

[Claudia Rosciglione](#)

# Individuals and collectivity between the principle of non-contradiction and the joint commitment

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## 1. Introduction

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In this paper I pay attention to and reflect upon the role and the nature of the human being considered as an individual that acts in a collective dimension and thus contributes to build a social reality. What is required to talk of collectivity? Is it anything that goes beyond the interacting individuals or not? In order to talk of collectivity, do we need to talk of a plural subject as well as of collective beliefs, (as Margaret Gilbert does), or not?

These are some questions that are addressed in my paper. In particular, I outline the view that the collectivity is the relationship among interacting individuals in the exercise of their own rationality. Consequently, I argue that the collectivity is built as a form of social interaction among and within the individuals, because there is a *We-mode*<sup>[1]</sup> embodied in each individual through the dialectic and dialogic structure that is constitutive of her. This dialectic nature of the Individual implies the involvement of other individuals in the exercise of each individual's rationality, that is a collectivity as at least two or more human beings which think, speak, and act committing to any other through one's own thoughts, words or actions. In this connection I refer to Aristotle's principle of non-contradiction, built in a linguistic and dialogical form, to the transcendental-pragmatic nature of Habermas' validity claims and to Gilbert's concepts of joint commitment and plural subject. In particular I will argue that the dialectic nature of each individual as *We-mode*, which implies the involvement of other individuals as a collectivity, can be derived already from Aristotle's principle of non-contradiction and Habermas' validity claims. Indeed the dialectic and intersubjective nature of each individual itself provides the condition of the joint commitment, which Gilbert is right to believe to be the foundation of every collectivity, but it does not require to claim for a plural subject that should be coincident with the collectivity itself.

## 2. Individuals and Collectivity without Plural Subject ▣

I think that this dialectic and intersubjective nature of any subject has not the same meaning of Gilbert's plural subject,<sup>[2]</sup> because with subject I always mean the individual as the single human being who interacts with other individuals instead of a body or a unit whose life and development go beyond the single individuals who have contributed to give it a shape. However, I think that Gilbert's concept of joint commitment is a critical notion in the question at issue. In fact, the collective dimension and the commitments it implies are not guaranteed by something over the individuals but by the dialogic rationality inherent in each individual who consequently is jointly committed. In this connection Gilbert's concept of joint commitment is fundamental to describe the characteristic of the collectivity, of the group. On this account, one is entitled to talk of 'we', of a group or a collectivity if two or more people are jointly committed to one another in some way. The joint commitment takes place when two or more people are committed, namely they mutually state their readiness to do, say or think something together.<sup>[3]</sup> In this connection, I agree with Gilbert that this concept of joint commitment is a fundamental everyday concept, incorporated in many central social concepts such as those of social rules, a tradition and an action performed together with another person.<sup>[4]</sup> In everyday life human beings make always joint commitments that imply rights and obligations for the parties because they are shared. Consequently, two or more people are a group, a collectivity that shares intentions and doing something. They are committed to one another, that is to say they indicate their readiness to have that intention or to act in that way. On this account, the feature of the group or of the collectivity is not the number of people involved, rather their mutual commitment to say or do something. The commitment implies relationships that are specified as rights and obligations for the parties that have been mutually committed to one another. This means that who is jointly committed to do X has the obligation to do X and the right to rebuke any one who decides not to do X or not to accomplish X even though she had previously indicated her own readiness to do X. Gilbert is right in pointing out that the parties, which make the group or the collectivity and are jointly committed, are not entitled to withdraw unilaterally from the taken commitment just because it is shared on the grounds of a more or less explicit readiness. However, I think it is necessary to specify further what the joint commitment implies. The implication of the joint commitment is not just that one is not entitled to withdraw unilaterally from the commitment, because this can be always the case as a matter of fact and belongs to the individual power of the parties engaged in the collective dimension. Rather the implication is that were a to withdraw unilaterally, the other parties are necessarily bound to rebuke her in virtue of the rights and the obligations implied by the commitment. Therefore the other parties of the group call that party to account for her behaviour for which she is compelled to answer owing to the game of giving and asking for reasons, which is peculiar to human reason as I will show later. With a good degree of certainty one may claim that the joint commitment is the condition of collective action, hence it makes the collectivity, the group, which are not mere aggregate, to emerge. However this claim does not mean that the concept of joint commitment needs arguing for a unitary body or a unitary whole over and above the individuals, that which Gilbert calls a plural subject. The subject to which Gilbert makes reference is not individual rather it is a body that is beyond the single subjects. Single subjects depend on it in the name of the joint commitment and the feature of being jointly fulfilled is what makes this body plural in the sense of being contrary to what is singular or individual. Gilbert gives the following definition of the joint commitment: 'X and Y and whatever others are jointly committed to x as a body'. The answer to the question about what being jointly committed to x as a body means is that 'the parties emulate a *single x-er*'.<sup>[5]</sup> Whenever Gilbert addresses this question, she employs the term plural subject to refer to this body. On her account, these two concepts

