

Lecture 04 : Philosophical Issues in Behavioural Science

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1. Introduction

This week we first encounter joint action and the second (of two) main question for the whole course: What distinguishes doing something jointly with another person from acting in parallel with them but merely side by side? We will investigate the leading, best developed attempt to answer this question (Bratman 2014). We will also consider some initial objections to that answer.

This is the first lecture on the second (of two) main part of the course. Here we turn to the question, What distinguishes doing something jointly with another person from acting in parallel with them but merely side by side?

In this lecture we first encounter the key ideas you will need for Assignment 3, which is also the second piece of assessed work you will submit.

This lecture does not depend on you having studied any previous sections.

In case you missed some of the earlier lectures, this lecture has been written to avoid depending on you having already studied those lectures. After this lecture, you should be able to write a basic essay for Assignment 3. In the lecture following this one, will go deeper and make explicit connections with earlier lectures.

For the minimum course of study, consider only these sections:

- *The Question* (section §2)
- *Bratman on Shared Intentional Action* (section §6)

2. The Question

Getting a pre-theoretical handle on joint action is best done by contrasting joint actions with actions that are merely individual but occur in parallel.

3. The Simple Theory of Joint Action

Two or more agents perform an intentional joint action exactly when there is an act-type, φ , such that each agent intends that they, these agents, φ together and their intentions are appropriately related to their actions.

Simple Theory of Joint Action

4. Togetherness vs the Simple Theory of Joint Action

To gain a deeper understanding of the Simple Theory of Joint Action, consider an objection it faces: in invoking intentions to do things *together*, the Simple Theory is presupposing the very thing it was supposed to characterise.

This is a highly optional section covering some advanced material. It fits here, but the reasons it matters will only become apparent later. Please skip it if you do not have time to study all the sections this week.

4.1. The Objection from Togetherness

1. The Simple Theory of Joint Action depends on agents having intentions to do things together.
2. For two or more people to do something together is for them to perform an intentional joint action.¹
3. Therefore, the Simple Theory presupposes the notion of intentional joint action, the very thing it was supposed to characterise.

4.2. Reply to the Objection

For each of the following sentences minus the ‘together’, there is a collective interpretation:

- a. The tiny drops soaked Zach’s trousers [together].
- b. The three legs of the tripod support the camera [together].
- c. Ayesha and Beatrice lifted the block [together].

The collective interpretation makes adding ‘together’ appropriate.

It is the same sense of ‘together’ in each case, (a)-(c).

¹ Gilbert appears committed to this claim, for she writes that ‘[t]he key question in the philosophy of collective action is simply ... under what conditions are two or more people doing something together?’ (Gilbert 2010, p. 67). She also suggests that ‘two or more people are acting together if [and only if] they are jointly committed to espousing as a body a certain goal, and each one is acting in a way appropriate to the achievement of that goal, where each one is doing this in light of the fact that he or she is subject to a joint commitment to espouse the goal in question as a body’ (Gilbert 2013, p. 34). It is possible that she is using ‘together’ in a special technical sense (although she does not say that she is).

The truth of the collective interpretation of (c) does not depend on there being any intentional joint action. (As the contrivance introduced in the recording shows, Ayesha and Beatrice need have no awareness of each other's existence or actions; nor need they have intentions concerning anyone else.)

Therefore, two or more people can do something together without thereby performing a joint action. This contradicts premise (2) of the objection.

5. Objections to the Simple Theory of Joint Action

To understand why philosophers invariably reject the Simple Theory of Joint Action in favour of bolder alternatives, consider objections to it. The objections aim to show that the Simple Theory cannot distinguish between all the contrast cases that an account of shared agency must distinguish.

5.1. Aim

Our aim in this section is to find grounds for rejecting the Simple Theory of Joint Action.

5.2. Bratman's Counterexample

Michael Bratman offers a counterexample to something related to the Simple Theory of Joint Action. Suppose that you and I each intend that we, you and I, go to New York together. But your plan is to point a gun at me and bundle me into the trunk (or boot) of your car. Then you intend that we go to New York together, but in a way that doesn't depend on my intentions. As you see things, I'm going to New York with you whether I like it or not. This doesn't seem like the basis for shared agency. After all, your plan involves me being abducted.

But it is still a case in which we each intend that we go to New York together and we do. So, apparently, the conditions of the Simple Theory are met (or almost met) and yet there is no shared agency.

5.3. Reply to Bratman's Counterexample

The mafia case fails as a counterexample to the Simple Theory of Joint Action because if you go through with your plan, my actions won't be appropriately related to my intention.

And, on the other hand, if you don't go through with your plan, then it is at best unclear that your having had that plan matters for whether we have shared agency.

What seems to be wrong in the Mafia Case is not that the agent's need further intentions, but just that if their intentions don't connect to their actions in the right way then there won't be intentional joint action.

