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Précis of Shared Agency: A Planning Theory of Acting Together

Abstract: A précis of Michael E. Bratman, *Shared Agency: A Planning Theory of Acting Together* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

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We have an important capacity to act together. Perhaps we paint the house together, or sing a duet together, or have a conversation together. In such cases we engage in shared intentional – and perhaps shared cooperative – activity. These are not merely cases of strategic interaction in which each publically pursues what she wants while adjusting in light of the other’s public pursuit of what he wants while adjusting in light of what she is doing. Nor need such shared activities be grounded on a prior exchange of promises. My aim in *Shared Agency: A Planning Theory of Acting Together* is to articulate theoretical resources that can help advance our understanding of such shared intentionality. Focusing on small-scale cases, I argue that the planning structures that are central to the cross-temporal organization of our individual agency are also at the core of these important forms of sociality.

In defense of this claim I seek sufficient conditions for such shared intentional activity, sufficient conditions that draw from the conceptual, metaphysical, and normative resources of the planning theory of individual agency. I thereby aim to defend the claim that there is an important continuity – conceptual, metaphysical, and normative – between individual planning agency and shared intentionality.

According to the planning theory of our individual agency, our practical thought and action is structured by plans, plans that are normally partial and

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need to be filled in as time goes by. We characterize these plan structures by joint appeal to their characteristic roles in our temporally extended agency and to underlying rationality norms of consistency, agglomerativity, means-end coherence, and stability. Intentions are plan states.

We then draw on this planning theory to understand shared intentionality. We focus on planning agents who have the capacity to know about each other's minds and actions. We try to describe certain special, inter-related planning structures of these participating individuals such that the rational functioning of those planning structures would constitute the rational, social functioning that is characteristic of shared intentional activity. Our capacity for shared intentional activity is grounded in our individual planning capacities in the sense that the proper functioning of those planning capacities, given relevant special contents of the plans, contexts of the plans, and inter-relations among the participating planning agents, would constitute a basic case of shared intentional activity. And this contrasts with accounts of shared intentionality (e.g., those of Margaret Gilbert and John Searle) that appeal to basic new elements over and above those involved in individual intentional agency.

My approach is reductive in spirit, since it aims to understand central cases of shared intentionality in terms of resources broadly available within the planning theory of individual planning agents with the capacity to know about each other's minds and actions. (I do not, however, claim that all such planning agents have the capacity for shared intentional action.) But it is also multi-faceted in spirit: it appeals to a range of different elements, and argues that when these are harnessed together we arrive at a capacity for shared intentionality. Given the aim of grounding our capacity for shared intentionality in our capacity for individual planning agency (given the capacity to know about each other's minds and actions), what is essential is the provision, in terms of these inter-related, individualistic planning structures, of sufficient conditions for robust forms of shared intentionality. We can leave open the question whether these conditions are strictly necessary for shared intentionality.

A key is the phenomenon of shared intention. When we paint the house together, or sing together, or have a conversation together our shared intentional activity is normally explained by our shared intention in favor of our so acting. We are singing together because that is what we intend to do – where talk of what we intend to do is talk of *our* shared intention so to act. In this respect shared intentional activity parallels individual intentional activity: in each case, the explanatory role of intention – individual or shared – is fundamental. And the aim is to articulate structures of inter-connected individual planning agency whose rational functioning would constitute the rational functioning of shared intention.

This leads us to ask: what fundamental roles do shared intentions play in our lives, and what norms are associated with those roles? My answer highlights

analogies with the roles of intentions in organizing individual thought and action, and with the associated norms of individual intention rationality. In particular, my proposal is that the characteristic roles of a shared intention to *X* will include inter-personal coordination of action and planning in pursuit of *X*, and the framing of related bargaining and/or shared deliberation concerning how we are to *X*. And these roles will be associated with norms of social consistency and agglomeration, social means-end coherence and social stability. Failure to satisfy these social norms will normally undermine the social roles of shared intention.

We want then to specify a structure of inter-connected plan states of individuals in appropriate contexts that would, when functioning in the norm-guided ways highlighted by the planning theory of individuals, play these roles characteristic of shared intention in part by way of conformity to these associated norms of social rationality. Such a broadly individualistic structure of inter-connected planning agents would be a construction (in the sense of Gricean creature construction) of shared intention.¹

Suppose then that you and I share an intention to *J*. Here are the main elements of my proposed construction of our shared intention:

1. Each intends that we *J*.

Within the planning theory we can make good sense of my intending *our* action; so we should reject the own-action condition on intention. Further, to avoid circularity, the characterization of *J* is to be, in the basic case, neutral with respect to shared intentionality.

