fact that they share enthusiasm about the same philosopher.

Let us move on to Group 3. Group 3 is just like Group 2 except for one additional clause: they all get together to make a pact to help humanity.

Section 6.3 – Group 3

Group 3: A group of Business School graduates were taught and come to believe Smith's theory of the invisible hand. Each member of the group believes that each member (including himself) has strong motivating reasons to help humanity by pursuing their own selfish interests. In addition, they all get together on graduation day and make a "pact" that each will go out to help humanity by acting as selfishly as they can and not cooperating with anyone. Upon graduation, each goes out to help humanity just as they intended.

Let us jump straight to the membership criteria. One becomes a member of Group 3 by satisfying conditions (1) through (4), same as before, in addition to the following condition: (5) by making a "pact" together with the others.

What is a "pact"? I will argue that a pact, in an ideal scenario, can be thought of as a norm that is subscribed to by every participant of the pact-making process. In an

ideal scenario, each student walks away with a mutual belief that each participant subscribes to the same ideal norm, N_i . This ideal norm, N_i , may take any shape or form, but to keep things simple, suppose that N_i can be (partially) described as follows.

The ideal norm, N_i : Each participant (of the pact-making process) is required to help humanity by acting in accordance with the theory of the invisible hand. Each participant has the right to remonstrate with any participant for failing to do so.

In Group 3, through the pact-making process, each student comes to know about and endorse N_i and forms a belief that every participant knows about and endorses N_i . This is not the end of the story. There has to be some kind of assurance that students will actually comply with the norm. For this, we need to turn to motivating reasons. We can distinguish between two possible scenarios.

Scenario A: Participants of the pact wholeheartedly endorse the norm, N_i , and have strong motivating reasons, especially norm-inspired motivating reasons, to comply with it. If this is the case, then we might want to say that the participants are “taking the pact seriously” and the pact is “a solemn pact.”

Scenario B: Some participants wholeheartedly endorse the norm, N_i , and believe that the norm applies to all participants of the pact. In addition, N_i requires or recommends one to compel other participants to comply with the norm by various prescribed means, and those means are sufficient to engender strong motivating reasons for the other participants to comply with the norm. Finally, the subscribers of the norm have strong motivating reasons and the ability to carry out those prescribed means, partly because they subscribe to N_i , partly because they have a desire to have more people join them in helping humanity, or for some entirely different reasons.

The scenario that Searle has in mind in his original example (2002, 2010) is likely to be Scenario A. Thus, we have a scenario in which every member of the group takes the pact seriously. Since they are coming together to make the pact, the participants may communicate with one another in such a way that each participant walks away from the gathering with a belief that every other participant is also taking the pact seriously.

So far, I have only focused on those who are members of the group in question. It is natural to be curious about those who are outside of a group, say Group 3. I will focus on one particular case.

A non-member of Group 3: A person, call him Josh, fails to satisfy the membership criteria of Group 3. Nevertheless, he acts in a certain way partly because he thinks the group as a whole is going to act in a particular way.

What makes this case perplexing is that, in explaining Josh's actions, it seems that we are making reference to an irreducible collective concept, the concept of a group. In fact, we can explain this case in terms of my singularist framework.

Suppose that I am deciding whether to lift a heavy box on the ground. I might contemplate the following. Am I strong enough to lift this heavy box? What is likely to happen if I failed to lift the box? What if I lifted the box halfway off the ground but I could not hold it? How might other people do in response? Are they going to help me if I got injured? Not to mention the chain of possible causes and effects. All of these considerations are considerations about facts or about what circumstances might obtain (in the future). Facts or circumstances can be affected in numerous ways. They can be affected by natural laws like gravity. They can be affected by animals, say, a cat may

start scratching my leg. They can also be affected by other people—a medical team may come to my aid in case I got seriously injured. What is important to us, when trying to explain a person's behaviour, is what circumstances the person believes is likely to obtain, not how these circumstances obtain. It hardly matters whether these circumstances are affected by natural laws, animals, individuals or groups of individuals.

Going back to Josh's case, Josh behaves in a certain way because he believes Group 3 is going to do something. The purported fact that Group 3 is going to do something is a part of Josh's assessment of the circumstances, which is an important part of motivating reasons. The framework does not distinguish whether the circumstances are affected by a group or an individual. Section 3.4 discusses a similar issue.

In Group 3, we are assuming, without going into details about what exactly happened at the pact-making gathering, that the participants are able to communicate with one another effectively and accurately. Unfortunately, in real life, we cannot take this for granted. This is the topic of the next section: How does a pact (or a norm) come about?

Section 6.4 – Coming about of an agreement, a pact or a joint commitment

In real-life, people are often faced with the challenge of communicating with one another and have their thoughts and feelings understood by others. This poses a serious challenge for the participants to reach an ideal pact. It also poses a challenge for people entering into a joint commitment. Continuing the discussion of Group 3, let us

talk about how the ideal norm, N_i , in one way or another, emerges from the pact-making process. Suppose that Group 3 has only two members, Alice and Bob.

If Alice and Bob are close friends or siblings, they may communicate with one another in a way that only they themselves can understand. Outsiders are prone to misinterpretation. For example, if Bob shakes his head three times, Alice understands that Bob is against the proposal and will not compromise under any realistically obtainable circumstance. On the other hand, Carl, to whom Alice and Bob are strangers, may misinterpret Bob's gesture and come to believe that Bob is still willing to agree to the proposal if sufficient incentive is provided.