Bratman seems to be aiming to identify intentions whose fulfilment requires shared agency. But is this necessary? It seems to me that what matters is that the Simple Theory as a whole distinguishes shared agency from parallel but merely individual agency, not that it does so by way of fulfilment conditions of intentions.

5.4. Walking Together in the Tarantino Sense

Contrast friends walking together in the way friends ordinarily walk, which is a paradigm example of joint action, with two gangsters who walk together like this ... Gangster 1 pulls a gun on Gangster 2 and says: "let's walk" But Gangster 2 does the same thing to Gangster 1 simultaneously.

The interdependence of the guns means that their actions can be appropriately related to our intentions.

The conditions of the Simple Theory are met both in ordinary walking together and in walking together in the Tarantino sense. So according to the Simple Theory, both are intentional joint actions.

But walking together in the Tarantino sense is not an intentional joint action unless the central event of *Reservoir Dogs* (Tarantino 1992) is also a case of joint action.

Therefore the Simple Theory fails to distinguishing joint action from actions performed in parallel but merely individually.

5.5. Reply to Tarantino's Counterexample

At least two philosophers responded, independently of each other, by saying that walking together in the Tarantino sense really is a joint action.

My opponents reasoned that each is acting intentionally, and that coercion is no bar to shared agency.

Just here we come to a tricky issue. There is a danger that we will just end up trying to say something systematic about one or another set of intuitions, where nothing deep underpins these intuitions.

This is a real threat; you'll see that most philosophers are not careful about their starting point in theorising about shared agency. They merely give examples or a couple of contrast cases and off they go. Adopting this undisciplined approach risks achieving nothing more than organising your own

intuitions. (It's fine to organise intuitions on weekends and evenings, but it shouldn't be your day job.)

Despite the danger of merely organising intuitions, let us consider a further attempted counterexample.²

5.6. Blocking the Aisle

Imagine two sisters who, getting off an aeroplane, tacitly agree to exact revenge on the unruly mob of drunken hens behind them by standing so as to block the aisle together. This is a joint action. Meanwhile on another flight, two strangers happen to be so configured that they are collectively blocking the aisle. The first passenger correctly anticipates that the other passenger, who is a complete stranger, will not be moving from her current position for some time. This creates an opportunity for the first passenger: she intends that they, she and the stranger, block the aisle. And, as it happens, the second passenger's thoughts mirror the first's.

The feature under consideration as distinctive of intentional joint action is present in both the Strangers and the Sisters: each passenger is acting on her intention that they, the two passengers, block the aisle.

But the Strangers, unlike the Sisters, do not perform an intentional joint action.

So the Simple Theory of Joint Action fails to provide a correct answer to the question, What distinguishes genuine joint actions from parallel but merely individual actions?

6. Bratman on Shared Intentional Action

The leading, best developed account of shared intention is due to Michael Bratman. What are the main features of his account?

What distinguishes joint actions from parallel but merely individual actions?

Bratman's first step towards answering this question is to postulate shared intention:

'A first step is to say that what distinguishes you and me from you and the Stranger is that you and I share an intention to walk together—we (you and I) intend to walk together—but you

² There is another way of going, which does not depend on trading intuitions (Butterfill & Sinigaglia in press). But it would take us too far ahead to get into that at this stage.

and the Stranger do not. In modest sociality, joint activity is explained by such a shared intention; whereas no such explanation is available for the combined activity of you and the Stranger. This does not, however, get us very far; for we do not yet know what a shared intention is, and how it connects up with joint action.’ (Bratman 2009, p. 152)

The view that joint action involves shared intention is almost universal.³ To illustrate:

‘I take a collective action to involve a collective [shared] intention.’ (Gilbert 2006, p. 5)

‘The sine qua non of collaborative action is a joint goal [shared intention] and a joint commitment’ (Tomasello 2008, p. 181)

‘the key property of joint action lies in its internal component [...] in the participants’ having a “collective” or “shared” intention.’ (Alonso 2009, pp. 444–5)

‘Shared intentionality is the foundation upon which joint action is built.’ (Carpenter 2009, p. 381)

Once we postulate shared intention, the key problem becomes to say what it is.

Bratman’s theory has two components, a functional characterisation and a substantial ‘construction of interconnected intentions and other related attitudes ... that would ... play the roles characteristic of shared intention’ (Bratman 2014, p. 32).⁴

6.1. Bratman’s Functional Characterisation

Shared intention serves to (i) coordinate activities, (ii) coordinate planning, and (iii) structure bargaining.

To illustrate, if we share an intention that we cook dinner, this shared intention will (iii) structure bargaining insofar as we may need to decide what to cook or how to cook it on the assumption that we are cooking it together; the shared intention will also require us to (ii) coordinate our planning by each bringing complementary ingredients and tools, and to (i) coordinate our activities by preparing the ingredients in the right order.

³ Pacherie (2013, pp. 3–7) discusses in depth the idea that a notion of shared intention is useful for understanding shared agency.

