## Book Review Open Access

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**Margaret Gilbert:** *Joint Commitment: How We Make the Social World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013, 464 pp.

Reviewed by *Matti Heinonen*

What is common between two people going for a walk together, the fusion of two agents into a married couple, and the constitution of the European Union? According to the *philosopher of social phenomena* (the label of her choice for the field of research that is also known as social ontology and collective intentionality theory) Margaret Gilbert, these are all phenomena of *joint commitment*. The various papers collected together in her new collection of essays are dedicated to demonstrating the importance of joint commitment as an explanatory and interpretive concept in a variety of social domains, which range from the constitution of political society to garden variety forms of acting together in everyday life.

The primitive conceptual component of joint commitment sets her philosophical approach to the social world apart – in substance and detail, if not in spirit – from other theories of the social world put forth in recent years by philosophers of social ontology such as Raimo Tuomela (2013), Christian List, and Philip Pettit (List and Pettit 2011). Furthermore, it marks the crucial conceptual difference between her account and its most important theoretical rival in the domain of small-scale shared agency, the constructivist approach advocated by Michael Bratman (2014). The introduction to Gilbert's collection of essays opens up with a remark that seems to be addressed to Bratman and his followers:

> Philosophers often appeal to *Ockham's Razor*: "entities are not to be multiplied beyond necessity". Many would also say the same about ideas: if you are trying to explain something, do so in familiar terms, stick with the tried and true... over the course of the past twenty years or so I have come ever more firmly to believe that a number of branches of contemporary philosophy, as well as other disciplines, stand to benefit from the introduction of a particular new idea... The idea in question is what I have labeled *joint commitment*. (p. 1)

The approach to social phenomena that Gilbert opposes is what she calls *singularism* – the view that social phenomena can be analysed solely in terms of the personal intentional states and actions of individual agents. She regards both

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David Lewis (1969), who analysed convention in terms of the personal beliefs and preferences of individual agents (Essay 9: "Social Convention Revisited"), and Michael Bratman, who has analysed shared intention in terms of interlocking complexes of individual beliefs and intentions (Essay 5: "Two Approaches to Shared Intention"), as representatives of singularism. More generally, she regards the game-theoretic approach to social phenomena, which she describes as being guided by the "me watching you watching me" –principle (p. 4), as emblematic of singularism. However, she does not only wish to supplement game theory with a richer and more complete framework of individual agency – as other adversaries of simple belief-desire psychology (including Bratman) have done – but to supplement it with a framework that involves irreducible appeal to the notion of joint commitment in particular.

One might worry about the broad range of views that Gilbert lumps together under the label of singularism in order to put her own theory under a more favourable light. It is not obvious that the mathematical formalism of game theory cannot represent the actions of social groups without appealing to the notion of joint commitment (Bacharach 1999). Furthermore, it is far from obvious that the causal role analysis of intentional states – which many philosophers of functionalist persuasion, including Bratman, have made use of – must be restricted to the intentional states and actions of individual agents (List and Pettit 2011). By applying the label of singularism to these rather different and versatile philosophical positions, Gilbert seems to be making things too easy for herself and failing to confront her most serious theoretical adversaries.

The charge that Gilbert directs against singularism does not depend so much on an argument as on an intuition. She contends that singularism (as she understands it) is unable to account for important social phenomena, which range from the mundane (such as walking together) to the profoundly significant (such as the bonds of a loving relationship) and the institutionally inevitable (such as the rules and regulations that are inscribed in law). Gilbert claims that these apparently different phenomena are similar to the extent that they all involve the tendency of the agents to "emulate, by virtue of the actions of all, a single phi-er" (p. 7) – where phi-ing stands for forms of thought and action that are appropriate to the social context.

Gilbert's intuition about the fusion that she takes to be intrinsic to joint action stems from normative rather than from psychological considerations. Thus she claims that when two people engage in some form of joint activity one is (ceteris paribus) obligated to the other to perform her part of the activity and the other has the standing to rebuke her if she fails to perform appropriately. Such normative ties are assumed to be brought about when the parties each express, in conditions of common knowledge, their willingness to be jointly

committed to a particular action or attitude content. Although the joint commitment is brought about by psychological and behavioural processes, the result of these processes is accordingly a new kind of normative fact that involves an irreducible social bond.

The strong reliance on philosophical intuition in arguing for the importance of joint commitment is something that seems to put some of Gilbert's claims in the book into a methodological bind. Suppose that one does not share her intuition that joint commitment is an important everyday concept or that social phenomena have an irreducible kind of normativity attached to them. In that case, Gilbert seems to lack an argument to turn one's head around. Yet there is surely more room for theoretical manoeuvre here. Other philosophers have argued for the introduction of group concepts to social science on the basis of general explanatory and theoretical considerations, rather than on the basis of philosophical intuition alone (List and Pettit 2011; Tuomela 2013).

However, that is not Gilbert's strategy. Rather, she endorses a Weberian approach to social science, according to which social science ought to be framed primarily in terms of the concepts and ideas that inform the actions of the individual agents, who populate the social world. Yet it seems to remain an open question, even after reading through the compelling essays collected together in her book, whether ordinary people share the conception of social phenomena that Gilbert finds intuitive. Insofar as her account indeed purports to elucidate what ordinary people mean when they talk about "our convention" (Essay 9: "Social Convention Revisited") or "our belief" (Essay 7: "Collective Epistemology"), the tenability of her ideas ought to be investigated by a combination of empirical and philosophical means, rather than by philosophical intuition alone.

This being said, Gilbert's account of social phenomena might easily serve as a first step towards a philosophically informed empirical research program. While Gilbert contends that people may possess a concept without being able to articulate it, this hardly means that concept possession cannot be empirically investigated. Indeed, behavioural scientists have often been successful in coming up with experimental paradigms to tease out concepts that are only implicitly possessed. At times, they have been assisted in this task by philosophers. One can only hope that the essays collected in the present volume might inspire more naturalistically minded philosophers and practicing social scientists to think through the repercussions of her views in more empirical detail.

Overall, the present collection of essays serves as a valuable resource to scholars in a variety of disciplines, as well as ordinary people, who have an interest in the everyday phenomena that Gilbert discusses with much insight and illumination. Given that there is substantial overlap between the essays in the collection, the reader is best served by focusing on the parts of the book that she finds the

most interesting. In addition to papers that the reader may previously be familiar with, the collection also includes two previously unpublished essays and a number of papers that have been previously available only in hard-to-find edited volumes. While most of the essays in the collection have been published during the last ten years, there are some older papers and one paper on love and marriage dates back all the way to 1990 (Essay 11: "Fusion: Sketch of a Contractual Model"). On the whole, the book is an enjoyable read and can be recommended to a broad-ranging audience.

## Bibliography

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