Consider another example featuring a habitual liar, Lyn. Suppose that Lyn and Carl are close friends. One day, Lyn says to Carl, "I promise to you, Carl, to pay you five bucks if you finish this cup of water." Hearing this, Carl quickly realizes that Lyn is playing tricks on him. Likewise, Lyn also knows, from noticing Carl's facial expressions, that Carl knows that he is playing tricks on Carl. Hence, neither Lyn nor Carl takes Lyn to be making a "real promise," with all the rights and obligations attached, to pay Carl five dollars should Carl finish the drink. However, a casual observer from a neighbouring table, Bob, might mistakenly believe that Lyn is making a "promise" to Carl and thus puts himself under an obligation to pay Carl five dollars should Carl finish the drink. Bob believes that, if Lyn refuses to pay Carl, then Carl, and perhaps Bob too, would have the right to remonstrate with Lyn for breaking his "promise" to Carl.

To comprehend and describe in detail what is going on in this example, it is useful to recall that social conventions are norms too, and norms in real-life often have both constitutive and deontic components.

There exists a norm, call it “private norm,” that applies to Lyn and Carl and that both Lyn and Carl subscribe to. According to this “private norm,” Lyn’s utterance of the above-mentioned sentence does *not* constitute the making of a “real promise.” As a result, Lyn does *not* owe Carl any obligation in accordance with the “private norm.” Bob, on the other hand, takes Lyn to be making a “promise” in accordance with a “social norm of promising”³² that Bob subscribes to. This “social norm” only applies to those who know about it. Since the “social norm” is widely known in the wider society in which all three of them are members. Bob believes that the “social norm” applies to Carl, Lyn and himself. We assume that the “social norm” grants an agent the right to remonstrate with someone for failing to fulfill what constitutes, in accordance with the constitutive components of the “social norm,” a “promise,” even if the agent is not the “promisee.” Thus, although Bob is not the “promisee,” he has the right to remonstrate with Lyn in accordance with the “social norm.” Lastly, Bob believes that he has a right to remonstrate and chooses to remonstrate with Lyn partly because he has a (norm-inspired) motivating reason, as evidenced by Bob’s wholehearted endorsement of the “social norm.”

There is no categorical difference between the “private norm” and the “social norm.” Both are named after a group in which they are widely accepted. The “private norm” is “widely” accepted (known and complied with) by Carl and Lyn. The “social norm” is widely accepted in a much larger group, conveniently coined a “society,” to

³² It should be noted that this “social norm” is presented solely for the purpose of constructing a useful example. I am not suggesting that we, the readers and the author, should endorse or comply with this “social norm.” Nor am I suggesting that this “social norm” is what in fact is accepted by the society in which we, the readers and the author, live.

which Bob, Carl and Lyn belong. There is nothing inherently special about this group called “society.”³³

Section 6.5 – Differing opinions within a group

So far, we assumed in Group 1, 2 and 3 that the members uniformly believe the theory of the invisible hand. Indeed, this is what I take Searle to be suggesting. For the sake of inquiry and in the spirit of putting my MR-N framework to test, in this section, I am going to discuss an example of a group, Group 4, where members have differing opinions about the theory of the invisible hand, even though the intuitive verdict is still that the group as a whole believes the theory.

The intuitive verdict is that the group as a whole still believes the theory of the invisible hand. I believe that this intuitive verdict, as product of intuition, can be somewhat vague, like all intuitions are, and thus calls for further clarification. However, different people have different intuitions about whether the group, as a whole, can be said to “believe a theory.” As a result, there can be many distinct cases in which a group can be said to “believe a theory.” I am not in a position to discuss all possible cases. What I can do instead is to offer a “typical” example of a group of this kind.

In Group 4, some students in the group believe the theory of the invisible hand while others do not. Yet, the group as a whole is still said to “believe the theory.”

³³ Likewise, there is nothing inherently special about the so-called “our society,” except that we, the readers and the author, happen to be a part of it.

The group may have a constitutive norm, N_1 , that stipulates that as long as the majority of its members agree that the theory of the invisible hand is valid, then the group considers the theory to be valid.

As I have noted earlier, those who believe the theory are likely to have strong motivating reasons to do as the theory tells them to do, provided that they desire to help humanity. As for those who do not believe, they do not have the same motivating reasons.

However, the group may have another deontic norm, N_2 , which effectively stipulates the following: every member is required to follow every instruction of any theory that the group, as a whole, believes to be valid. This deontic group norm evidently applies to every member and is, let us assume, subscribed to by every member. In this case, since the group, as a whole, has decided to endorse the theory of the invisible hand in accordance with the constitutive norm N_1 , those members who do not believe the theory have strong motivating reason to do what the deontic norm, N_2 , tells them to do. This motivating reason move non-believers to do the same thing as the believers do, i.e., act as selfishly as they can and refrain from cooperating with others.

Thus, we have a group that, as a whole, believe the theory of the invisible hand, in which all members are motivated to do what the theory tells them to do, despite the fact its members have entirely different views about the theory. Notice that this group is given a full singularist description. The phrase “group belief” is interpreted in purely singularist terms. This concludes our discussion of the business school examples.