2. Each intends that we *J* by way of the intentions of each that we *J* and by way of relevant mutual responsiveness in sub-intention and action, and so by way of sub-plans of each that mesh with each other.

The connection between these intentions and our *J*-ing, when our *J*-ing proceeds *by way of* these intentions, normally involves relevant mutual responsiveness. (I call this the connection condition.) When each intends that we *J* by way of the cited intention of the other, these intentions interlock. This contrasts with a case in which each intends that the joint activity (characterized in a way that is neutral concerning shared intentionality) proceed without the relevant involvement of the other's relevant intention. (E.g., each of two gang members intends that they go to NYC together by throwing the other into the car trunk.) Further, the condition of intending that we *J* by way of meshing sub-plans blocks the use of deception to work around the other's conflicting sub-plans.

¹ Grice, Paul (1974–1975): “Method in Philosophical Psychology (From the Banal to the Bizarre)”. In: *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*. p. 23–53.

3. Each believes that the intentions in 1 are persistence interdependent and that if the intentions in 1 do persist we will J by way of those intentions and relevant mutual responsiveness.

This helps support the idea that in shared intention each participant can sensibly see each person's intention as settling whether they J.

4. The intentions in 1 are persistence interdependent.

While one of our intentions may well precede that of the other, once these intentions are in place the persistence of each depends, other things equal, on the persistence of the other. This interdependence may, but need not, be based on relevant mutual moral obligations grounded in assurances and the like.

5. All these conditions are out in the open/common knowledge among us.

So there is a public basis for our thinking together about how we are to J.

These conditions constitute a public structure of interconnected intentions of each. The conceptual, metaphysical, and normative resources on which these conditions draw (with the possible exception of the out-in-the-open condition) are available within the framework of the planning theory of individual planning agents who know about each other's minds and actions. And the fundamental claim of the book is that when this structure of intentions of each functions in accordance with the rationality norms of the planning theory of individual agency it thereby realizes the roles characteristic of shared intention in part by way of conformity to the associated social rationality norms.

In partial support of this claim, note that we are supposing that each *intends* the joint J-ing by way of the other's intention, mutual responsiveness, and meshing sub-plans. It is not just that each intends his part and expects the other to play her part. So the rational pressure on each to make her plans coherent and consistent ensures rational pressure on each to support the success of the joint activity and the effective, meshing role of the other in that activity. Given my intention that we J by way of your intention, mutual responsiveness, and meshing sub-plans, I am under rational pressure to coordinate with you, to support your role – perhaps by way of helping actions – and to avoid ways of acting that are incompatible with all that. And similarly for you. These rational pressures on each, pressures grounded in the rationality norms of individual planning agency, induce, given these distinctive contents and inter-relations, pressures in the direction of social coherence and consistency, and associated social coordination and effectiveness, pressures that are characteristic of shared intentionality. And when this structure of intentions of each in fact leads to our J-ing by way of relevant mutual responsiveness (and thereby satisfies the connection condition), there is shared intentional activity.

It is important that each may participate in such a shared intention for different reasons. Perhaps I participate in our shared intention to paint the house because I cannot stand the color, whereas you participate because you cannot stand the mildew. And while such a shared intention to J involves individual subjects of relevant intentions that we J, it need not involve a group subject who intends to J.

Given such a shared intention, each is under rational pressure to seek to ensure that the sub-plans of each, agglomerated together, both are adequate to the shared task and do indeed mesh. In the absence so far of adequate and meshing sub-plans, the shared intention will tend to structure bargaining and/or shared deliberation in the pursuit of such sub-plans.

Such shared deliberation is itself a shared intentional activity, one that will typically involve the joint application of shared commitments to weights for the shared deliberation. We can model such shared commitments as themselves forms of shared intention, namely: shared policies about relevant weights. Such shared policies about weights can build on agreement in evaluative judgment. But sometimes such shared policies will screen out certain kinds of evaluative consensus; and sometimes they will go beyond prior evaluative consensus. There can be shared policies about weights that do not directly correspond to agreement in evaluative judgment, and these shared policies can help make shared deliberation more determinate and more likely to support needs for mesh. And the reasons for which each participates in these shared policies can diverge.

Such a network of shared intentions and shared policies constitutes a common ground, one that goes beyond common knowledge. This common ground can support shared thought and action even while allowing for divergence in relevant evaluative judgment and/or in the reasons for which each participates. Guidance by this common ground can be a form of shared self-governance; and our positive evaluation of such shared self-governance may help support the stability of this common ground. And a central claim of my book is that the planning theory gives us theoretical resources that enable us to model the shared intentions and shared policies that constitute this common ground.