make the difference that allows talking of a collectivity that is jointly committed rather than being a mere aggregate of individuals. In this respect she distinguishes between subjective and objective stance and argues that only the latter allows for the collectivity and the joint commitment, because the objective stance provides the context in which the individualities are surpassed towards an objective dimension that is unitary and not individual (plural subject).<sup>[6]</sup> On the grounds of the primacy of the unity and the objectivity over the individualities Gilbert argues that subjects and parties emulate a single x-er. However claiming that the parties emulate a single x-er is conceding that there exist single individuals, which within a collectivity or a group behave *as if* they were a body and a unity beyond their own individuality. This means that as a matter of fact this kind of body or unit, which to Gilbert is coincident with the plural subject, does not exist as such. Rather it is a sort of simulation carried out by the individuals as parties of the collectivity.<sup>[7]</sup>

The question addressed in this paper is then: does talking of joint commitment and collectivity require the sacrifice of the individuals by constraining them within the space of the plural subject as a body and a unit which does not do the capacity of human rationality justice? I am inclined to answer this question negatively, because talking of collectivity does not need establishing a plural subject and a kind of unity that are opposite to an individualist model. This paper will rather put forth arguments in favour of such an account.

Indeed it is each individual that can be jointly committed to other individuals, thus giving rise to the social reality that coincides with and derives from that interpersonal relation in which every individual who takes part in it is protagonist. For this reason, I think that it is not necessary to talk of a plural subject as a body or a unit, as Gilbert does, to make reference to the collectivity and to set the condition of the commitment. The force of the joint commitment is due to the force of the rational argumentation that is peculiar to the human being in the social dimension in which she is always historically placed, just as I will show on the grounds of Aristotle's demonstration of the principle of non-contradiction by the 'elenctic refutation' as well as of Habermas' transcendental pragmatic presuppositions.

### **3. Aristotle and the Principle of Non-Contradiction**

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In this connection, I think that Aristotle's principle of non-contradiction, which is constructed in a linguistic and a dialogic form, provides us still with a fundamental reference.

Indeed Aristotle's demonstration of the principle of non-contradiction by the 'elenctic refutation' stems from language, because he considers the fact that the adversary might talk or merely say something as the sufficient proof of the necessity of the principle.<sup>[8]</sup> Who says something, is committed to say something determinate, namely something with a definite meaning, because any uttered word always conveys that particular meaning instead of any other one or many ones at the same time. Were it not the case, one could not even utter a word or talk. Therefore, we cannot fail to meet the principle of non-contradiction. When the individuals exercise their rationality giving it a linguistic articulation, they are committed to satisfy implicitly a principle of determinateness, owing to which thinking requires thinking something under that respect in that moment rather than any thing else, something that can be expressed in that well defined way rather than any other one. Otherwise, there could be neither rationality nor its linguistic articulation. Accordingly, whoever denies the principle of non-contradiction undergoes the paradox of denying herself and the others the exercise itself of rationality. In this sense, the principle of non-contradiction is inherent in human rationality and it induces strongly each human being to be committed not only to herself but also to the others, when she says something or simply acts. If X says something to Y in the context C, for instance 'now it is raining', X is not entitled to say 'now it is not raining' in the

same C. Should she say this, Y will have the full right to criticize X and disapprove what she said in C. Therefore, saying something to someone in a context makes the one who talks committed to the hearer. That is already a joint commitment. This commitment would hold even though a particular individual restricted herself from talking and saying anything and decided only to act. To be consistent, indeed, whoever denies the principle of non-contradiction should not only refuse to talk or to utter words but also to even think and act.