As I will soon argue in Chapter 8, joint commitments can be described in purely singularist terms as well. But first, I will argue for an important preliminary thesis. The

thesis roughly states that collective concepts, such as collective duties, can be reduced to singularist terms. I will apply this thesis to argue that my singularist framework can fully describe joint commitment.

Chapter 7 – Practicality of Norms

Before I talk about joint commitment, I need to establish an important preliminary result: any norm that does *not* admit a singularist partial description is impractical. First, I will say a few words about collective normative concepts since they are the key components of deontic norms.

People commonly speak of a group having collective duties, rights, obligations, responsibilities and so on. How do we make of such things as collective duties? Can we reduce them to what each individual is recommended, required or forbidden to do? In this section, I will argue that collective duties, rights, obligations, responsibilities and so on can indeed be described in terms of what each individual is recommended, required or forbidden to do. If they cannot, they would be practically useless. I am going to use “collective duty” as the main talking point. By arguing that collective duties can be described in terms of what each individual is required, recommended or forbidden to do, I hope to show that collective rights, obligations, responsibilities and so on that are, in fact, practically useful can also be described in singularist terms.

Before I move on, I need to make an important assumption. A deontic norm is *not* the same (kind of thing) as its verbal descriptions. It is common knowledge that norms can exist without anyone mentioning or describing them. There are many “unspoken rules” in societies that govern appropriate or acceptable behaviours. Thus, expressions such as “collective duty” and “individual duty” are, without exception, partial verbal descriptions of deontic norms. Therefore, it is the deontic norms themselves that are described in collectivist or singularist terms.

Collectivist description of a norm: A description (of a norm) is *collectivist* if and only if it contains collectivist terms such as “collective duty.” A description (of a norm) is *singularist* if and only if it is not collectivist.

Most norms can be described either in singularist terms or collectivist terms. Here is an example. There is a kind of norm, masqueraded as a claim, that can be roughly described as follows: a certain organization that has done something wrong in the past, has a collective duty now to compensate the victims (or their families or descendants). This is a collectivist description.

Here is a singularist partial description of the same norm: certain high-ranking officials of the organization are each (individually) required to authorize payments (among other forms of compensation) to the victims, and certain lower-ranking members of the organization are each required to do what they are supposed to do in order to ensure that the payment is delivered. This is a singularist partial description of the same norm.

In the singularist description, the term “collective duty” is replaced by a conjunction of “individual duties.” When we say that an organization has a collective duty, we understand, if we know how the organization is organized, that each member of the organization has individual duties, among other things, to do what they are each supposed to do.

Before I move on, let us make a quick definition.

Irreducible norm: A norm is *irreducible* if and only if it does *not* admit any singularist partial³⁴ description.

Here is an example of an irreducible norm. Suppose that the organization, in my above example, is in a complete dysfunctional mess, in which no member of the organization knows, among other things, what their individual duties are. Merely claiming that the dysfunctional organization, as a group, has a collective duty to compensate the victims would, in all likelihood, fail to produce any fruitful result, and the victims would be left alone to suffer. In this case, there is no singularist partial description of the corresponding deontic norm—no one knows what he is individually recommended, required or forbidden to do. In this case, the deontic norm is *impractical*, i.e., meaningless or inconsequential, and it does not admit any singularist partial description.

In fact, any deontic norm that is irreducible, i.e., that does not admit any singularist partial description is impractical. Suppose that we have a norm that can only be described by the sentence, “a group has a collective duty to save a drowning person.” Assume you are a member of this group, and a person is drowning. What are you supposed to do in accordance with this norm? The norm does not recommend nor require anyone, specifically you, to save the drowning swimmer. For, if the norm does, the norm would admit a singularist partial description. Nor does the norm hold you blameworthy for failures. This is because, otherwise, the norm would admit a singularist

³⁴ Why “partial”? Suppose we have a norm that says (1) Alice and Bob have a collective duty to φ and (2) Carl has a duty to ψ . This norm does not admit a singularist full description since (1) cannot be described in singularist terms, but it does admit a singularist partial description, i.e., description (2).

partial description—you, as an individual member of the group, is individually blameworthy. Therefore, irreducible norms are practically inert.

This conclusion is echoed by Stephanie Collins. Collins (2019) observes that what she calls “coalitions” and “combinations,” both of which do not have a clear organizational structure, do not constitute “agential groups” and therefore cannot be holders of collective duties or group duties.³⁵ Collins can be understood as suggesting that duties assigned to a group that does not have an organizational structure are impractical. Hence, these group are effectively “duty-less.”

Therefore, impractical norms can be safely discarded for the purpose of describing realistically observable social phenomena.

Here is an interesting corollary. It is natural for people, upon hearing the above examples (of the drowning swimmer and of the dysfunctional organization), to argue that it is egregious to let the swimmer drown without anyone taking any responsibility. Hence, some people are required to do something so that the swimmer can be saved. Likewise, in a dysfunctional organization, it is natural for people to react by saying that the organization in question ought to organize themselves and take responsibility for its past mistakes.

