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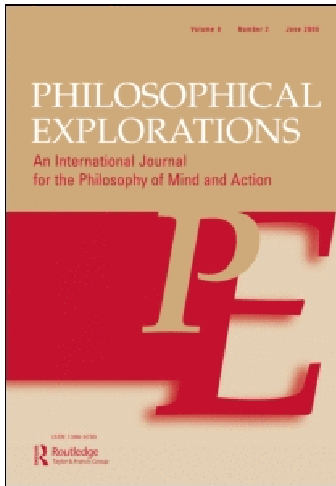

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Defining and Defending Social Holism

Philip Pettit

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Abstract

This paper offers a definition of social holism that makes the doctrine non-trivial but possibly true. According to that definition, the social holist maintains that people depend non-causally on interaction with one another for possession of the capacity to think; the thesis is meant to be a contingent truth but one, like physicalism, that is plausible in the light of some a priori argument and some plausible empirical assumptions.

The paper also sketches an argument in support of social holism, which connects with themes in a number of traditions, philosophical and sociological. The key idea is that people depend on socially shared dispositions and responses for the ability to identify – identify fallibly – the properties and other entities that they consider in the course of thinking.

Introduction

The belief in social holism, as it has been called for much of this century, goes back to the romantic tradition associated with the likes of Vico and Rousseau and Herder and, perhaps above all, Hegel (Berlin 1976). Thinkers in this tradition rejected the idea that they found in the dominant, empiricist and rationalist schools of thought: that ultimately each individual has to work their own way – whether on the basis of rationalistically innate or empirically induced resources – towards an individualised understanding of the world they live in; and equally they rejected the loosely associated idea that society was born of a contract, or the emergence of suitable conventions, among such epistemologically self-made creatures. They dismissed the image of the human being that they found, for example – or thought they found – in Hobbes's *Leviathan* (Haakonssen 1991; Hampton 1986; Hobbes 1968).

Romantics insisted that such a picture, representing people in society as loosely jointed atoms, radically underestimated the importance of our social connections. While having a distinctive and novel approach of their own, they criticised the picture for failing to do full justice to the classical and mediaeval view that the human being, in Aristotle's words, is a *zoon politikon*, a social animal.

Because of the social atomism it implicitly endorsed, the received tradition could find nothing incoherent in the notion of the solitary individual who might achieve full and proper development in isolation from others; that figure was implausible but did not count as impossible. The romantics argued, by contrast,

that this notion of the solitary individual was an abstract and impossible conceit. They suggested that an individual can realise his or her humanity only in community with others: that there is a sense in which community comes first, individual human beings second.

But this is all somewhat vague. Can we give an analytically more rigorous account of the sort of thing that holists wanted to say? In particular, can we give an account under which social holism becomes a philosophically plausible doctrine? This paper is an attempt to meet that challenge, regimenting and reworking points that I have argued elsewhere (Pettit 1996).

The discussion is divided into two parts. In the first I look at the issue of how to formulate holism satisfactorily. And then in the second I go on to summarise the sort of argument that persuades me of the truth of holism.

Part 1. Defining social holism

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The main strand that must be preserved in any statement of a social holist position is the claim that individuals are not entirely free-standing. They depend upon one another for the possession of some property that is central to the human being. No one can enjoy that property – no one can properly be a human being – except in the presence of others. Of course anyone, like Robinson Crusoe, may have isolation thrust upon them but such a Crusoe-like figure will always have had the benefit of a social existence in the past. As no one can be a sibling without having or having had a brother or sister, so no one can be a proper human being, according to this claim, without enjoying or having enjoyed the presence of others in their life.

Some questions about holism

There are three questions about the content of holism that this formulation immediately raises. First, what sort of property is required to be socially dependent in order for social holism to be true? I depend on the presence of others for the enjoyment of a variety of properties such as that of being a sibling, or being of average height, or that of enjoying a certain degree of status or power. No such property can be possessed by the entirely solitary individual; it presupposes a community of more than one. But that a person depends on the presence of others for the possession of such a property hardly serves to bear out the truth of social holism. For who would ever deny this claim? The first question, then, bears on exactly what sort of property must be socially dependent if social holism, intuitively understood, is to be true.

The second question raised by the dependency formulation bears on the meaning of the dependence in question. Here the salient distinction is between a causal and a non-causal sort of dependence: with the first there is active influence from others, with the second there is not. I depend causally on the presence of others for the possession of a vast array of features: say, for the ability to speak English, since I picked up that language from my parents and peers and teachers. I depend non-causally on others for the possession of all those qualities that involve a hidden comparative or indexical reference to the wider community: it

is only in virtue of the presence of others that I can be tall or rich or successful, for example, even when no one else was causally responsible for my developing such traits.

