Dimensions of Shared Agency

A Study on Joint, Collective and Group Intentional Action

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Acknowledgments

Introduction

1. The topic

The notion of shared agency is at the core of many philosophical debates, such as social philosophy, philosophy of mind, action theory, and social ontology. In particular, social ontology, a crosscutting area of research, is interested in shared agency due to its double relation with the social environment. On the one hand, shared agency is important for how we make the social world: our doing things together powers the establishment of rules and patterns of behavior, shaping the social context. In this sense, the creation of social institutions is one of the most fundamental issues investigated. On the other hand, shared agency helps to understand to what extent the social world might affect how we, as human beings, act together. The question is about the influence that both institutional and habitual regulations have on agency, be it individual or shared with others. Assuming agency is described as an intentional behavior, rationally oriented towards action, 'shared agency' refers to all phenomena where two or more individuals act together intentionally. Developing thorough explanations accounting for how we act together intentionally is complex, and the contemporary debate has proposed a variety of frameworks that are sometimes complementary and other times at odds with one another.

This book endeavors to explore some of the most influential theories of shared agency, concentrating primarily on the proposals of 'the Big Five of Social Ontology'—Michael E. Bratman, Margaret Gilbert, John R. Searle, Raimo Tuomela, and Philip Pettit (considered mainly for his works with Christian List).[1] This investigation pursues three main purposes: first, it intends to offer a critical survey of some of the most influential theories of shared action and provide an original conceptual framework suited to capture points of consensus and conflict emerging between different accounts. Second, the book attempts to establish whether the theories in question also aim to approach shared agency in terms of group agency and ascertain

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[1] The group of theorists including Bratman, Gilbert, Tuomela, Searle, and Pettit can be found in Chant, Hindriks & Preyer (2014) as 'the Big Five of social ontology'. Although the present investigation refers primarily to the pieces Pettit has written together with List, the expression 'Big Five' is not changed into 'Big Six', because it is beyond the scope of this book to account for what Pettit and List have been writing individually. The fifth in my list will thus be the plural subject formed by List and Pettit taken together.

whether this shift (if any) is adequately supported. I will establish that not all of the Big Five aim to approach shared agency as group agency. Authors who take this path propose theories that, in some regards, do not match the theoretical desideratum. Therefore, the third objective is to sketch a non-reductive account based on a functional and performative notion of agency that applies to both individual-sized and group-sized forms of agency.

Each chapter pursues each goal, respectively, from first to third. Part One provides a critical survey of different accounts of shared agency, aiming to clarify how two or more individuals can act together intentionally and how extensive previous explanations of shared agency have been. Part One focuses intensively on the theory of Bratman, Gilbert, Searle, and Tuomela, known as 'the Big Four of Collective Intentionality' (Chant, Hindriks & Preyer 2014).[2] They have illuminated the question of shared agency by providing indispensable explanations and theoretical tools to account for how two or more individuals act together intentionally. Part Two considers shared agency in terms of group agency and asks whether the subject of group agency is the individuals who contribute to the performance or the group that they form. As the scope broadens, the Big Four's analysis is enriched by List and Pettit's proposal (2011). Part Two then moves to discuss the contributions of the Big Five. The question then becomes: has someone from the Big Five of social ontology offered a group-level account of shared agency? By 'group-level account', I mean an account that defends the idea that sometimes groups, not individuals, are the subject of intentions and actions. Part Three explores the received accounts by showing how adhering to a particular form of individualism has undermined most attempts to treat groups as agents. The thesis developed here is to drop such an individualistic premise and offer a functionalist and performative notion of agent: an agent is what is capable of agency. In the wake of Carol Rovane's action theory (Rovane 1998, 2004, 2014), I will maintain that in so far as social groups can act intentionally—by committing to a rational plan—they can be regarded as agents. It is only in these cases that shared agency can be regarded as group agency.