There are two ways of interpreting these natural reactions. On the first interpretation, what people are calling for are *improvements* of previously impractical norms. These calls are likely to be made on the basis of what might be called “norms of a society.” According to this norm, group members are each individually required come up with a detailed organizational plan. This is sometimes described by some author as

³⁵ Collins defends this proposition by referring to the lack of decision-making capacities of non-agential groups. I am making a very different argument.

“we-reasoning,” which can be understood as a process of refining an impractical norm to make it practical. On the second interpretation, what people are calling for is to apply the “moral norms of a society” to the case. The “moral norms” recommends or requires each individual to act on their own and to seek others’ help if necessary.

Under either interpretation, the end result is the same: a new norm that applies to the situation is established. This new norm does admit singularist partial descriptions and is therefore practical. It is not a coincidence that our natural reactions when facing an impractical norm is to establish a new norm that is in fact practical.

If we take a step back from norms and consider the situation as a whole, we realize that norms are not necessary for people to collaborate on any project. For instance, if each member of the said organization is sufficiently motivated to compensate the victims, then norm-inspired motivating reasons (and norms) would be unnecessary. For a more concrete example, suppose that one member of the dysfunctional organization, call her Alice, frustrated by the inability of the organization to act, inspired partly by the fact that the organization has a collective duty to compensate the victim, decides to compensate the victims out of her own pockets. She is by no means individually required nor recommended by the organizational norm to do so.

Can Alice be said to have a norm-inspired motivating reason, by virtue of her endorsement of the irreducible norm of the organization, to pay? I believe the answer is no. At first glance, however, the answer seems to be yes. It is tempting to suggest that Alice can indeed be motivated by a group norm that does not admit any singularist description.

Before jumping to a conclusion, let us consider Alice's motives. There are many possible motives for why Alice chooses to pay out of her own pockets. Alice may be motivated by her pity for the victims, her frustration with the incompetent organization, her unique temperament, her endorsement of certain moral norms which recommends her individually to act, and her endorsement of a similar but different group norm that does admit singularist descriptions. Any of these motives might explain Alice's actions more plausibly than that she endorses a norm that does *not* admit singularist partial descriptions. Therefore, I argue that, properly speaking, Alice *cannot* be said to be motivated by an irreducible group norm, which does not admit any singularist partial description. I would be making an *improper* statement by claiming that Alice counts the fact that the dysfunctional organization has a collective duty to compensate the victims as a *pro tanto* motivating reason for her to pay out of her own pockets by virtue of her endorsement of an irreducible group norm.

As a side note, it must be granted that norms can be impractical for many different reasons besides being irreducible. Take Act Utilitarianism for example. The deontic norm of Act Utilitarianism offers a generic recipe for determining, in each circumstance, what a person is required, recommended or forbidden to do. However, it is up to each person to figure out what exactly he is required, recommended or forbidden to do in each circumstance, but this can be extremely difficult. This implies that the norm of Act Utilitarianism is impractical.³⁶ This is another cause of impracticality.

There is an argument, such as one endorsed by Olle Blomberg (2020, p. 103) and Wringer (2014), for adopting concepts like "collective duties." They argue that since

³⁶ This problem of Act Utilitarianism is noted by many, in particular Fred Feldman (2012), who advocates for a "practical level theory" to complement a "theoretical level theory" such as Act Utilitarianism.

collectivist terms are widely used in ordinary discourse, any account that seeks to reduce and reinterpret them comes at a cost which would be preferably avoided.

There are at least two problems with this kind of argument. Firstly, I believe that norms are not identical to their verbal descriptions. Hence, there is no theoretical cost in describing a norm, as a norm, in singularist terms. Secondly, it can be helpful to know, for the purpose of determining a norm's practicality, whether the norm admits a singularist (partial) description. There are values to be gained from "reinterpreting" norms that are commonly described in collectivist terms.

In summary, although it can be helpful sometimes to verbally describe a norm in collectivist terms, such a verbal description either represents a gross simplification of the norm's contents, which can be at least partially described precisely in singularist terms or goes to show that the norm itself is impractical.

Chapter 8 – Gilbertian Joint Commitment

Section 8.1 – Introduction of joint commitment

The goal of this section is to describe Gilbertian joint commitment in terms of my singularist framework. Let us first take a look at Gilbert's views on personal commitments. Gilbert takes both personal and joint commitments to be "everyday concepts" that most of us are familiar with.

According to Gilbert, a personal commitment can be either a personal decision or a personal intention to do something (2006, p. 128). For instance, by deciding to join a chess club, I am making a personal commitment. Before the personal commitment is rescinded, I remain bound by the personal commitment. The trick is that I can rescind any time I want to. I can, at any time, withdraw a personal commitment that I have made only to myself.

Not only can a person decide or intend to do an act, but he can also decide or intend to accept a certain goal or believe a certain proposition, but the latter two can be explained in terms of what the person decides or intends to do (2006, p. 137 & p.138). Hence, what is most relevant here is a person's decision or intention *to do* something, which Gilbert calls a personal commitment. In addition, personal commitments give the person *reasons* to act in accordance with the commitment (2006, p. 128).

Joint commitment, on the other hand, is a collective decision or intention by two or more people to do something. Joint commitment is the product of a number of

people's mutual expressions of readiness³⁷ to do something *as a single body*, *as a unit*, or *as one* (2013, p. 32-33).