The third question turns, not on the nature of the dependent property, and not on the meaning of dependence, but on exactly what it is that the individual depends upon for the possession of that property. I may depend upon the presence of others for the enjoyment of a certain property in the sense of depending upon their existence – in particular, their existence in my social context – or in the sense of depending on the enjoyment of interaction with them: in particular, the sort of interaction that involves people's forming beliefs about one another and that has in that sense a social character. I depend upon the existence of certain others for being of average height. I depend upon interaction with them for the enjoyment of a certain degree of status or power.

Notice that this distinction between depending on the existence of others and depending on interaction with others is different from a further distinction which is not significant, I think, in the context of social holism. This further distinction would parallel the divide that is drawn by Jerry Fodor and Ernest Lepore (1992, 28) between the claim that there are certain, specified propositions you must believe if you believe that p and the claim that you can't believe that p without also believing some other, unspecified propositions. It is the distinction between the strong claim that there are certain specified individuals on whom any individual will depend for the capacity to think and the weak claim that any individual will depend on some unspecified others for the capacity to think. Social holism is going to be half-plausible, I take it, only in the weak form, not the strong: and this, whether it is read in as a claim about dependence on the existence of others or about dependence on interaction with others.[1]

There are two other questions bearing on social holism that we ought also to register. They relate to precisely what sort of claim it is and what type of considerations ought to be sufficient to support it. They bear on the status of social holism, rather than its content.

The first of the status-questions is whether social holism is meant to be a necessarily or contingently true proposition. If holism is true, then does that mean that the relevant property is socially dependent as a matter of necessity; or will it do that it is socially dependent in the actual circumstances under which all human beings live? The second question of status bears on what ought to be required for establishing the truth of social holism. Should it be the sort of doctrine that can be defended on the basis of an *a priori* analysis of our concepts, together perhaps with certain background assumptions? Or will it be sufficient for the doctrine to be a matter of purely empirical discovery: to be a theory, like the theory of natural selection, that is foisted upon us by dint of accumulating observation and evidence?

1 Michel Desy drew my attention to the parallel with Fodor and Lepore's distinction. Notice that the weak claim that I associate with social holism is consistent with it's being the case for a given individual NN that there are certain specified individuals such that NN depends on them having the capacity to think. That may be true without it's being true that there are certain specified individuals such that any person depends on them for having the capacity to think.

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The content-questions resolved

What to say in response to the first content question? One obvious line would be to hold that some essential property of any human being – some property such that in its absence the bearer would not survive as a human being – is dependent on the presence of others. This line is supported in some more or less Hegelian formulations of the doctrine. For example, the English idealist, F.H. Bradley (1876, 173), writes: 'I am myself by sharing with others, by including in my essence relations to them, the relations of the social state'.

But taken strictly, this line would make social holism into a more or less impossible doctrine to defend. For we would all surely agree that the person who suffers deep brain damage in an accident and lives on in a coma remains a human being. And the property in virtue of which they remain such – ultimately, a matter of biological identity – is not one for the appearance of which they depend on the presence of others. At least not in any relevant sense: they may depend on being part of a certain, evolutionary lineage for possession of that property but that is not the sort of dependence which interests social holists.

We need to go to a somewhat softer claim if we are to represent social holism as a half-way plausible doctrine. And here we may take our cue from Charles Taylor (1985, 191) who provides the following gloss on holism. 'The claim is that living in society is a necessary condition of the development of rationality, in some sense of this property, or of becoming a moral agent in the full sense of the term, or of becoming a fully responsible, autonomous being'. Following Taylor, we may say that social holism will be true so far as it turns out that some property that is distinctive of human flourishing – if not strictly essential to remaining a human being – is socially dependent in a suitable way. The view, as he goes on to elaborate it, is 'that outside society, or in some variants outside certain kinds of society, our distinctively human capacities could not develop'.

The property that is most widely held to be socially dependent in the annals of romanticism fits this requirement of being distinctive of human flourishing. It is the property of being able to think, where thinking requires more than just the formation of belief and other intentional states: it also involves the capacity to perform the intentional act of reasoning and, in general, the capacity to do things with a view to increasing the chance that one's beliefs are more or less well-formed and more or less likely to be true (Pettit 1996, Ch. 2). The romantics among whom holism emerged united in insisting that people were dependent on language for the capacity to think (Wells 1987). And they had no doubt but that the language on which people depended in this way was essentially social. Their only problem, in Rousseau's words, was: 'which was the most necessary, the existence of society to the invention of language, or the invention of language to the establishment of society' (Rousseau 1973; Wokler 1987, 63).