Aristotle made already this point against the sophists.<sup>[9]</sup> It is no accident that just against the principle of non-contradiction they argued that anything is possible (that is one thing and its contrary) and that they derived the extreme consequence that there are no being and not-being, no true and false, no right and wrong, no more and less, no better and worse. As significant as this consequence is Aristotle's confutation of that sophistic argument, which he charged with scepticism and relativism. Aristotle argued that those who deny the principle of non-contradiction should neither talk nor utter a word nor even think or act in order to be consistent with their thesis. If one talks, she always states something determinate instead of any other thing. If one thinks, she always thinks something and cannot think the contrary at the same time. If one acts, she selects one action in place of any other one. To support the necessary character of the principle of non-contradiction, Aristotle brings the case of going to Megara or not.<sup>[10]</sup> Were the relativists right, every one would believe something true and be deceived at the same time, believing that something is the case and believing that it is not would make no difference because there would not be any thought of something determinate, but as a consequence they would not differ from plants. On such grounds why who affirms to reason that way goes then actually to Megara instead of remaining where she is while merely figuring that she goes there or rather figuring nothing at all? In fact who attempts to deny the principle of non-contradiction, continuously affirms it by talking, thinking and acting in a particular manner rather than in any other. This is the indirect yet conclusive demonstration of the necessity, hence the universality, of the principle. Whoever did not satisfy this principle, would undergo the paradox of being bound to vegetate, since she would be obliged to give up what belongs constitutively to her: the exercise of rationality as the capability of thought, language and action.

However is it really possible to give up one's own nature of a rational and social being that is committed to oneself as well as the others when she acts, thinks and articulates her thoughts? The answer to this question is the same as that of Aristotle's case of going to Megara or not. It is impossible that a human being behaves like a plant, because even not acting, for instance remaining at the place where one actually is rather than going to Megara, is the outcome of a particular choice, hence the implicit and necessary acknowledgement that every one always acts, thinks and talks in a determinate manner.

Accordingly to answer the previous question one can state that the above-mentioned paradox of being like a plant is not real for two reasons. First, an individual is conditioned by the context in which she is born and develops. This context has such an essentially social character that carrying out an action without being committed to within the context of a dialogic and interpersonal relationship is not possible. Second, an individual is above all determined by herself, by her rationality that makes her always think, talk and act dialogically within a plural dimension on whose grounds she is committed to an interpersonal level.

The single individual implies necessarily a plurality of individuals for her exercise of rationality to obtain. Every individual is responsible to herself and to the plurality of other individuals for her determinate thoughts, words and actions. For this reason the principle of non-contradiction is a necessary and constitutive rule for every rational being and it makes a group of individuals a collectivity, whose open and plural nature is recognized by any one of

its members according to its determinate and regulated character. The joint commitment, upon which the collectivity is founded, derives from the dialogic and dialectic nature of the rationality that is inherent in each individual. The constitutive nature of the principle of non-contradiction shows that every individual is always implicitly or explicitly committed to other individuals and that this necessary mutual or, as Gilbert says, joint commitment is one of the intrinsic properties of the individual, who accordingly has a We-mode by nature. There is no need, therefore, to bring in such an ambiguous concept as the 'Plural subject as a body', which should be intended as something more than and different from the sum of the single individuals.

#### **4. Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action and Validity Claims**

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From this point of view also Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action shows that the commitment to other individuals is expressed by the force of rationality intended as the force of the argumentation. The concept of validity claims can be used to support this account of the relationship between the individual and the collectivity. Each individual who takes part in the discourse raises necessarily claims to the truth, the truthfulness, and the rightness so that she must give before other individuals the reasons for what she says. Likewise, the other individuals are allowed to ask the reasons for the validity of her arguments only if they meet the same claims. Accordingly, all subjects who take part in the discourse have to give and to ask for reasons, to assume the validity claims that commit them all to be accountable for what they say and responsible to those who listen to them. Like Aristotle as far as the principle of non-contradiction is concerned, Habermas argues that such claims along with the associated game of giving and asking for reasons pertain all human beings and that all this extends even to contexts which are not argumentative or communicative in an explicit manner, in the sense of aiming at settling an agreement between all those who are involved in them.