Inherent in any joint commitment are certain rights and obligations, for instance, obligations to do certain acts and to be subject to rebuke for failing to do these acts. These obligations are “non-moral” or “context-insensitive,” which means that they are binding on a person regardless of whether there are other obligations that conflict with them. In addition, no one can unilaterally rescind from a joint commitment without the consents of other parties.

In a later paper, Gilbert argues further that there may be a particular *feature* inherent in any joint commitment. Only those who have the *feature* can be a party to the joint commitment. Let me call it the *defining features* (of a joint commitment), for easy reference. For instance, the audience of a live performance may be jointly committed to keep quiet. However, only those having the feature of “situated inside the auditorium” can be parties to the joint commitment. Once a person leaves the auditorium and loses the defining feature as a result, he is no longer a party to the joint commitment. This “special” method of rescinding from a joint commitment does not require any party's approval.

Section 8.2 – Analysis of joint commitment

³⁷ Curiously enough, Gilbert, in her most recent book, notes that a person may be threatened, such as at gunpoint, to be “ready” to enter joint commitment as long as he prefers not to be harmed (2023, p. 4-5). Although this claim at first glance seems problematic, I shall not make a move against it.

The goal of this section is to fully describe Gilbertian joint commitment in terms of my framework. I summarize the key features of Gilbertian joint commitment as follows.³⁸

1. A (Gilbertian) joint commitment is a commitment involving two or more people.
2. Joint commitments necessarily involve rights and obligations.
 - a. Each party is obligated to conform to the joint commitment.
 - b. Each party has a right to remonstrate with any party for violation of the joint commitment.
 - c. No party can unilaterally rescind from the joint commitment without attaining the approval of all parties (2006) or the approval of “an authority” (2023, p. 6-7). However, in a group of two, if one party violates the joint commitment, the non-violator may unilaterally rescind (2006).
3. Rights and obligations that inhere in any joint commitment are “non-moral” or context insensitive, meaning that they are “binding” as long as the joint commitment continues to hold.
4. The creation of a joint commitment requires each party to express and come to know of each other’s readiness to be bound by the joint commitment.
5. Joint commitments give each party a “reason” to act in accordance with the joint commitment.

³⁸ For Gilbert’s own brief list, see 2013, Chapter 2, p. 41.

6. It might be the case that all parties to a joint commitment share certain features and that a person will be freed of the joint commitment if he ceases to have these features.

Here is how I would describe Gilbertian joint commitment. Pay attention to the words and phrases I used in my description: they are all carefully and precisely defined by my framework.

First of all, we have a group, *g*. Members of *g* are the parties to the joint commitment. Since rights and obligations are involved, we have a *deontic norm*. The kind of deontic norm that inhere in any joint commitment is of a very specific type—it is comprised of rights and obligations listed from (2a), (2b) and (2c) with property (3). Let us call this type of norm the *Gilbertian norm*.

Since the parties (to a joint commitment) are jointly committed to do something as a *single body*, their rights and obligations are “collectively owned.” Let us use “collective duty” as the main talking-point. From Chapter 7, we know that, in order for a norm to be practical, the norm must admit singularist partial descriptions. Hence, at least some collective duties can be explained in terms of a conjunction of individual duties. Let us focus only on those.

(2a) Each member is thus required, recommended or forbidden to do what he is individually required, recommended or forbidden to do in each circumstance. For example, if a group is jointly committed to push a car out of a pit, then, for instance, it is possible that one person is required to push the car while the other is required to hold the steering wheel.

(2b) Each party has a right to remonstrate with any party, including himself,³⁹ for violation of (2a). To use the same example, if the driver fails to hold on to the steering wheel, then both the driver and the passenger has a right to remonstrate with the driver.

The clause (2c) about unilateral rescindment can a bit tricky. If a person becomes a party to the joint commitment at any time in any way, he would be unable to unilaterally rescind from the joint commitment without attaining the approval of every other party. He remains “bound” by the joint commitment unless he loses the *defining features* that the joint commitment requires. In addition, Gilbert contends that the quitter does not have to issue *explicitly* a rescindment request, and the others do not have to announce *explicitly* their approval in order for the rescindment request to go through.

This is further complicated by the fact that a party may choose *not* to approve, i.e., choose to disapprove, another party’s request to rescind from the joint commitment, but instead opt to simply refrain from *exercising* his right to remonstrate with the would-be quitter for violations of the terms of the joint commitment. To put it simply in plain language, “I do not blame you, but I reserve my rights to do so.” Do we want to distinguish this case from cases of approval? I believe so. However, this is much easier said than done. Although Gilbert does not seem to fully address this issue, my framework needs to take accountability on everyone’s behalf. Let us consider a simple example.

³⁹ Although Gilbert does not seem to clarify this explicitly, but I see no reason why a person does have a right to remonstrate with himself for failing to do what he is required to do. This is because, plausibly, other parties are forbidden from interfering with a person’s blaming himself.

Suppose that Alice and Bob were jointly committed to go for a walk together. Assume that Bob did not show up, and Alice did not remonstrate with Bob. Did Alice approve of Bob's quitting, or did she simply choose not to remonstrate with him?

