

Lecture 05 : Philosophical Issues in Behavioural Science

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1. Introduction

This week we will consider objections to Bratman's theory of shared intention (see *Bratman on Shared Intentional Action* in Lecture 04). This should not only deepen your understanding of Bratman's position: you will also encounter some ideas about a role for commitment in joint action, and consider how discoveries in smiling might enable you to formulate objections to Bratman's (and several others') accounts of joint action.

This week's lecture is the second on joint action.

This lecture is intended to guide you towards a deeper understanding of Assignment 3. (Ideas for a first way of answering that assignment were presented in *Lecture 02*.)

This lecture depends on you having studied some sections from previous lectures:

- *Philosophical Theories of Action* in Lecture 01
- *The Question* in Lecture 04
- *Bratman on Shared Intentional Action* in Lecture 04

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

- *Two (Failed?) Objections to Bratman* (section §3)

If you need more time for studying *Lecture 04*, you can safely skip the rest of this lecture for now. Although useful for of Assignment 3, this lecture is not essential for writing a basic answer. Nor will you need to rely on its contents for later assignments.

2. From Individual to Joint Action

We link the questions about individual and joint action.

3. Two (Failed?) Objections to Bratman

Searle (1990, pp. 92–3) and Velleman (1997, p. 32) have attempted to provide objections to Bratman's theory of shared intentional agency. Neither objection works (at least not as it stands), but both illuminate features of Bratman's view.

The two objections do not depend on any details of Bratman's theory of shared intentional agency other than his claim that:

‘Our shared intention to paint together involves your intention that we paint and my intention that we paint.’ (Bratman 2014, p. 12)

Both objections aim to show that this claim is either false, or at least cannot be used to characterise shared intention without unilluminating circularity.

3.1. Searle’s Objection

According to Searle,

‘the team intention ... is in part expressed by “We are executing a pass play.” But ... no individual member of the team has this as the entire content of his intention, for no one can execute a pass play by himself.’ (Searle 1990, pp. 92–3)

From this Bratman reconstructs an objection:

1. ‘it is always true that the subject of an intention is the intended agent of the intended activity’ (Bratman 2014, p. 13; this is the Own Action Condition)
2. Therefore, neither I nor you individually can rationally intend that we paint.

3.2. Reply to Searle

Bratman (1997)’s response is to offer counterexamples to the Own Action Condition which involve only ordinary, individual action. (I present such a counterexample in the recording.)

Bratman (2014, Chapter 3, §1) also considers, and rejects, two arguments for the Own Action Condition.

3.3. Velleman’s Objection

1. ‘intentions . . . are the attitudes that resolve deliberative questions, thereby settling issues.’ (Velleman 1997, p. 32; this is the Settle Condition)
2. If I intend that we paint together, then my intention settles the issue of whether we will paint together.
3. If the issue is settled, your intention that we paint together cannot settle it.
4. It follows that if I intend that we paint together, you cannot rationally intend the same.

5. Therefore, we cannot rationally each intend that we, you and I, paint together.

3.4. Reply to Velleman

The persistence of my intention that we paint may depend on the persistence of your intention that we paint; and conversely. That is, our intentions are *persistence interdependent*.

Where our intentions are persistence interdependent, they collectively settle the issue of whether we will paint (Bratman 2014, pp. 64ff).

Therefore, premises (2) and (3) in Velleman's Objection are not both true.

3.5. Conclusion

Neither objection shows that Bratman's theory is wrong.

4. The Objection from Contralateral Commitment

A premise linking shared intention with contralateral commitments provides the basis for an objection against Bratman's account (among others' accounts) of shared intention. What is the objection and should we accept it?

In this section we consider the prospects for developing an objection to Bratman's (and others') theory of shared intention from the claim that shared intention is associated with commitment.

This is inspired by Gilbert (2013, pp. 88–9) assertion that:

‘When people regard themselves as collectively intending to do something, they appear to understand that, by virtue of the collective intention, and that alone, each party has the standing to demand [...] conformity of the other parties. A joint commitment account [...] respects this fact. [...] accounts that do not appeal to joint commitment—such as those of Michael Bratman and John Searle—are hard-pressed to do so.’

5. Sharing a Smile

Smiles have been much studied in the behavioural sciences. Can understanding smiles help us to see objections to philosophical theories about joint action, and about action?

5.1. What Is a Smile?

What distinguishes a genuine smile from a muscle spasm or the exhalation of gas through the mouth which might produce things resembling smiles? Consider this answer: only the genuine smile is a instrumental action.

Why think of the smile as instrumental? Because smiling is a skillful activity requiring sustained coordination of zygomatic major and orbicularis oculi muscles that is typically learned through social interactions in the first year of life (Messinger & Fogel 2007, pp. 335–7, 348–50; Reddy 2000). If you think about how smiles can unfold (becoming increasingly wry, say), how they mesh with other expressions of emotion (your shock becomes amusement before, as the Ayesha's trick with your distant ancestor's favourite antique vase goes horribly wrong, turning to horror), how they combine with winces and blinks and other facial expressions (Fridlund 2014, p. 177), how they are responsive to context,¹ and how they can be used to express not only amusement but also happiness, politeness, satisfaction or playfulness among other things, you can see that smiling is not always a matter of simple and instant muscle contractions.² Further, like grasping an object or articulating a particular phoneme, smiling is an action that can be realised by different sequences of bodily configuration in different contexts.