Habermas contends that talking necessarily means claiming that what we say is true (claim to truth), sincere (claim to truthfulness) and right in relation to an enforced normative context (claim to rightness): these are the validity claims. As a matter of fact, the scope of this contention is still wider, because he shows that such validity claims apply even to contexts that are not plainly argumentative or communicative.<sup>[11]</sup> Thus Habermas disproves the classical sceptic objection that it is sufficient to draw back from a communicative linguistic context to reject the validity claims and deny their universal or rather transcendental-pragmatic character.

He argues indeed that these validity claims make possible the refutation of the sceptical objections and thus they reveal the inherently interpersonal and dialogic nature of human rationality. In order to be really consistent with herself, the sceptic is not entitled to attempt to elude the validity claims by not talking, thus refusing to argue. Of course she can decide to keep herself from taking part in the discussion and to opt for silence, but she cannot deny to belong to a social and cultural form of life and to carry out communicative actions of various kinds. On Habermas' account, if the sceptic opts for the silence, she still remains within the vital relationships from which she cannot draw back. Madness and suicide would be left as her extreme options.<sup>[12]</sup> Remaining alive itself means that it isn't conceivable that the sceptic is able to free herself from communicative actions, because she always remains inside a daily and ordinary argumentative praxis, which leads her to take a stand on something by expressing a yes or a no, albeit implicitly.

Habermas argues that even being alive is a choice that forces the sceptic to take a stand,

namely to say yes or no, to select an action rather than any other one, thus meeting the transcendental-pragmatic presuppositions and satisfying the validity claims she meant to deny.

Therefore, there is no form of life that is not founded on communicative actions even though Habermas admits that this may be often the case in an implicit way, that the discursive processes, which aim at settling an agreement, may be very little institutionalised and that the forms of argumentation may be rudimentary. In this connection, Habermas talks of transcendental-pragmatic presuppositions because even the sceptic, namely who refuses any kind of argumentation, cannot but meet them. The sceptic cannot get off from the daily communicative praxis that is constitutively argumentative. She is imprisoned in the presuppositions that are necessarily implied by any argumentation and are part and parcel of the communicative praxis that belongs to every rational subject who is embedded in a socio-cultural form of life.

This argument shows clearly the constitutively communicative nature of the individual, even of the radical sceptical one.<sup>[13]</sup> The individual who thinks, talks, makes her choices, and hence lives, needs implicitly other individuals that make the collectivity to which she belongs and is committed as much as she expects that the collectivity belongs and is committed to her. If the principle of determinateness, which is implied by the principle of non-contradiction and the validity claims, has a constitutive character for every one, it is possible to argue that the individual always has a we-mode, because everyone needs the collectivity to exercise the rationality in full and to realize one's own nature. A collectivity is being formed and expressed in the game of giving and asking for reasons and makes all individuals committed to one another in a determinate communicative context that may be more or less explicit and institutionalised. Therefore the collectivity needs not to be intended as a plural subject, to which single individuals must somehow submit, which accordingly is something more than the interpersonal relation in which the individuals are committed to one another.

## **5. Gilbert's Joint Commitment and Collective Beliefs**

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In this connection I think that talking of collectivity as a plural subject, which is a body or a unit, is as much overshooting an argument as ascribing collective beliefs to collectivity is problematic. Are we allowed to say that the collectivity is a plural subject that has collective beliefs like in Gilbert's theory? This hypothesis may face many difficulties. The first difficulty derives from ascribing the belief, which pertains a single individual or a single subject, to something that instead is plural: the collectivity. The collectivity as a whole made of many individuals who act in an interpersonal manner by means of the joint commitments cannot be considered a unitary subject that has beliefs. The beliefs are proper to particular individuals that express them through language in a given social context and are mutually committed as regards these beliefs to other individuals who share the same context. This is how individuals build a shared social reality that in its turn makes them a collectivity. Two or more individuals come across sharing the same belief through discussions, dialogues, but in the sense that each will have a belief with the same content in the same context and not in the sense that there is a collective belief over and beyond the beliefs of the single individuals.