Here is my answer. For the purpose of finding out whether the Gilbertian norm is applies to Bob, it does not matter whether Alice has sufficient motivating reasons to remonstrate with him. If Alice believes that she has a right to remonstrate with Bob, she did not approve. If she believes that she no longer has a right to remonstrate, then she did approve. Prior to Bob's rescindment, Alice and Bob are the only subscribers of the Gilbertian norm. As I have noted towards the end of Section 5.6, norms could not exist independently of the people who know about, endorse or comply with them, and, when it comes to the details of a norm, the opinions of the subscribers matter the most. Therefore, as long as Alice is of the opinion that (2a) does not apply to Bob, Bob is not a party to the joint commitment. This result can be extended to any group. In particular, it can be extended to a "group" of comprised of only one member. Hence, in a group of two, if one party violates the joint commitment and thus becomes a non-subscriber, the remaining person may unilaterally rescind as well.

In addition, Gilbert's convenient assertion that *every* party's approval is required for rescindment ensures that there is no disagreement among the remaining parties when one party rescinds. Hence, we do not have to deal with the case where some remaining parties believe they have a right to remonstrate with the quitter while other remaining parties believe they do not.

In cases where a joint commitment group features an authority (Gilbert 2023, p. 6-7), the authority would have certain power protected by the Gilbertian norm. For

example, the authority may have certain rights to make certain decisions, in particular, decisions about whether someone is allowed to rescind from the joint commitment; plus, each regular member is required to obey the decisions of the authority on certain issues, in particular, issues concerning participation and rescindment. In summary, on top of (2a), the Gilbertian norm contains a series of additional requirements, recommendations and prohibitions that define the structure of the group.

Let us move on to (3). Why are Gilbertian obligations “non-moral” and context-insensitive? This is because the so-called “moral norms” or “moral principles” are just another kind of norm. The fact that a “moral norm” says one thing does not imply that another norm, say a Gilbertian norm, cannot say another thing. Hence, norms are context-insensitive.

Item (4) says that the creation of a joint commitment requires each party to express and come to know of each other’s readiness to be bound by the joint commitment. I take this to be a practical requirement. For a Gilbertian norm to apply to a person, that person must, at least in some circumstance, know about and endorse the Gilbertian norm. Undoubtedly, each party wants to know whether the Gilbertian norm applies to another person. Fortunately, since joint commitment requires “mutual expressions of readiness to be bound by the joint commitment,” each party to the joint commitment believes that every other party knows about and wholeheartedly endorses, at least in some circumstance, the same Gilbertian norm. As a result, each party can feel confident when holding the other parties responsible for obeying the joint commitment.

As for (5), since the parties to the joint commitment endorse the Gilbertian norm, they may acquire norm-inspired motivating reasons to comply with it. There are many other sources of motivating reasons, such as the one arising from a person's aversion to being subject to remonstrance. In either case, it is natural that joint commitments give each party "reasons," i.e., motivating reasons, to act in accordance with it.

When it comes to (6), the role of the *defining features* of joint commitments, these features specify a class of circumstances in which the Gilbertian norm applies to a person. To reuse Gilbert's example, an audience of a live performance may jointly commit to keep quiet. Here, the Gilbertian norm only applies to a person in circumstances where that person is inside the auditorium in which the performance is held. In short, the Gilbertian norm only applies to a person in circumstances in which the *defining features* are obtained.

Overall, the story of joint commitment roughly goes like this. We have a group, g , comprised of multiple people. Each member of G knows about and endorses a norm, n , and each member of g knows that every other member knows about and endorses n . The norm n has certain properties, and, as a result of having these properties, n can be classified as a "Gilbertian norm." This is to say, the norm n has properties (1) through (6). Furthermore, the Gilbertian norm, n , can be partially described in terms of what each person is required, recommended or forbidden to do. When all of the above conditions are satisfied, we can safely conclude that there is a joint commitment and that members of g are jointly committed to do something *as a single body, as a unit or as one*.

I hope I have successfully shown that the various aspects of joint commitments that pertain to realistically observable social phenomena can be fully explained in terms of motivating reasons and norms.

Section 8.3 – Response to Gilbert’s charges against singularism via an analysis of shared intention

Previously, in [Section 1.3](#), I outlined Gilbert’s argument for why existing singularist theories are inadequate: they fail to meet the three central criteria.

The Disjunction Criterion claims that it is not necessarily the case that for every shared intention there be correlative personal intentions to the fulfillment of the shared intention. The Concurrence Criterion stipulates that the consent of every party is required for a shared intention to be changed or rescinded. The Obligation Criterion says that each party owes obligation to each other party to act as appropriate to, or in accordance with, the shared intention.

It is no surprise that the contents of the Concurrence and Obligation criteria are featured prominently in Gilbertian joint commitment since joint commitment can be used to describe shared intentions. The Concurrence Criterion is featured in (2c) while the Obligation Criterion is captured by (2) and (3). I shall not repeat myself here.

It is left to discuss the Disjunction Criterion. Gilbert admits that personal intentions to act as appropriate to the shared intention do often accompany shared intentions, and shared intentions do often give each party a motivating reason to act as appropriate, but not necessarily. The key lies in the phrase “not necessarily.”

In my discussion of (5), I mentioned that “it is natural that joint commitments give each party ‘reasons,’ i.e., motivating reasons, to act in accordance with it.” What *naturally* exist does not *necessarily* exist. Hence, as a bottom line, I am not contradicting Gilbert here.