Language was taken to be essential to thinking so far as it supplied concepts or ideas: that is, the very currency of thought. As Bradley (1876, 172) puts it, in speaking of the concrete socialised individual: 'the tongue that he makes his own is his country's language, it is (or it should be) the same that others speak, and it carries into his mind the ideas and sentiments of the race (over this I need not

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stay), and stamps them in indelibly'. Language in this sense was taken to exemplify social institutions in general, all of which carry the ideas of the community: all of which carry what Hegel described as the *Volkgeist* (Taylor 1985, 387).

But if the capacity to think is the sort of property on which social holists may be expected to focus, how should we resolve the other two content questions that we raised about their doctrine. Does social holism maintain that this capacity is causally or non-causally dependent, and dependent just on the existence of others or on interaction with them?

Causal dependence cannot be sufficient for the truth of holism. I causally depend on the existence of others for being the sort of creature who is able to think: this, so far as thinking requires a biological make-up that I inherit from my parents. And I causally depend on interaction with others for having learned how to think, since I almost certainly picked up that capacity in learning the meaning and use of words from others in my community. But neither of these forms of dependence could plausibly be questioned. And so it would be strange to think that they were the claims by which social holism – if anything, a contentious doctrine – is characterised. The dependence that holists emphasise has got to be dependence of a non-causal sort.

That takes us, then, to the third content-question. Are we to say that for social holists thought is non-causally dependent on the existence of others in a shared social context? Or are we to say that it depends non-causally on interaction – in particular, social interaction – with others? Is the dependence alleged to be the more or less passive dependence on others involved in my being of average height: that is, in my height being such as to count as average? Or is it the more active dependence involved in my enjoying a certain amount of power or status: this depends, not just on there being others in my social context, but on their having formed, and perhaps acted on, certain beliefs and dispositions in my regard?

My inclination here is to say that the dependence posited has got to be the active sort illustrated by the power and status examples. When classical holists spoke of the dependence of thought on language and on other social institutions, they clearly had in mind a claim that I am capable of thinking only insofar as I relate to others as the speaker of a common tongue. They were not merely registering the fact that being able to think, like being of average height, presupposes that there is a relevant comparison class available in the local context.

The status-questions resolved

Let us grant that social holism has to be a doctrine about the non-causal dependence of people on interaction with one another for possession of the capacity to think or for possession of some such distinctive property. The two status-questions are, first, whether it has to claim that such dependence obtains as a matter of necessity and, second, whether it has to be able to support the claim on an *a priori* or relatively *a priori* basis?

There can be little doubt about the answer to the second question. Since social holism was put forward on more or less philosophical grounds among the romantics, and since no one has ever questioned the propriety of arguing for or

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against it on such grounds, we must take social holism to be putatively *a priori* or relatively *a priori* in character. It will be *a priori* true if conceptual analysis or some such exercise is sufficient to provide relevant support; it will be relatively *a priori* true if all that is needed in addition is the admission of certain background assumptions.

But what of the first question? Does social holism, if it is true, have to be a necessarily true claim? Does it have to be a claim that holds, not just of human beings in the world as we know it, but of human beings in any possible world? Does it have to say, not just that in the actual world people depend on interaction with one another for the capacity to think, but that it is impossible that they should ever have that capacity in the absence of interaction? Does it have to argue that the solitary thinker is an absolute impossibility, not just an impossibility relative to actual-world circumstances?

I see no way of arbitrating this question by reference to the sorts of things maintained in the romantic or in related traditions, for none of the writers in question is specific enough about the matter. However I have no doubt but that we should take the more relaxed line on the question and admit that it will be enough for social holism to count as true that the capacity to think is socially dependent in the actual world, not in every possible world: socially dependent, as we just stipulated, in a way that can be established by *a priori* or relatively *a priori* argument.

My reason for taking this line is that even if social holism is allowed such a status – even if it is allowed to be a doctrine of less than necessary dependence – still it will be surprising enough to attract attention and dissent. It will resemble in status the doctrine of physicalism or naturalism – non-eliminative physicalism or naturalism – as that is defended by many contemporary philosophers. And such physicalism is the very paradigm of a significant philosophical doctrine.