To begin, we need to establish what shared agency is. There are various occurrences that intuitively cause us to suppose that two or more individuals do something together. Here are just some of many possible examples: looking out the window, one can see people walking and chatting with one

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[2] 'Big Four' thus denotes the group of philosophers who focused specifically on collective action. 'Big Five' denotes the Big Four in addition to Pettit (here, List and Pettit) as a group interested more generally in social ontology and agency in collective and group contexts.

another, friends grabbing a coffee together, children crossing the street in line by pairs, and neighbors greeting each other. One can also think about more complex contexts of agency happening in private life and at work. In those circumstances, it is common to experience situations where obtaining a goal is a complex challenge that can be easily overcome through a concert of individual contributions rather than by a single individual effort. Meeting strict deadlines, moving heavy obstacles, and preparing amazing shows are just some targets better reached with the help of others. Sometimes, it may also happen that people act together moved by altruistic motives, feelings of solidarity, or empathy. Contrariwise, one might do something with others instrumentally, aiming for a particular goal. Other times people share an action just by obeying pre-existing rules or customs, unaware that the act implies collective efforts. For instance, standing in line at the supermarket is not a matter of deliberation; we stand together and wait for our turn because we are habituated and expected to do it. It is a custom, and respecting that custom can be seen as a way of acting together—although no joint action was voluntarily started. Shared agency may also arise from intimate relationships binding individuals together, as in the case of individuals getting married, becoming friends, or business partners. Another interesting phenomenon concerns worshippers, people who do something together by praying to the same God in which everyone believes. Setting differences aside, all these examples have at least one thing in common: each describes a performance in which several individual contributions are conducive to the same goal. Nevertheless, the scenario may be different and concern "cases of joint action with an inbuilt element of conflict" (Tuomela 2000, p. 7). For example, in the case of a tennis match, the activity requires two or more players, rules, the referee, a suitable court, and the right equipment; moreover, the expected end of playing together is based on each individual's aim to defeat the opponent(s) and win the match. This example demonstrates that shared agency sometimes involves competition.

The list is long and could even be longer. By allowing our imagination to run wild and find examples of shared agency without restraints, we might end up with a bountiful variety of situations where two or more people do something together. Still, the diversification offered by empirical descriptions is not the only source of complexity. To the variety of ways people act with others, we should further consider the various dimensions that emerge from the observer's perspective and situatedness. In fact, if we were to focus our research on a single definition of 'acting together', such as 'collective actions pursuing some common goal', the entire reflection may dismiss some classes of examples not involving a shared aim, like in the tennis case. Thus, the expression 'shared agency' will be used to identify only events of a specific sort while excluding others. Although it is not possible, or even productive, to eliminate the

specificity imposed by the theory, it is essential to consider that different approaches use the same concept in ways that do not always overlap and sometimes have distinct meanings. This is the reason why different theories apply the same expression to domains that may differ from one another.

A cornerstone of this work is to investigate philosophical concepts without overlooking their theoretical standpoint and explanatory power. Thus, the next section delineates the philosophical perspective from which the concept of shared agency is defined, analyzed, and criticized in this book. Broadly, the philosophical approach is grounded in the contemporary debate in social ontology and situated within the analytical branch. Although this general perspective encompasses many variables, some common points make it feasible to merge several theories into a single approach. The most important point of consensus is the *intentionalistic model of action*, adopted by most analytical accounts.

2. The debate

Social ontology is a regional ontology that attempts "to put to use the rigorous tools of philosophical ontology in the development of category systems which can be of use in the formalization and systematization of knowledge of a given domain" (Zaibert & Smith 2007, p. 1). In particular, the domain of social ontology can be identified through the social world, a realm formed by the totality of individuals, relationships, groups of people, institutions and all other patterns of behavior that are a part of society. To better specify the scope, we need some preliminary clarifications about the specific concerns associated with the discipline. There are many different branches, varyingly characterized by specific methodological choices, tasks, and background references.[3]

First, there is social ontology of phenomenology, rooted in the Münich and Göttingen Circles, particularly in the doctrine of Edmund G. A. Husserl (1973, 1975, 1984), Max Scheler (1954), and Adolf P. B. Reinach (1989). These philosophers studied the experience of the subject and the nature of the object, referring to the notions of consciousness and intentionality—two constitutive moments of social objects, subjects, and the relationship between the two poles.[4] Second, and strictly intertwined with the phenomenological approach, there are discussions in social ontology close to the philosophy of law. This branch is related to theorists such as Reinach

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[3] For a thorough introduction to the discipline, see Epstein 2018.
[4] About phenomenological social ontology, see Andina 2016, Salice 2013, Salice & Smith 2016.

(1989), Wilhelm A. J. Schapp (1930, 1959), and Czeslaw Znamierowski (1912), who devoted their research to the study of social entities—including laws, codes, norms, and institutions—characterized by normative features. Third, agency and social entities/structures have been studied in connection with one another by the proponents of critical realism (Archer 1995, 1998a, 1998b, 2010, Bhaskar 1998, Bhaskar & Lawson 1998, Elder-Vass 2007, 2010, 2014), a line of thought in contemporary sociology intertwined with social philosophy and action theory.