Gilbert claims that just because the collective belief belongs to the collectivity as a plural subject, this kind of belief is independent of the particular beliefs of the individuals that are parties of it. Moreover, she claims that the individual X within a given group G may have a different belief from that of the group to which she belongs and to which she has an obligation because she is jointly committed to G as one of its members. But how could such a thing be possible? One should admit of the paradoxical situation in which an individual X has

the determinate belief A, for example that today it is raining, while as one of the members of G she is jointly committed to believe non-A, that is to say that today it is not raining. The only explanation for such a situation is that in either case the subject is stating something he does not believe to be the case, hence that she is not satisfying the claim to truthfulness.

The careful analysis of some cases that Gilbert brings to support the notion of collective belief shows that what is called a belief is not really a belief. Let's consider the case of the Event Committee for the Celebration of the 50<sup>th</sup> University Anniversary.<sup>[14]</sup> After a debate among its members, the Committee as a group decides to state that Prof. Rowling will be a good speaker and to support him for that role. Are we allowed to say that the Committee statement that Prof. Rowling is a good speaker is a belief and that this is a collective belief being held by a group? Rather wouldn't it be better to say that this statement is the outcome of a strategy or that it articulates the agreement emerged through the discussion held by the members of the Committee, hence of the group, whose individual parties have decided through the negotiation to support the opinion that Prof. Rowling is a good speaker? In this case, we can concede that the group strategy may not coincide with the particular beliefs of one or more individuals that are members of the Committee without facing a paradox. For instance, it may be that I do not believe that Rowling will be a good speaker and that nonetheless I decide to support the strategy to present him as a good speaker for other reasons. However this makes sense if we use the concept of strategy, of the convergence within a group that results from the negotiation between the members rather than introducing collective beliefs. The negotiation is still binding and implies rights and obligations even without producing a collective belief, because the members are jointly committed to supporting Rowling as a good speaker. As soon as an individual X agrees as a Committee member with other subjects Y, W, Z... who are also parties of the Committee in claiming that Rowling is a good speaker, X is jointly committed. If X decided afterward to state publicly that Rowling is not a good speaker, the other parties of the group would have the right and the obligation to rebuke her and recall her to the joint commitment she had endorsed within the group independently of her individual beliefs. Therefore, there is no need to talk either of the group in terms of a body or of collective beliefs to allow for joint commitments, which entail rights and obligations for the parties of the group and for the formation of the collectivity that acts socially. The beliefs always pertain to the individuals and only the individual subjects have and express them through language. In this way, every subject commits herself to the game of giving and asking for reasons on what she thinks and says owing to the principle of non-contradiction and the validity claims, which are constitutive of our speech acts and of the correlated intentional states, as Searle would say (Searle 1969, 1983).<sup>[15]</sup>

Accordingly either we don't call the beliefs at stake in cases like the example of the Event Committee collective beliefs or, if we ascribe beliefs to the group, we consider the group as a subject that should have consciousness and mental states, thus paving the way to admitting of the mind of the group even if Gilbert denies that this is her view.

## 6. Conclusions

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In conclusion, I tried to show that if we want to assure that the collectivity and the interpersonal action have a binding force and to avoid their interpretation as a sum or an aggregate, we don't need to bring in such concepts as plural subject or collective beliefs, because we risk to create an ambiguous level in which the collectivity becomes a unitary subject endowed with powers, which makes it a reality beyond the interpersonal relations among its members and to which we have to ascribe features that are instead peculiar to the individuals. The dimension of the commitment, hence of the rights and the obligations, is

instead assured by the interpersonal relations among the individuals, but those relations must be considered as such and must not be separated from the acknowledgment of the individual space. Only in this space the dimension of the plurality and the commitments unfolds, which is constitutive of the exercise of human rationality.

