

## Book Review

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**Manuel Vargas and Gideon Yaffe:** *Rational and Social Agency: The Philosophy of Michael Bratman*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, 368 pp.

Reviewed by *Olle Blomberg*

This anthology consists of ten essays that engage with various aspects of Michael Bratman's philosophy of action, framed by a brief introduction by the editors and a substantive response to the essays by Bratman. The first four essays by Richard Holton, Alfred Mele, Kieran Setiya, and David Velleman are related to the core of Bratman's planning theory of intention, whereas the next four essays by Jay Wallace, Geoffrey Sayre-McCord and Michael Smith, Elijah Millgram, and Christine Korsgaard deal with issues concerning self-governance, autonomy and identification. The last two essays, by Margaret Gilbert and Scott Shapiro, focus on Bratman's account of shared agency. Korsgaard's essay, which is based on her keynote at the Collective Intentionality VII conference in Basel 2010, touches on the topic of group agency. As far as I am aware, all essays except Velleman's and Shapiro's are published here for the first time.<sup>1</sup> I will here focus on the essays that relate to Bratman's work on shared agency.

In "The Nature of Agreements: A Solution to Some Puzzles about Claim-Rights and Joint Intention," Gilbert presents a joint commitment account of agreements and uses it to explain the nature of claim-rights associated with everyday agreements as well as intentional joint action. A claim-right is a right to the performance of some action  $\phi$  that a person X has against another person Y. Gilbert argues that such a claim-right and its associated directed obligation is, at least when associated with an agreement, grounded in X and Y's joint commitment to some plan P, where the action  $\phi$  is Y's contribution to the realisation of P. A joint commitment is formed when "each party expresses to the others his

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<sup>1</sup> While it is never mentioned in this book, Shapiro's "Massively Shared Agency" was previously published in *Teoria e Critica della Regolazione Sociale*, no. 5, 2011, in a special issue on "Intenzionalità collettiva e figure della responsabilità", available online at <http://mimesisedizioni.it/journals/index.php/tcrs/article/view/30/28> (accessed March 4, 2015).

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readiness to join with them in (jointly) committing them all to endorse plan *P* as a body” in a context of common knowledge (232). If you and I are in this way jointly committed to going for a walk, then each of us has a claim-right to the other’s walking. According to Gilbert, this account avoids problems that beset accounts that construe agreement-associated claim-rights as moral rights. First, she argues that a moral account cannot explain how *X* could have a claim-right to *Y*’s  $\phi$ -ing when this is an evil action. Secondly, such an account cannot make sense of the claim-right’s directedness to *Y* in particular. If the claim-right is a moral right, then it isn’t clear why it is only I who am in a position to demand of you that you walk. Here, I think Gilbert is correct at least with respect to the second problem, and she shows how the joint commitment-account avoids both problems.

Now, Gilbert thinks that “joint intention” necessarily involves claim-rights and that her joint commitment-account explains how it can be that you and I can have joint intention to  $\phi$  even if each of us personally intends not to contribute to this  $\phi$ -ing. After all, claim-rights and associated obligations with respect to our  $\phi$ -ing will arise from a joint commitment irrespectively of what each personally intends to do. Obviously, Bratman’s account of shared intention cannot solve this “puzzle,” since such a shared intention just is a pattern of personal intentions and beliefs. But is there really a puzzle to be solved? Gilbert thinks that intuitive judgements about cases establish that there is. While I agree with Gilbert that it would in many contexts be natural for me to say that “We intend to go for a walk” if we have agreed to go for a walk even if I personally intended not to join you, it is far from obvious that I would be speaking truthfully and accurately.

At any rate, Gilbert’s chapter interestingly shows that if the notion of joint commitment is indeed needed for understanding agreements and claim-rights, then Bratman’s appeal to ontological parsimony in favour of his account of shared intention is somewhat defused. If the notion of joint commitment is needed in our ontology anyway, then we are free to appeal to it in an account of shared agency too.

In “Massively Shared Agency,” Shapiro focuses on Bratman’s early work on shared agency, where Bratman set out individually necessary conditions for shared intention and activity. Shapiro criticises Bratman for not accommodating authority relations and the possibility of alienated participants in his account. An alienated participant is someone who isn’t committed to bringing about a group’s  $\phi$ -ing, but who nevertheless intentionally participates in the  $\phi$ -ing. For example, the workers in an automobile factory might intentionally produce cars together in virtue of each of them intentionally doing their part of a shared plan designed by management. But no participant needs to intend that they produce cars. Interestingly, Shapiro extends Bratman’s account to cover cases of small-scale shared agency involving authority. Authority can serve as a mechanism for ensuring that

the participants' subplans become consistent. In this way, authority can play a role that is analogous to the role that bargaining and shared deliberation already play in Bratman's account. When it comes to the issue of alienated participants, Shapiro suggests that their acceptance of shared plans designed for bringing about and coordinating the group's  $\phi$ -ing can play a role similar to the role that intentions that the group  $\phi$  play in Bratman's account. Shapiro's extension of Bratman's account is a valuable contribution to the literature on shared agency, and provides an interesting bridge between a Bratmanian theory of shared agency and theories of distributed agency and cognition.

In "The Normative Constitution of Agency," Korsgaard sketches an account of agency according to which an agent acts autonomously by constituting its own activity by following certain norms – norms determined by the laws of reason. The view is contrasted with the view of Bratman and others who see agency as a natural rather than a normatively constituted phenomenon. Korsgaard then briefly argues that an upshot of her Kantian account is that several natural individuals can unify themselves into a genuine collective agent, by constituting the collective activity by together following norms determined by the laws of reason. The result would be a case of group or "corporate" agency. Korsgaard does not, however, give an account of what it would be for several individuals to do this together, or for them to exercise "shared" agency. The essay is nevertheless extremely engaging and rich, and provides an interesting perspective on agency that starkly contrasts with Bratman's perspective.

There are also other essays in the collection that touch on themes relevant to shared agency and collective intentionality. For instance, Holton's argument for the importance of all-out beliefs (as opposed to credences) is partly motivated by their supposed role in interpersonal coordination. Velleman's "What Good Is a Will?" is a forceful challenge to the idea that there are present-directed Bratmanian plan-intentions, but it is also a challenge to the idea that there are present-directed Bratmanian shared intentions.

Readers interested in contemporary philosophy of action, and Bratman's philosophy in particular, will certainly benefit from reading this anthology back-to-back. All chapters are of high quality and Bratman's responses throw light on both his own theory and the competing positions presented in the essays.

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