In addition, social ontology can be associated with critical theory. For example, György Lukács' ontology of social reality (1984) proposed an ontology concerning the reality established through human labor and the modifications it enacts on the natural and causally determined world.[5] Critical theory has also helped advance another way of reasoning related to the development of analytical social ontology, which spread notably among the exponents of the second Frankfurt School generation. The approach is the one drawn on John L. Austin's speech acts theory (1962) and embraced in Jürgen Habermas' theory of communicative action (1981a, 1981b). Apart from being true or false, the guideline is that some statements can represent a proper way of acting due to three main features: locutory, illocutory, and performative power. The first aspect concerns the production of a meaningful linguistic expression; the second element involves the action performed by the speaker in uttering that phrase; while the third is related to the power of the speech act to affect the audience and change the way things are. These features are typical of utterances expressed by performative verbs such as promising, asserting, claiming, forgiving, etc., which do not have any true or false value. Take, for example, the statement: 'I assert that the race is on'. This assertion communicates a meaning (locutory act), i.e., the beginning of the race; it expresses the intention to start the game (illocutory act); and it makes the race begin (performative act). Speaking out the statement consists of doing something and impacting the social world.

Speech act theory is important to introduce the analytical perspective into social ontology, which has found its starting point precisely in the study of language and the human capacity to make things with words. In particular, John R. Searle's contribution (1995) deeply impacted the debate on the construction, composition, and nature of social reality, influencing philosophers of mind, epistemologists, and researchers interested in

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[5] On the relation between analytical social ontology and critical theory, see Testa 2015, 2016.

decision and game theory.[6] Briefly, Searle's philosophy of language holds that "speaking in a language is a matter of performing illocutionary acts with certain intentions, according to constitutive rules. These constitutive rules typically have the form 'X counts as Y', or 'X counts as Y in C'" (Searle 2002, p. 4). To speak in a language means saying things that one intends to do, while being formed by constitutive rules, and having the performative power to generate a new state of affairs, which is then represented in the mental attitude as Y.[7] While the X of constitutive rules represents a physical object (e.g., a piece of paper), Y indicates a new mind-dependent function covered by X (e.g., money) in context C (e.g., this piece of paper now counts as money in the context). The power of language is to add a new function to a slice of the world that did not have that meaning before the intention to implement it (Searle 2014).[8] Therefore, social ontology's main object is the mind-dependent world, considered as the portion of reality populated by functions, norms, and institutions, constructed by human language and interaction.[9] The core of Searle's theory asserts that the act of making something with language is an intrinsically collective performance, which gains its power through shared understandings by many individuals in context C.[10] In this sense, shared agency is involved in the creation,

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[6] For a comprehensive introduction to Searle's philosophy, see Smith 2003.

[7] For the sake of simplicity, I use the expression 'constitutive rule' as mentioned in the quote (Searle 1995, 2002). It is worth noting that Searle subsequently modified and replaced the notion with the broader concept of declaration, which embraces a richer variety of ways of accepting status functions (cf., Searle 2010, pp. 19–24).

[8] In addition to standard cases in which a status function (Y) is attributed to a physical object, Searle has considered free-standing Y terms existing as long as "a status function is created without there being an existing person or object who is counted as the bearer of the status" (Searle 2010, p. 20). Examples of free-standing Y terms are corporations, electronic money, and blindfold chess. In response to Smith's critique (2003), taking freestanding Y terms to be exceptions to Searle's former account of constitutive rules, in Searle (2010, pp. 97–100) those cases are treated as characteristic products of complex societies, where collective intentionality is somehow integrated with the exercise of individual imagination. Thus, the declarations involved in the creation of any status function can generate social facts that are not based on prior brute facts.

[9] An introduction to social objects is offered by Gallotti & Michael 2014, especially, Gallotti 2014 and Guala 2014.