Physicalists do not say that necessarily mental states reduce to physical states; they do not say, for example, that as between any two possible worlds, if they are physically indiscernible then they must be mentally indiscernible too. Almost all physicalists are prepared to admit that there is a possible world where Descartes's theory is correct and a separate realm of non-material, mental stuff co-exists alongside material substance: *res cogitans* co-exists with *res extensa*. What physicalists say is that the actual world is not a Cartesian world of that kind and that in this world mental states are just physical states by other names; they are such that were we to construct a physical duplicate of the actual world – and do nothing more (Jackson 1998) – then we would also have constructed a mental duplicate. Thus they hold by the view that as a matter of contingent fact, not as a matter of necessity, mental states reduce to physical ones.

But physicalists do not maintain this just by way of reporting an empirical discovery. They argue for the position in a relatively *a priori* way. First, they use conceptual analysis to underpin an account of what it is for certain states to be mental in character. And then they argue that under this analysis there is no need to assume the presence of more than physical stuff in the world – however 'physical' is understood (Pettit 1993) – in order to explain the presence of mental states: some physical states will count under that analysis as mental states.

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To take one standard approach, physicalists may use conceptual analysis to defend the view that all that is needed for a state to be a mental state – say, all that is needed for a state to be a belief that p – is that things be organised with the bearer so that a certain pattern appears in their response to environment and in their transition to behaviour. The creature enters or exits the state in the presence of evidence for or against the claim that p, for example, and if they enter it, then they adjust and act in a way that would tend to promote desire-satisfaction if it were the case that p. Physicalists add to this functionalist analysis of what it takes for a state to be a mental state of a certain kind the background assumption that in the actual world the sorts of causal-functional roles in question are discharged by purely physical properties. The analysis and the assumption together entail that in the actual world mental states are just physical states considered from the point of view of the roles they play.

By analogy with physicalism social holism might well maintain, on relatively *a priori* grounds, that while there are possible worlds in which human beings do not depend non-causally on social interaction for the ability to think, in the actual world – because of some general feature of this world – they do so depend. Such a doctrine would be sufficiently interesting to command attention and it would certainly deserve to be described as a form of social holism.

Some connections

In a recent article, Rae Langton and David Lewis (1998) offer a characterisation of what it is for a property to be intrinsic. Roughly characterised, the idea is that with any pure, more or less natural property, we can say that the property is intrinsic just in case it can be possessed or not possessed by something independently of the existence of another contingent, distinct object. It can be present and it can be lacking both in something that is accompanied by another entity and in something that is unaccompanied.

It is worth remarking that under the account of social holism offered here, the property of being able to think may count, by this definition, as intrinsic in character. For if it is only a matter of contingent fact that the ability depends upon interaction with others – and therefore accompaniment by others – then it will be possible for the property to be instantiated or of course not instantiated in an unaccompanied subject. What is going to be true, however, is that the property of being able to think will be extrinsic in a restricted sense. While there may be possible worlds with unaccompanied thinkers, there won't be any such possible worlds within the neighbourhood, suitably characterised, of the actual world. The property of being able to think will be extrinsic so far as modality in that region of logical space is concerned.

In another recent article Michael Esfeld (1998) introduces the notion of a holistic system. Take any system which has constituent parts: take, for example, the system constituted by certain subjects who are capable of thought. Such a system will be holistic, in his sense, if and only if among the qualitative properties that make something a constituent – among the properties that make someone a member of a community of thinkers – some are such that they can only be possessed in the presence of other constituents of the system: some of the properties

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that make someone a thinker in this community of thinkers, for example, can only be enjoyed if indeed there are other such thinkers.

Will a community of thinkers be a holistic system, under this definition? Referring to my work elsewhere, Esfeld (1998, 377) suggests that it will. 'The property that makes something a constituent of a social community of thinking beings is the property of thinking in the sense of following rules. According to social holism, no finite being can have this property unless there are other thinking things ...'. But here, by parallel with what I said in the previous case, it is worth remarking that that claim needs qualification. For what social holism says under the definition we have set out – and it is broadly faithful to Pettit (1996) – may not be that it is impossible for a finite being to have this property unless there are other thinking things; only that this is impossible in the suitably demarcated neighbourhood of the actual world.