⁴ Bratman’s theory has been refined and defended over more than two decades (Bratman 1992, 1993, 1997, 2009, 2014). Here we consider just the core components.

Bratman also proposes a requirement: shared intentions should be inferentially and normatively integrated with ordinary, individual intentions.

6.2. Bratman's Substantial Construction

Bratman claims that the following are collectively sufficient⁵ conditions for you and I to have a shared intention that we J:

- (1) '(a) I intend that we J and (b) you intend that we J
- (2) I intend that we J in accordance with and because of (1a), (1b), and meshing subplans of (1a) and (1b); you intend that we J in accordance with and because of (1a), (1b), and meshing subplans of (1a) and (1b)
- (3) '(1) and (2) are common knowledge between us.' (Bratman 1993, p. View 4)

Elaborating on the intention in condition (2), Bratman adds that each agent must intend 'that the route from these intentions to our joint activity satisfies the connection condition' (Bratman 2014, p. 52). But what is the connection condition? It is 'the condition that specifies the nature of [the] explanatory relation' between shared intention and joint action ... [T]he basic idea is that what is central to the connection condition is that each is responsive to the intentions and actions of the other in ways that track the intended end of the joint action—where all this is out in the open.' (Bratman 2014, pp. 78–9).

6.3. Appendix: Further Conditions

In more recent work Bratman has added these further conditions to those above: > (4) The persistence of each intention in conditions (1) and (2) is interdependent with the persistence of every other such intention > (Bratman 1997, p. 153; > Bratman 2006, pp. 7–8; > Bratman 2009, p. 157; > Bratman 2010, p. 12; > Bratman 2014, p. 65). > > (5) We will J 'if but only if 1a and 1b' > (Bratman 1997, p. 153; > Bratman 2009, p. 157).

The common knowledge condition, (3) above, is extended to include these further conditions, (4) and (5).

On this course, I shall usually simplify exposition by discussing conditions (1)–(3) only. However, conditions (4) and (5) will be relevant (and explained) in *Two (Failed?) Objections to Bratman* in Lecture 05.

⁵ In Bratman (1992), the following were offered as jointly sufficient *and individually necessary* conditions; the retreat to sufficient conditions occurs in Bratman (1997, pp. 143–4) where he notes that 'for all that I have said, shared intention might be multiply realizable.'

There are some further developments of the view in Bratman's most recent work (Bratman 2014).

6.4. Alternatives to Bratman's Theory of Shared Intention

This course focusses on Bratman's theory because it is the best developed, most influential and has yet to encounter a successful objection in print (despite many attempts).

You are not expected to study alternatives to Bratman's theory on this course. But you may choose to do so.

Laurence (2011) and Roessler (2020) will appeal to Anscombe fans.

Opposing Bratman's view that shared intention does not require any ontological, metaphysical or conceptual innovations, some hold that shared intentions involve a novel attitude (Searle 1990; Gallotti & Frith 2013). Others have explored the notion that the primary distinguishing feature of shared intentions is not the kind of attitude involved but rather the kind of subject, which is plural (Helm 2008). Or they may differ from ordinary intentions in involving distinctive obligations or commitments to others (Gilbert 1992; Roth 2004). Or the most fundamental distinguishing mark of shared intentions is the way they arise, namely through team reasoning (Gold & Sugden 2007; Pacherie 2012)—a view that we will return to later in the course when considering game theory.

Finally, Bratman's approach has inspired a family of accounts, including Asarnow (2020), Blomberg (2016), Ludwig (2007, 2016) and Tollefsen (2005).

7. Question Session 04

If available (no promises), recordings of the live whole-class lecture will be here, together with slides and references. They are usually available on the day after the session. (You may need to refresh this page to make them appear.)

Glossary

connection condition 'the condition that specifies the nature of [the] explanatory relation' between shared intention and joint action ... [T]he basic idea is that what is central to the connection condition is that each is responsive to the intentions and actions of the other in ways that track the intended end of the joint action—where all this is out in the open' (Bratman 2014, pp. 78–9). 8

contrast case a pair of cases where one involves shared agency and the other does not and which are otherwise as similar as possible. 4

meshing subplans ‘The sub-plans of the participants *mesh* when it is possible that all of these sub-plans taken together be successfully executed.’ (Bratman 2014, p. 53) 8

modest sociality ‘small scale shared intentional agency in the absence of asymmetric authority relations’ (Bratman 2009, p. 150). 7

shared intention An attitude that stands to joint action as ordinary, individual intention stands to ordinary, individual action. It is hard to find consensus on what shared intention is, but most agree that it is neither shared nor intention. (Variously called ‘collective’, ‘we-’ and ‘joint’ intention.) 6, 8

Simple Theory of Joint Action Two or more agents perform an intentional joint action exactly when there is an act-type, ϕ , such that each agent intends that they, these agents, ϕ together and their intentions are appropriately related to their actions. 2–6

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