[10] Sharing an intention has a weak meaning on Searle's view as it regards the belief that other individuals in C may participate in the effort planned by the intention. The collective nature of the action is fixed by the form of the attitude, 'we-intention', which is a trait of individual psychology. Cooperating with others is not necessary for the exercise of collective intentionality (Searle 1990, 1995, 2007, 2010). Searle's perspective will be explored in Section 2.2.

maintenance, and modification of objects generated by declarations and classified as mind-dependent entities (Searle 2003).[11]

Shared agency is not only a structuring element of the social world, but it is also structured by such reality and regulated by established practices, customs, and institutions. Accordingly, shared agency refers to performances carried out by two or more individuals together and through the mediation of social facts. The presence of a normative regulation may determine some sort of organization in the context, which allows complex ways of doing things together. When doing things together in these contexts, everyone plays a role and participates in the action, bearing a function that is fixed by the system of rules and realizable by anyone who is suitable.[12]

3. The theory

Current accounts in analytical social ontology investigate shared agency by adopting the doctrine of intentionality. This theory is a philosophical model approaching the study of human behavior that has acquired its full dignity in the contemporary debate, especially after the theory's diffusion through the innovative works proposed by Elizabeth Anscombe (1957) and Donald Davidson (1963, 1970).[13] According to Anscombe, an intention is the reason for someone to do something—the reason for the action—which makes an intentional action an action "to which a certain sense of the question 'why?' has application" (Anscombe 1957, p. 11). This means that intentional actions are those events of human behavior for which the agent can account. Insofar as a particular action has been done for a reason, we can ask the agent why she has acted in that way, and since the action was an intentional one, the agent should be able to give us an answer—making it possible to hold the agent responsible for her actions. Similarly, Davidson maintains that an action is intentional if and only if the event (i.e., the action or the activity of doing it) can be considered and described as something done for a reason. For Davidson, "a reason rationalizes the action only if it leads us to see something the agent saw, or thought he saw, in the action—some feature, consequence or aspect of the action the agent wanted, desired, prized […]" (Davidson 1963, p. 685). Importantly, in order to take an agent's action as an accountable

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[11] On collective intentionality and the creation of the social world, see Seddone 2014. For an analysis and critique regarding the strict focus on collective intentionality, see Ylikoski & Mäkelä 2002.

[12] On complex forms of social behavior see, among others, Descombes 2011, Hodgson 2007b, List & Pettit 2011, Thomasson 2002, Tuomela 2007, 2013a.

[13] A concise introduction to intentional agency can be found in De Caro 2008, pp. 111–134.

event, a description must be provided based on which the agent is moved to action by a goal that she wanted to realize.[14]

A major part of the debate in social ontology has followed a similar intentionalistic framework by combining it with some principles of speech acts theory, particularly the importance of language in the making of the social world.[15] As Searle first suggested, the unique way in which humans communicate and give a structure to their life represents a primary feature in establishing what is social and what is physical. Socially created aspects are set through performative language use, which is the act people realize by attributing a specific function (e.g., money) to a neutral object, such as a piece of paper chosen to become a form of currency. In this sense, when people recognize the existence of a new object in the context, they are acting together. Their action consists of the performance they realize by sharing and uttering their common intention as it happens, for example, with the intention to make some piece of paper function as a form of currency. Thus, the intention is a mental attitude expressed by the speech act and connected with the willingness to do what the speech act effectively says and does. In other words, the intention can be described as a mental state representing (in a proposition) the task the agent wants to realize through the action, be it a verbal or physical performance.

Following this line of thought, Searle assumes that "an intentional action is simply the condition of satisfaction of an intention" (Searle 1983, p. 80). Apart from offering a different formulation of the issue, this statement focuses on at least three aspects characterizing the intentionalistic model of agency: the action, the mental state, and its conditions of satisfaction.[16] Let us start with the mental state, i.e., the intention. According to Searle, an intention for the

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[14] The emphasis on accountability explains why intentional actions have been considered so important to become almost the exclusive focus of action theory. The fact that we can describe an action by attributing some willingness or rational guidance to the agent is the aspect that makes the action a relevant topic of research, especially in relation to moral and ethical issues (De Caro 2008).

[15] The book focuses specifically on the 'rationalistic' side of the debate, but it is worth mentioning that part of social ontology that has also considered aspects pertaining to the emotional and phenomenological experience of the subjects. The contributions of Hans-Bernard Schmid are particularly interesting in this regard (see Schmid 2009, 2014, 2017a, 2017b).