Part 2. Defending social holism

So much for the characterisation of social holism. The second question that I wanted to address is how this sort of doctrine might be defended. There are a variety of possible defences. One would argue that in order for thought to take place, the thinker must have a conception of an objective world which can be different from how it appears to them at any moment and that such a conception will only be available to someone who lives in community with others. Another would argue that in order to think a person must be able to identify constraints by which to try and regulate their views – they must be able to identify rules to which they can try to remain faithful – and that such rules can only be identified in the context of communal life. Yet a third would argue, more straightforwardly, that without language there is no thought and that language, as the romantics stressed, is an essentially social institution.

I do not mean to provide an overview of these different possible lines of reasoning. What I shall do instead is to try and summarise an argument that persuades me of the truth of social holism. As it happens, the argument resonates in different ways with each of the lines of reasoning mentioned. While it is distinctive in detail, it exemplifies the sort of reasoning that has typically influenced social holists.

The argument can be summarised in the following steps.

1. Being able to think involves the capacity to use voluntary signs in representation of how things, as the subject believes, are.
2. In order to represent a property – or other entity – voluntarily, the thinker must be able to identify that property and must be able to see it as something that they can try, fallibly, to register.
3. Thus the capacity to think requires the thinker to have at best a consciously fallible criterion for determining whether or not the property is present in a given case.
4. How does a human thinker register the presence of a property that in their repertoire is semantically basic: i.e., not defined by other properties? They cannot use the fact that they are disposed to apply the predicate in a given case as

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a criterion for the presence of the property; they could not then think of the property as something that they can try but fail to register.
5. A human thinker might be able in principle to use an idealised version of this predicative disposition in a criterial role; and so there is no argument in principle against the abstract possibility of the solitary thinker.
6. But in actual fact human thinkers are not solitary in that way: they use a socially shared, predicative disposition as an identifying criterion.
7. The social holism thus supported is a deep, not a superficial, changeable feature of human thinkers: it explains how human conversationalists can claim to know – to know immediately, not to derive – what they each have in mind with the use of certain words.

First step

Being able to think involves the capacity to use voluntary signs in representation of how things, as the subject believes, are.

Thinking is the activity, at least among other things, of trying intentionally to ensure that the beliefs one forms are more rather than less likely to be true. It involves asking oneself questions, such as whether or not it is the case that p, and then seeking out evidence, or paying attention to evidence at hand, in the hope that this evidence will lead one to believe that p only if it is indeed the case that p (Pettit 1996, Ch. 2).

But if people are to be able to ask themselves questions in this way, then they must have a way of representing to themselves, at will, the possibility they wish to make up their minds about: p. And that is to say that they must have a sign – a voluntary sign, in Locke's phrase (1975) – by means of which they can represent that possibility and hold it out as something to endorse or reject. They must have resources of representation that dramatically outrun those of a dumb animal or machine in which beliefs and desires materialise and mutate – update – in a wholly involuntary, though no doubt fairly rational, way.

The voluntary signs that figure most saliently in people's thinking are, of course, the public words that they share. Henceforth, then, I shall generally have public words in mind when I speak of voluntary signs. But the argument that follows, at least up to step 7, does not depend on the assumption that the only voluntary signs are public words. It may be, as some philosophers have suggested (Geach 1957), that people operate also with inner words: that is, with inner, voluntarily used words, as distinct from the involuntary 'language of thought' postulated by certain cognitive scientists (Fodor 1975). If people do operate with such words, then the argument that follows applies to those signs as well as to words in a public language.

Second step

In order to represent a property voluntarily, the thinker must be able to identify that property and must be able to see it as something that they can try, fallibly, to register.

The signs whereby human beings get to represent possibilities and actualities ultimately involve sentences or sentence-like structures that are fit for being assert-

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ed or denied. But for any reasonably complex thinker such large-size signs are bound to involve the use of other, smaller-size ones. Take a smaller sign of that kind: say, take the sort of sign that constitutes a predicate. Examples might be: 'is red', 'is regular-shaped', 'is heavy', 'is a game', 'is a box' and so on.

If someone uses such a sign in the way of representing how things might be, or are, then they have to be able to identify the property that it designates; a corresponding point will apply with other forms of words but we shall stick to predicates. They have to be able to know which property it is, at least in the sense of being generally able to distinguish it from alternatives that come up in ordinary discussion (Evans 1982). Or at least this is so for those predicates that they use non-parasitically, without deferring to the usage of any particular experts. Locke (1975, Bk3, Ch. 2, s.2) makes the point nicely, when he rails against the idea that a speaker might use words without a conception of the items for which they stand: 'they would be signs of he knows not what, which is in truth to be *the signs of nothing*.'