Furthermore, early in [Sections 3.5](#), I explained that motivating reasons are *pro tanto*. As such, the existence of a motivating reason for an agent to act in a certain way does not necessarily *move* or *drive* that agent to act in that way. Thus, although an agent is likely to be motivated by the shared intention to act as appropriate to the shared intention, the agent may not be sufficiently motivated to actually act on it.

To reuse the hiking example from [Section 1.3](#), Alice and Bob collectively share an intention to hike to the top of a hill. Alice, feeling exceedingly tired halfway through the hike, decides not to go all the way to the top. She has not yet informed Bob of her decision.

By virtue of being exceedingly tired, Alice has a (strong) motivating reason to abandon their original plan, stronger than her motivating reason to honour her obligation to Bob by acting as appropriate to the shared intention. All-things-considered, Alice does not have sufficiently strong motivating reason to act as appropriate to the shared intention. In another word, she does not have an all-things-considered “correlative personal” intention to do so. Thus, correlative personal intentions, interpreted as all-things-considered personal reasons or intentions, are not necessary for shared intentions.

Thus, I have shown that we can the hiking example, in which “shared intention” plays a prominent role, in terms of my singularist framework in a way that satisfies

Gilbert's three criteria of adequacy of any account of "shared intentions." Therefore, the MR-N singularist framework is immune to Gibert's charges against singularism.

Chapter 9 – Concluding Remarks

Section 9.1 – Other singularist theories

My framework may be compared to other singularist theories that currently exist. A comprehensive comparison is beyond the scope of this thesis. I will briefly mention one theory advocated by Michael Bratman.

Bratman (1999, 2014, 2022) famously advocates a singularist account of social phenomena. His account is developed on the basis of a theory of planning, which is roughly a theory about how individuals make decisions and plans. Bratman believes that a theory of planning would set the stage for analyzing some basic forms of sociality. The main idea is that, if we understand how individuals make decisions and plans, we will be able to understand how multiple individuals can make the same or similar decisions or come up with the same or similar plans together or each on their own.

I have no time or space to go into details about Bratman's theory, but I will say a few words about the challenges Bratman's theory is facing.

Firstly, Gilbert (2013) argues that Bratman's theory, particularly his account of shared intentions, is inadequate. According to Bratman, roughly speaking, shared intentions is understood as a complex of interlocking individual intentions. This understanding fails to meet three criteria of adequacy (Gilbert, 2013): the disjunction, concurrence and obligation criteria. The disjunction criterion demands that shared intentions must not require a complex correlation between individual intentions of the relevant parties. An adequate account of shared intention should be more flexible than

that, according to Gilbert. The concurrence criterion demands that, barring special circumstances, the concurrence of all parties should be required in order for the shared intention to be changed or rescinded. This echoes one of the key features of joint commitment, the rescindment clause. The obligation criterion says that shared intentions should be associated with obligations to act.

My framework is not threatened by these criteria. For, it does not presuppose any particular account of shared intention. Different people may have different ideas about what shared intention amounts to. No matter what the idea is, my framework is able to describe that idea in purely singularist terms, just like I did with the concept of joint commitment and in the adapted Business School examples. Therefore, if a person, originating from a different social tradition, introduces a notion of shared intention that is unfamiliar to us, I bet that my framework would still be able to account for it in purely singularist terms.

Secondly, I believe my framework enjoys several advantages over that of Bratman's. First of all, Bratman's theory of planning was unable to account for unplanned spontaneity (Bratman 2014, p. 4) and neither can it account for, as Jennifer Rosner (2006) puts it, messiness of the self. Moreover, the theory of planning ran into problems when describing the workings of large-scale organizations (Bratman 2014, p. 8). Searching for a way to fill in the gap, Bratman turns to a famous theory of law proposed by H. L. A. Hart in 1961. Bratman, in his 2022 book, attempts to incorporate into his theory of planning Hart's theory of law. He believes that, with the help of Hart's theory of law, he would then be able to offer a satisfactory account of large-scale organizations.

I have some worries about Bratman's approach. It is arguably preferable to design at the beginning a comprehensive theory of social phenomena than to do major patchwork on an existing theory. More importantly, Hart's theory of law, which Bratman relies on, represents an agglomeration of two separate and distinct concepts—motivating reasons and norms—which I believe call for further clarification. In contrast, my framework is developed from the very beginning with a clear focus on precision and comprehensiveness. It is structured to accommodate the various distinctions that I need to make in order to achieve my objective.

Section 9.2 – Conclusion

A key feature of my framework is that it is able to serve all kinds of people, no matter their backgrounds or upbringing. Some people might claim, for instance, that, all things considered, abortion is wrong, period. Others might claim the opposite. Yet, there are those who believe that people are entitled to their own opinions on matters like abortion.⁴⁰ I intend my framework to be able to serve all kinds of people, including those who claim uniqueness and those who claim plurality.

To achieve this, I refrain from making any reference to the society to which I belong in the MR-N framework. As a result, moral norms do not enjoy any privileges over non-moral or immoral norms. The MR-N framework depicts the righteous just as well as the villain.

⁴⁰ Of course, there are people who believe that, all-things-considered, abortion is permissible, period.