The fact that mere individuals are to be jointly committed, instead of one plural subject that is a unitary body over and above them, does not make the commitment and the rights and the obligations it implies less compelling. On the contrary, as we have argued on the grounds of Aristotle's principle of non-contradiction and of Habermas' transcendental-pragmatic presuppositions, the individual is always placed into a social-cultural context in which she is always engaged in relations with other individuals at the argumentative and the communicative level, albeit this level may be more or less explicit or institutionalised. Every subject is always already committed to another one, a you, or to many other ones who in their turn make commitments in the same way by taking a stand with a yes or a no. The collectivity is such a mode for individuals of opening up relations and of mutually committing to one another through the implicit or explicit exercise of their dialectic rationality.

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## Notes

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1. R. Tuomela, *Social Ontology: Collective Intentionality and Group Agents*, Oxford University Press, USA 2013. 
2. M. Gilbert, «A Real Unity of Them All», *The Monist*, vol. 92, no 2 (2009), pp. 268-285; *Il noi collettivo*, Raffaello Cortina, Milano 2015, 11ff. 
3. M. Gilbert, *On Social Facts*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1989. 
4. M. Gilbert, *On Social Facts*, quoted in note 3; M. Gilbert, *A Real Unity*, quoted in note 2, 274 ff.. 
5. M. Gilbert, *A Real Unity*, 275. 
6. *Ibid.* Gilbert often associates the concept of social group with that of plural subject, intended as 'a set of jointly committed persons'. It seems that talking of a set of persons she leaves room for the individual personal dimension, which is not completely abolished. Yet the concept of the plural subject is explicitly brought in to make reference to the collectivity, the group as a whole, as a body in which the individualities must take a back seat, if not be abolished. 
7. Gilbert puts explicitly forth her theory of the plural subject as a collectivist model in opposition to the individualist model such as, for instance, Michael Bratman's (M. Gilbert, *A Real Unity*). According to Gilbert, there could be a shared, hence a collective, we only if the parties are jointly committed as a body or a unit to act and believe in a particular way. This condition allows talking of collective actions and collective beliefs. On the contrary, Bratman distinguishes between shared intentions and personal intentions, but the former are a web of attitudes of the individual participants. As a consequence, a shared intention is not an attitude in any mind, in a fused superagent (like Gilbert's plural subject), rather it is a state of affairs

that consists in the attitudes of participants and the interrelations between those attitudes. On Bratman's account, in the shared intention the constitutive intentions of individual are interlocking (M. Bratman, «Shared Cooperative Activity», *Philosophical Review*, 1992, 101, 327-340; «Shared Intention», *Ethics*, 1993, 101, 97-113). ☒

8. See Aristotle, *Metaphysik*, G, 1006 a 12-28 . ☒
9. See Aristotle, *Metaphysik*, G, 1009 a 4-30. ☒
10. See Aristotle, *Metaphysik*, G, 1008 b 3-30. ☒
11. J. Habermas *Moralbewusstsein and kommunikatives Handeln*, Surkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1983. ☒
12. Ibidem. ☒
13. In *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, Habermas points out that every form of linguistic communication implies an intersubjective recognition, because the speech act of the *Ego* is successful only if the *Alter* accepts the offer contained in that act by taking a stand with a yes or a no on those validity claims (truth, truthfulness, normative rightness), which are implied by the very speech act. On Habermas' account, then, understanding a particular speech act implies already that every hearer exercises one's rationality. The hearer knows the grammar and the forms of order, but also the essential conditions, namely the validity claims, which may provide her with a motive to take an affirmative stand on that speech act. In this connection, understanding means exercising already one's own rationality by taking a stand with a yes or a no. This game of taking a stand as well as of giving and asking for reasons is the intersubjective foundation of rationality and entails settling an agreement between the *Ego* and the *Alter* (J. Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, Surkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1981, Bd. 1). ☒
14. M. Gilbert , m. Priest M. *Conversation and Collective Belief*, in *Perspectives on Pragmatics and Philosophy* (Ed. by Capone A., Carapezza M., Lo Piparo F.,) Springer, 2013, pp. 1-34. ☒
15. J. Searle, *Speech Acts*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1969; *Intentionality*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983. ☒