Being able to identify a property, however – being able to tell which property it is – may be consistent with not being able to see it as a property about the presence of which one might be mistaken; for all we need assume, it may allow this sort of conscious infallibility. But such infallibility has to be ruled out under the mode of identification available to the familiar, human thinker. The thinker's way of knowing which property is in question must leave them in the position of seeing it as a property that they can try to register and yet fail to get right. Otherwise the project of thinking – the project of trying, fallibly, to represent things as they are – would make no sense.

Third step

Thus the capacity to think requires the thinker to have at best a consciously fallible criterion for determining whether or not the property is present in a given case.

If a thinker is able to think of a property as something that they can try, fallibly, to register, then the means whereby they determine whether the property is present in a given case must be one that they themselves see as fallible; it must be a consciously fallible criterion. Did they have access to a consciously infallible criterion, then they could not think of the property in the way required for making sense of the project of thought. Indeed it is doubtful if they could think of it as an objective property, since the conceptions of objectivity and fallibility are so closely tied together.

Fourth step

How does a human thinker register the presence of a property that in their repertoire is semantically basic: i.e., not defined by other properties? They cannot use the fact that they are disposed to apply the predicate in a given case as a criterion for the presence of the property; they could not then think of the property as something that they can try but fail to register.

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Consider the sort of property that for a given thinker – there may be variation between individuals – is not introduced to them by definition in terms of other properties. This property has to be made known to them – and become the semantic value linked with a given predicate – on the basis of ostension. Perhaps plain, textbook ostension. Or perhaps the more sophisticated variety that presupposes background capacities of various kinds as well as the simultaneous ostension of other associated or contrasted properties.

No finite set of examples will serve to determine which property is ostended in such a case, for reasons that Wittgenstein in particular made salient (Kripke 1982; Wittgenstein 1958). The problem is that any finite set of examples will instantiate an infinite number of different properties, not just the single property – or equivalence set of properties – that they are intended to present.

But it is agreed on all sides that such a set of examples can give rise in the subject to a firm disposition to apply the predicate in some cases and not in others: with a firm disposition to partition further items into bearers and non-bearers of the ostended property. And so it might be suggested that a thinker can use this disposition as a criterion for deciding whether the property is present in a given case. The thinker, that is to say, can envisage the property as that which reveals itself in their disposition to apply the term in this case, to withhold it in that, and so on.

The fourth step in the argument rejects this suggestion. Such a criterion would not be consciously fallible; on the contrary, it would be consciously infallible. And so the thinker would have no ground for envisaging the property as something that they can try, fallibly, to register. The thinker would have no ground, in a Wittgensteinian phrase, for distinguishing between what is so and what seems to them to be so. They would have no motive for embarking on what we see as the ordinary project of thought. Some suggest indeed that they might not even have the wherewithal for thinking of the property as something objective.

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Fifth step

A human thinker might be able in principle to use an idealised version of this predicative disposition in a criterial role; and so there is no argument in principle against the abstract possibility of the solitary thinker.

At step 4 in the argument some philosophers will be inclined to go straight for the conclusion that no human could possess the capacity for thought in isolation – lifetime isolation – from others. I find that claim tantalising but I think that it is impossible to defend on an *a priori* basis. For we can in principle imagine the possibility of a human being coming to think of a predicative disposition as a criterion that is reliable only in certain circumstances: those that we theorists can describe as normal or ideal (Blackburn 1984). And we can envisage them using that idealised disposition as a consciously fallible criterion for determining if the property in question is present; it will be consciously fallible to the extent that there is no guarantee ever available to the thinker that their current circumstances are indeed normal or ideal.

Suppose that the person finds themselves disposed now to use the term in question of a given unchanging object and now, a moment later, to withhold it. We may conjecture that they would find themselves forced to fault one or other of the triggering situations; after all, no objective property could come and go like that. But in that case they could think of certain circumstances as unfavourable for the triggering of the disposition so far as they were of a kind with how these, the faulted situations are assumed to be; and they could think of other circumstances as favourable (Pettit forthcoming). And then what would stop them from using the idealised predicative disposition - the disposition as it fires in favourable circumstances – as a criterion for determining when the property is present, when not?

The person envisaged might generally apply the predicate without thinking, on the basis of their predicative disposition. They would stop and check that the property really was present, then, only when there were signs of a possible mistake. And they would check for the presence of the property, in effect, by looking to see if their circumstances show any signs of being unfavourable for the triggering of the predicative disposition. This checking would be fallible, so far as it could never rule out absolutely the possibility that, contrary to how they treat them, the circumstances are indeed favourable or unfavourable. It would enable the thinker to see the property in question as something that they can try, fallibly, to register.

