JOINT ACTION WITHOUT JOINT INTENTION (OR GOAL)

Abstract

Joint or cooperative action is standardly assumed to involve sharing an intention. When two agents are going for a walk together, what sets their action apart from a physically identical case in which they happen to be walking *alongside* each other is their having a joint intention to go for walk together. Here I argue for an alternative strategy for explaining joint action, which breaks sharply with tradition by eschewing all reference to joint intentions. In the longer paper on which this talk is based, I start by canvassing several problems with the traditional approach. In the talk, for reasons of time, I briefly summarize those problems with an eye to motivating my alternative approach. I then devote most of the time to articulating and defending my proposal, which I call 'the dynamic account of joint action'. The account explains joint action purely in terms of the individual actions and executive dispositions of each cooperating agent and the environment they are acting in. Importantly, the views also understands cooperation as a *graded* phenomenon. I unpack the proposal and explain its virtues, addressing objections along the way.

The most influential version of the traditional, intention-based approach, due to Bratman (2014), is rightly faulted for being too complex to capture cooperation between simpler creatures who lack the requisite conceptual-psychological machinery, such as non-human animals and small children (Butterfill 2012, Pacherie 2008). The Bratmanian account also mistakenly prioritizes stable, preplanned forms of cooperation over simpler, spontaneous and transient ones. Furthermore, as I explain, the flaws of the traditional approach actually run deeper, and carry over to any attempts to fix it by relaxing the conditions for jointly intending, or even by making do with the non-mentalistic notion of *joint goal*, as some have recently suggested (Butterfill, 2012, 2016; Butterfill & Sinigaglia, 2023). This is because both joint intentions and joint goals are ultimately unnecessary posits, and the preoccupation with them risks marginalizing the target phenomenon, viz. joint action.

Having briefly summarized the difficulties I see with explaining joint action by appealing to joint intention, I proceed to presenting my arguably superior dynamic account. I first survey several interrelated features that I see as key to fleshing out the distinctive dynamics of acting together. One such feature consists in the characteristic individual actions of each cooperating agent – for example, their implementing a division of labor (Abramova & Slors, 2015); avoiding interfering with each other's work; providing help as the other requires; offering feedback and guidance on each other's performance; and giving consent to the other to do certain things to oneself.

Another key element of acting together are those individual actions that each cooperating agent is *disposed* to perform – e.g., letting you use some of my paint if yours runs out while we paint the house together, or preventing me from falling over during our joint walk. Important here are the mechanisms of so-called "emergent coordination" (Knoblich et al., 2011) – a form of bottom-up, unplanned coordination manifest e.g. in processes of "entrainment" where agents come to synchronize some rhythmic behavior, such as the frequency in which they rock in a rocking chair (Richardson et al., 2007).

A further important aspect of the dynamics of joint action are the ways in which cooperating agents respond to the *environment* in which they are acting. Several psychologists have emphasized the role played by *joint affordances* in explaining joint action. (Think of the distinctive way in which a two-handled picnic basket invites two agents to pick it up, compared to a single agent (Knoblich & Sebanz, 2008)). The significance of the environment can also be seen when considering joint *games*. Playing a game together is largely distinguished by the game design. Players may enter a game with entirely competitive, indeed aggressive mindsets and yet the game structure ensures that their activity is friendly and cooperative (Nguyen, 2017).

Drawing together the various features sketched above allows me to formulate an attractive account of joint action that does away with joint intentions and goals, and hence sidesteps the pitfalls of doing so. To a first approximation, the dynamic account states that when two agents are

V-ing together, each agent is playing a part in their *V*-ing, and is acting or is disposed to act in at least some of the ways that facilitate the other's *V*-ing. Going over a series of cases, some intuitively joint and others not, I demonstrate the credentials of the account by illustrating its extensional adequacy. This exercise also allows me to introduce a couple of important refinements to the initial rough formulation of the account. First, while acting together typically involves coming to see one's partner as a means to the performance of the joint action, it precludes treating the partner *merely* as a means. Two people are acting together only if they are apt to facilitate each other's actions, where this is not restricted only to those actions that further each agent's *own* goals and intentions.

The second refinement concerns the gradability of cooperation (which drops out of view entirely with the traditional account of joint action in terms of joint intention). I propose we understand the target property – jointness or cooperation – as *graded* rather than binary, allowing that actions can be somewhat cooperative, quite cooperative, extremely cooperative, and so on. On this approach, degrees of cooperativeness are ordered along two scales, viz. the *number* of cooperative action- (or disposition-)types displayed by the agents; and how *thoroughgoing* their cooperative actions (dispositions) are. We can then say that some action is (flat-out) cooperative or joint just in case it meets the threshold for cooperativeness on at least one of the two scales.

Incorporating the above refinements, the dynamic account of joint action states that when two agents are (flat-out) *V*-ing together, each agent is (i) playing a part in their *V*-ing; and (ii) acting or is disposed to act in sufficiently many of the ways that facilitate the other's *V*-ing, where this is not meant to exclusively facilitate her own *V*-ing.

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