[16] It is important to observe that Searle rejects Davidson's idea that an action is intentional insofar as it is describable in terms of intentionality. Searle thinks that what is relevant is not the way of describing something but the nature of that something, i.e., the mental attitude (Searle 1980, pp. 47–70).

action is a kind of attitude which, together with desires, beliefs, and other mental states, shows a propositional form: 'I intend to do *x*' or 'I intend *x*'. Meaning that an intention for an action requires a subject having the attitude in mind, an external object to which the mental state refers, and a content that is the mental representation of the object. Moreover, the intentional attitude has a form that indicates the specific way in which the subject is relating herself to the object (the *x* term) when she is intentionally approaching it (Crane 2014). In this sense, an intention for the action has the form of a mental state planning for the action. This kind of reference makes the intentional case a specific one; if we consider other attitudes, for instance, beliefs and desires, the way of approaching the *x* term would present a different situation. Take the case of a belief. Here the subject has the mental state 'I believe that *x*' or 'I believe *x*', where *x* represents the object of the word with which the subject has a relation of believing it. For a belief to be satisfied, the content of the mental state must correspond with the object it wants to represent. Thus, if the mental state is 'I believe that it is raining', such a mental state will be satisfied—it will be true—only if the state of affairs in the world confirms the attitude's content. That said, it is easy to observe that intentions for the action work otherwise.

> Unlike beliefs and desires (broadly construed), the conditions of satisfaction of intentions are not mere states of affairs that coincide with the representational contents of the intentional state. These states of affairs must in addition be appropriately caused by the intentional state of intending, and agents who intend them must also wish that their intentional state of intending causes the appropriate state of affairs in the appropriate ways. The condition of satisfaction of an intention refers back to the representational contents of the intention. (Zeibert 2003, p. 212)

To rephrase, an intention for the action is satisfied insofar as the intention itself makes the agent do what the content represents as the intended action (performative power). If the action is realized by someone else or by the subject herself only by chance, the mental state will not be satisfied. In order for the intention to be fulfilled, it is necessary for it to play a causal role in the performance of the action. In this sense, "a given human behavior counts as an action, if and only if an agent having the intention to perform the action in question has caused it" (Schulte-Ostermann 2008, p. 191). As stated by Anscombe, the intention is the reason why a certain

activity has been performed, and according to Searle, such an activity is what makes the intention realized.[17]

The notion of intentionality can be related to agency in several ways to generate, as Searle suggests, various kinds of intentional attitudes. First, there is the prior-intention, "that is the intention that one forms prior to the performance of an intentional action" (Searle 2010, p. 33), otherwise called the plan for the action and considered the outcome of the process of deliberation that leads the agent to the formation of the attitude in question. Additionally, there is the occurrence that Searle has named intention-in-action, which indicates a primitive and actual component of the action: "it is the psychological event that accompanies the bodily movement when I successfully perform an intentional action involving a bodily movement" (Searle 2010, p. 33). While prior-intentions come before the action, intentions-in-action happen with the performance itself.[18] Moreover, for an intentional action to be realized, a condition where (one or more) intentions-in-action are present is always necessary, whereas prior-intentions can be missing (as in the case of extemporary behaviors). The point is that one can do something without having planned it before, as the intentional character of the action will be guaranteed by the presence of intentions-in-action that occur even in the absence of full awareness. Further, by comparing and contrasting the two intentional phenomena, it becomes clear that they require different conditions of satisfaction. For example, if I plan to eat an apple, my prior intention will be satisfied by me eating the piece of fruit. Differently, intentions-in-action require me moving my hand to grasp the apple and then moving it again to lift it to my lips: these conditions of satisfaction will be encountered if and only if I effectively make the gestures the conditions prescribe.[19]

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[17] According to Bratman there should be something more than the conditions of satisfaction that make intentions special mental states. Bratman proposes a distinction between intentions and other volitional attitudes (such as beliefs and desires) and connects intentions with the function of planning the action. The plan is a background framework on which the agent can weigh her beliefs and desires for and against the action. While beliefs and desires provide reasons concerning the action, intentions have the power to move the agent, to control her conduct, and to have an influence on it. Intentions create expectations that other attitudes do not generate (Bratman 1987, 1990).

[18] On the notion of intention-in-action, see McDowell 2011.

[19] In general, it is not necessary for the agent to be aware of the mental phenomenon involved in the action. Even though it is always possible to focus on the content of a mental state, such an acknowledgment is not necessitated by the event. Unaware intentions are more frequent in the case of intentions-in-action, while intentional plans—as the results of a deliberation process—are generally clear to the agent (Searle 2010, Crane 2014).

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