Sixth step

But in actual fact human thinkers are not solitary in that way: they use a socially shared, predicative disposition as an identifying criterion.

Whatever is possible in principle, however, it is fairly clear that human thinkers are not actually so egocentric in their orientation as is envisaged at step 5. With all of the words we use – use non-parasitically – we learn them from others and we teach them to others. And we do so in the unquestioned assumption that we will come thereby to share a disposition, when things are favourable, to apply the term in some cases and to withhold it in others. It is that disposition that we take as a criterion for determining whether the property is present in a given case.

Two people will share a disposition to use a predicate 'P' in certain conditions just in case:

- they are each generally disposed to use the predicate in those conditions and to withhold it in others;
- they are each generally disposed to treat one in any pair of interpersonally divergent responses – perhaps their own response, perhaps the other's, perhaps they are unsure which – as a misfiring of the predicative disposition;
- they are each generally disposed, where possible, to negotiate about such discrepancy and to try to agree on which response to discount – on the basis of what comes to be seen as a limitation or obstacle – as a misfiring;
- and that these things are so is a matter of common belief between them: they each believe that they are so, they each believe that the other believes them to be so, and so on.

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I think it is obvious that in this sense human beings generally share dispositions of usage in respect of the words in public, non-parasitic currency. They generally pick up dispositions to apply and withhold those words on the same pattern. They baulk at discrepancies of usage, conceding only as a last resort the possibility that discrepant speakers are each right: conceding, that is, that the terms they use may have different meanings. They are disposed in conversation to try to come to a common mind as to where the fault lies in the case of discrepant usage and in the process of this negotiation certain limitations and obstacles get to be identified, as do those favourable conditions where such factors are absent (Pettit forthcoming). And, finally, that these things are so is a matter of common belief, as appears in the expectations that people hold of one another in conversation.

If people come to share a disposition of usage with a predicate, then it should be clear that that disposition can serve them as a consciously fallible criterion for the presence of the property. They will each use the predicate spontaneously on the basis of where the disposition leads them but they will recognise that in view of the negotiation that discrepancy may force upon them they can be misled. They will think of the property in question as that property, the one that answers to the shared, properly firing disposition. But they will never be in an individual or collective position to rule out absolutely the possibility that the disposition as it is currently operating is not misfiring. Later discrepancies may force them to see the current circumstances of usage, in hindsight, as affected by a certain limitation or obstacle.

The pattern envisaged here, it should be emphasised, is not one of conventional, more or less arbitrary accommodation between different speakers. The pattern fits much better with an objectivist understanding both of the property targeted and of the way people treat that property. The idea is that each sees the property in the examples whereby it is initially ostended – they can point to it, as it were – because they are conscious of a freshly triggered disposition whereby, case by case, the contours of the property will be revealed, however fallibly, to them. People can think of the property as *that* feature: the one – as we theorists will say – whose presence in the examples is made salient by the extrapolative disposition it triggers.

If people baulk at discrepancy, that is explicable so far as they think of the property as an objective feature and assume that unless there is something getting in the way on one or another side, it should register similarly with different subjects. Thus when they come to identify certain limitations and obstacles, they will do so, not arbitrarily, but because treating such factors as sources of error fits best with the assumption that there is an intersubjectively accessible property at the source of their usage.

Seventh step

The social holism thus supported is a deep, not a superficial, changeable feature of human thinkers: it explains how human conversationalists can claim to know – to know immediately, not to derive – what they each have in mind with the use of certain words.

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The upshot of the first six steps in the argument is that individual people have the capacity to think, as a matter of contingent fact, only so far as they each come to share dispositions of signification – in effect, word-usage – with others. Such shared dispositions serve as consciously fallible criteria for the presence of semantically basic properties and enable people to think of those properties as features that they can try only fallibly to register. That is to say that they enable people to launch themselves individually on the enterprise of thought. A given person may lose touch with others of course, as in the case of Robinson Crusoe, but even such a thinker will remain in the debt of his or her initial socialisation. That initiation will have given them the ability to see certain properties and other entities as only fallibly detectable and they will be able to think of themselves as detectors of that kind; indeed they will be able to see themselves across time as occasionally falling into error.