In this thesis, I have tried to show that the framework is indeed singularist—it postulates no irreducible collective concepts. Every realistically observable behaviour of a “we” can be cast in terms of the “I.” The framework can also be used to describe, in a direct and unambiguous way, behaviours of an intimate group of people in terms of motivating reasons and norm.

I proved, by articulating Gilbertian joint commitment in terms of the MR-N framework, and by virtue of Gilbert’s contributions to the effect that the theory of joint commitment can explain a large variety of social phenomena, that we can explain the same variety of social phenomena in purely singularist terms. Hence, the singularist framework is at least as widely applicable as Gilbert’s.

As Gilbert correctly observes, it is common for people to use “plural” terms such as “we,” “union” or “unity” when *thinking about* the relationships between individuals, and it is difficult to “*perceive* the world through the lens of singularism” (emphasis added). However, there is an important difference between *thinking* or *perceiving* something, such as the social world, and fully *describing* or *theorizing* about it. When it comes to describing and theorizing social phenomena, especially in social contexts unfamiliar to certain parties of the conversation, singularist approaches are not only feasible but are also comparable to collectivist ones.

References

- Alvarez, M. (2010, March). *Kinds of Reasons: An Essay in the Philosophy of Action*. Oxford University Press.
- Alvarez, M. (2017). Reasons for Action: Justification, Motivation, Explanation. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2017 ed.). Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University.
- Baier, K. (1965). *The Moral point of view: a rational basis of ethics* (Abridged edition with a new preface by the author. ed.). New York: Random House.
- Bicchieri, C. (2005). *The Grammar of Society: The Nature and Dynamics of Social Norms*. Cambridge University Press.
- Blomberg, O. (2020). What We Ought to Do: The Decisions and Duties of Non-agential Groups. *Journal of Social Ontology*, 6, 101–116.
- Bratman, M. E. (1999). *Faces of Intention: Selected Essays on Intention and Agency*. Cambridge University Press.
- Bratman, M. E. (2014, January). *Shared Agency: A Planning Theory of Acting Together*. Oxford University Press.
- Bratman, M. E. (2022, June). *Shared and Institutional Agency: Toward a Planning Theory of Human Practical Organization*. Oxford University Press.
- Collins, S. (2019, July). *Group Duties: Their Existence and Their Implications for Individuals*. Oxford University Press.

- Deutsch, M. (2014). *The Handbook of Conflict Resolution: Theory and Practice*, 3rd Edition. Jossey-Bass.
- Feldman, F. (2012, June). True and Useful: On the Structure of a Two Level Normative Theory. *Utilitas*, 24, 151-171.
- Fiske, A. (1999, January). Learning A Culture the Way Informants Do: Observing, Imitating, and Participating.
- Gilbert, M. (1989). *On social facts*. London: Routledge.
- Gilbert, M. (2006, May). *A Theory of Political Obligation: Membership, Commitment, and the Bonds of Society*. Oxford University Press.
- Gilbert, M. (2009). Shared intention and personal intentions. *Philosophical Studies*, 144, 167–187.
- Gilbert, M. (2013, November). *Joint Commitment: How We Make the Social World*. Oxford University Press.
- Gilbert, M. (2018). *Rights and Demands: A Foundational Inquiry*. Oxford, UNITED, KINGDOM: Oxford University Press, Incorporated.
- Gilbert, M. (2023, January). *Life in Groups: How We Think, Feel, and Act Together*. Oxford University Press.
- Haidt, J. (2001). The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Judgment. *Psychological review*, 108, 814-834.
- Hart, H. L. (2012). *The Concept of Law*. (L. Green, J. Raz, & P. A. Bulloch, Eds.) Oxford, UNITED, KINGDOM: Oxford University Press, Incorporated.

- Hindriks, F. (2013). Collective Acceptance and the Is-Ought Argument. *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 16, 465–480.
- Hohfeld, W. N. (1917). Fundamental Legal Conceptions as Applied in Judicial Reasoning. *The Yale Law Journal*, 26, 710–770.
- Hume, D. (2019). *A Treatise of Human Nature*. London: Electric Book.
- Lewis, D. (2002). *Convention: A Philosophical Study*. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.
- Pettit, P. (2003). Groups with Minds of Their Own. In F. F. Schmitt (Ed.), *Socializing metaphysics: the nature of social reality* (pp. 163–193). Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Rosner, J. (2006). The Messy Self: An Introduction. *The Massachusetts Review*, 47, 191–196.
- Searle, J. R. (1964). How to Derive "ought" from "is". *The Philosophical Review* 73:43-58.
- Searle, J. R. (1995). *The Construction of Social Reality*. Free Press.
- Searle, J. R. (2002). *Consciousness and Language*. Cambridge University Press.
- Searle, J. R. (2010, January). *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization*. Oxford University Press.
- Taylor, P. W. (1978). On Taking the Moral Point of View. *Midwest Studies In Philosophy*, 3, 35–61.
- Williams, B. (1979). Internal and External Reasons. In R. Harrison (Ed.), *RATIONAL ACTION* (pp. 17–28). Cambridge University Press.
- Wringe, B. (2014). Collective Obligations: Their Existence, Their Explanatory Power, and Their Supervenience on the Obligations of Individuals. *European Journal of Philosophy*, 24, 472-497.