You might object that smiling cannot be an instrumental action because it does not happen to bring an outcome about. But the smile itself is the outcome. The goal of the action is to smile that smile (Something similar applies in the case of grasping and producing a phonetic gesture.)

5.2. Smiles present Obstacles to solving The Problem of Action

As instrumental actions, smiles create obstacles for many attempts to solve The Problem of Action. Although sometimes produced intentionally, a genuine smile can be something unexpected and even unwanted to the agent (as when you fail to suppress a smile that would be inappropriate).³ People also smile in their sleep; according to Messinger & Fogel (2007), newborn infants smile on average every 5 minutes during sleep. Smiles are this difficult ac-

¹ Although smiles as a whole exhibit variability depending on context, they may also involve characteristic movement patterns which could provide the basis for recognition in observers. Schmidt et al. (2003) offer evidence that 'the onset phase of spontaneous smiles [... have] consistent temporal characteristics, despite many differences in the contexts and conditions under which these smiles were elicited.'

² This is dramatically illustrated by the social complications of impairment to the ability to smile appropriately in schizophrenia (Azuma et al. 2016).

³ A related source of obstacles arises from what Hursthouse (1991) calls arrational actions. Note that her category of arrational action does not include smiles that are not intentional actions.

tions to accommodate whether you adopt the Standard Solution or prefer an Anscombian alternative.

One view is that what makes an event a smile, a instrumental action and not just a muscle spasm caused by excess wind, is the way that motor representation is involved. Specifically, the genuine smile will involve a motor representation of the outcome, the smile, and this motor representation will lead to movements by way of planning-like motor processes.

5.3. Sharing a Smile is a Joint Action

So far I've suggested that smiling is a instrumental action, the goal of which is to smile that smile. Next I want to consider sharing a smile. You and I sitting together at the performance observe a clown's falling. As the initial shock of seeming to witness a terrible accident turns to joy, we turn to each other and share a smile. As the lights go up, we smile together at the clown hoping that they will see us and be rewarded by our smile.

In the first moment, sharing a smile is a dyadic interaction; in the second moment, we are jointly smiling at the clown. These are both apparently joint actions. So we can ask,

[The Smile Question] What distinguishes joint actions such as sharing a smile from parallel but merely individual actions as when you and I each individually smile at the clown's performance but nothing is shared between us? (See *The Question* in Lecture 04.)

Could Bratman's account of shared intention (see *Bratman on Shared Intentional Action* in Lecture 04) enable us to answer the Smile Question? If not, is this a reason to revise or reject that account?

Is it plausible that sharing a smile involves any kind of commitment to smiling? If not, can we hold on to the view that all joint action involves commitment (Gilbert 2013)?

Consider how we might attempt to answer the Smile Question.

Merely being in the same situation is not enough for us to be sharing a smile.

Minimally, there have to be two kinds of connection between us for us to share a smile.

First, bodily coordination: the way your smile unfolds is shaped to some degree by how mine unfolds and conversely.

Second, emotional coordination: in sharing a smile, we are to some extent emotionally tied together. To some extent, the way your amusement unfolds

is being controlled by, and controlling, the way mine unfolds. (This is why you might occasionally regret sharing a smile with a stranger.)

Attempts to characterise joint action by invoking one or another kind of shared intention do not appear well-placed to capture these features.

6. Question Session 05

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.)

This section introduces the notion of an aggregate subject and the fundamental question about them:

How can there be aggregate subjects?

Perhaps the best understood cases of aggregate subjects are animals like the Portuguese man o' war (*physalia physalis*), which is an animal comprised of animals. In this case, the aggregate subject exists because its component subjects are biomechanically joined. But that would be a rare extreme for humans.

One way of answering this question invokes Pettit (2014)'s idea about self-representing agents. Roughly, if several individuals each represent themselves as components of an aggregate subject (Pettit says 'group agent') and if this causes each of them to act as if they were components of an aggregate subject, then they will constitute one.

Glossary

aggregate subject A subject whose proper parts are themselves subjects. A paradigm example would be a Portuguese man o' war (*Physalia physalis*), which is an animal that can swim and eat and whose swimming and eating is not simply a matter of the swimming or eating of its constituent animals. Distinct from, but sometimes confused with, a plural subject. 7, 8

motor representation The kind of representation characteristically involved in preparing, performing and monitoring sequences of small-scale actions such as grasping, transporting and placing an object. They represent actual, possible, imagined or observed actions and their effects. 6

Own Action Condition ‘it is always true that the subject of an intention is the intended agent of the intended activity’ (Bratman 2014, p. 13). 3

plural subject Some subjects who are collectively the subject of an intention or other attitude. If there is one token intention that is both my intention and your intention and no one else’s intention, then we are the plural subject of that intention. (The intention is therefore shared in the same sense that, if we were siblings, we would share a parent.) Distinct from, but sometimes confused with, an aggregate subject. 7

Settle Condition ‘intentions . . . are the attitudes that resolve deliberative questions, thereby settling issues’ (Velleman 1997, p. 32). 3

Standard Solution (to The Problem of Action). Actions are those events which stand in an appropriate causal relation to an intention. 6

The Problem of Action What distinguishes your actions from things that merely happen to you? (According to Frankfurt (1978, p. 157), ‘The problem of action is to explicate the contrast between what an agent does and what merely happens to him.’) 5, 8

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