The conclusion reached at step 6 fits the requirements outlined in Part I for being a statement of social holism. While it is a contingent truth, it is derivable by *a priori* reasoning, together with the assumption that things are not as described at step 5. It has people depend on interaction with others for possession of the capacity to think. And the dependence posited is non-causal in character. The idea is not that sharing predicative and related dispositions with others causally kickstarts the capacity to think, though there is a sense in which that may be true. The idea rather is that such a sharing of dispositions, if only with people from whom one is currently isolated in Crusoe-like exile, is part of what it is – as things contingently are with human beings – to have the ability to think.

But there is still one respect in which this conclusion falls short of what we might have envisaged under the name of social holism. This is that for all that has been said so far, human beings might decide to change their practices and conform to the image of the solitary thinker envisaged at step 5; they might choose to make social holism false. In this respect the social holism defended up to now differs significantly, for example, from the doctrine of physicalism with which we compared it earlier. For if physicalism is true – and at best it will be a contingent truth – it is true in such a way that people could not choose to make it false: it represents a deep, unchangeable fact about human beings.

I wish to remark in this final stage 7 of my argument, however, that as it turns out social holism is not all that different in this respect from physicalism. Not only is it contingently true, as argued up to this point. The fact that it is true explains something about human interaction that we cannot easily envisage human beings choosing to change. To that extent, then, it represents a deep and relatively unchangeable fact about our kind.

What social holism explains is the fact, as we take it to be, that in normal conversation we can just know straightaway what an interlocutor means by their words and, assuming sincerity, we can just know straightaway what it is they believe or desire or whatever. We carry on in conversation as if we can just hear the meanings of their words in our interlocutors' mouths: we postulate different meanings only as a last resort. And we do so, apparently, with good reason: except in dealing with children and strangers, we do not often find ourselves driven to admitting differences of meaning. But it is hard to see how we could be justified

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in making such an assumption about the accessibility of word-meaning, except so far as social holism is true.

Suppose that we each used our own idealised, predicative disposition as a criterion for the presence of a corresponding property and that we were unconcerned about discrepancy with others. Suppose, in other words, that we authorised ourselves as relevant disposees but did not give any presumptive authority to the corresponding – or apparently corresponding – dispositions of others. In that case there would be only very fragile reason for my assuming that I knew what another meant by this or that predicate. Take the case of a semantically basic predicate. I may know, by analogy with my own case, that the property picked up by the other is that which is present when circumstances are favourable for the triggering of the other's predicative disposition. But I have no sure access to what ought to count by the other's habits of negotiating intertemporal discrepancies as favourable circumstances. For all I know the other may be different from me in all sorts of relevant ways: they may be colour-blind, for example. And if they are, then the property they will have in mind when they use the predicate will differ in elusive ways from that which I target.

Consider, by contrast, the situation envisaged under social holism, where we each authorise others as well as ourselves. In this situation the property that we each target with a given, semantically basic predicate is that property, assuming there is one, that answers to a disposition we putatively share with others. But then there is no problem about how we can each know what another means by such a predicate. For we will each have equal, symmetric access to the disposition by means of which it is picked out.

It transpires, then, that not only do we human beings happen to conduct our thought in such a way that social holism is true: in such a way that we non-causally depend on interaction with others for the capacity to think. Social holism has got to be true in order to make sense of how we manage to have more or less immediate and reliable knowledge of the meanings of one another's words. It has got to be true in order to explain the possibility, not strictly of our capacity for thought, but of our capacity for what I have elsewhere described as commonable thought: that is, the possibility of our capacity to think contents that we can make immediately accessible to one another (Pettit 1996, Ch. 4). Social holism is a deep, if contingent, truth about human beings.

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Conclusion

There are many routes to social holism and some of them represent higher, straighter roads than that which is taken here. One would add to step 1 the premise that only a publicly used language can supply the voluntary signs required for thought and derive social holism straightaway. Another would reject step 5 and go straight from step 4 to social holism. Both of these approaches would make social holism out to be a necessarily true doctrine. Yet a third approach would use all of the steps from 1 to 6 but let things turn mainly on the claim that unless people have a consciously fallible criterion for determining whether a property – or whatever – is present, they will not be able to see it as objective.

But even if the road taken here is a low and winding one, and even if it leads only to a contingently true version of social holism, I hope that it will be found fairly compelling. People may not be pawns of higher social forces in the manner projected by some social philosophers; they may enjoy the sort of autonomy with which common sense credits them (Pettit 1996). But though people are autonomous agents in that sense, they may yet achieve the capacity to think only on the basis of interaction with one another. They may depend on one another for attaining the basic prerequisite of their individual autonomy; they may be able to realise that autonomy only in one another's company.[2]

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