

# THE IMPERSISTENCE OF JOINT COMMITMENTS

Line Edslev Andersen, Aarhus University

Hanne Andersen, University of Copenhagen

## **Abstract**

The phenomenon of shared intention has received much attention in the philosophy of mind and action. Margaret Gilbert (1989, 2000c, 2014b) argues that a shared intention to do A consists in a joint commitment to intend to do A. But we need to know more about the nature of joint commitments to know what exactly this implies. While the persistence of joint commitments has received much attention in the literature, their *impersistence* has received very little attention. In this paper, we shed light on the impersistence of joint commitments by showing how joint commitments can be dissolved by unexpected events.

## **Keywords**

Joint commitment, Margaret Gilbert, shared intentionality, joint action

## 1. Introduction

Since the late 1980s, collective or shared intentionality has been the subject of sustained discussion in the philosophy of mind and action. Important early contributions include Bratman (1992, 1993), Gilbert (1989, 2000c), Searle (1990), and Tuomela and Miller (1988). Most of the discussion is focused on the intentionality of joint action, i.e. on the shared intentionality expressed by a sentence such as “We intend to go for a walk together.” Some argue that the intentionality of joint action can be given a reductive account and understood in terms of individual intentionality (e.g., Tuomela and Miller 1988; Bratman 1993, 1999; Tuomela 2005). Michael Bratman, for example, holds that individual intentions of the form “I intend that we A” are the basis of the intentionality of joint action (1993, 106).

While Bratman gives an account of shared intentions in terms of individual intentions, others argue against such reductive accounts (e.g., Searle 1990; Meijers 2003; Roth 2004; Gilbert 2014b). Margaret Gilbert denies that a shared intention to do A has as its core personal intentions to do A together. On her account, it is not even necessary for X and Y to share an intention to do A that either personally intends that they do A (2014b, 102–6). She argues that a shared intention to do A consists in a joint commitment to intend as a body to do A. When and only when the members of some group G are jointly committed to intend as a body to do A, do they have a shared intention to do A according to Gilbert. For the parties to be jointly committed to intend as a body to do A, they must be jointly committed to emulate, by virtue of the actions of each, a single body that intends to do A. Gilbert labels her account “the plural subject account of shared intention,” since those who are jointly committed to something constitute what she calls a “plural subject” (2014b, 114–18).

Joint commitments form the corner stone of Gilbert’s account of social phenomena as it has been developed since her 1989 book *On Social Facts*. Not only can there be joint commitments to intend as a body to do something. There can also be joint commitments to believe as a body that something is the case, to accept as a body a particular rule, and so on. Hence, a joint commitment is the commitment of a group as one body to do something where ‘do’ is to be understood in a very broad sense so as to include intend, believe, accept, etc. This means that a joint commitment is the commitment of a group to emulate, by virtue of the actions of all, a single doer of that thing. Note that this does not require the participants to be personally committed to what the group is committed to. For example, the group can be committed to believe that p without the group members personally believing that p.

On Gilbert's account, a joint commitment is formed when the group members have expressed their personal willingness to be party to it, if only tacitly, and this is common knowledge between them. When a joint commitment has been formed, each party to the joint commitment has an obligation towards the others to act in accordance with the commitment. If one of them violates the joint commitment, the others gain the standing to rebuke her and may sometimes even exclude her from the group (Gilbert 2014b, 118). A joint commitment can only be rescinded with the concurrence of all the parties and individual parties to the commitment cannot rescind from it unilaterally without getting the others' permission. Gilbert thus writes that "when two or more persons are jointly committed to intend as a body to do X, then if either wishes to act contrary to the intention, they will need to get the permission of the other parties to the joint commitment so to act, or they will be – in one respect – at fault" (2003, 47). Consequently, joint commitments can be very persistent and act as strong behavioral constraints on Gilbert's account. They incline people to act in certain ways to avoid the risk of rebuke for violating them.

To motivate that a shared intention to do A consists in a joint commitment to intend as a body to do A, Gilbert offers the example of Queenie and Rom who intend to do some shopping together in a neighboring town. In order to get to the shops before they close, they must walk at a certain pace. But when they are halfway there, Queenie begins to lag behind. In a tone of mild rebuke Rom says, "Can you hurry up a bit? We won't be able to get any shopping done at this rate!" Queenie says "Sorry!" and catches up to him. She stops only a little later, however, and announces, "That's it! I'm not going any further!" Gilbert writes that, "Rom is likely to be taken aback. Whatever he says, his thoughts may well run along these lines: 'You can't just decide to stop here, not just like that!'" (2014b, 106). Gilbert suggests that this is because Queenie is violating an obligation she has towards Rom by virtue of their shared intention to go shopping together. Had Queenie sought his permission to stop and said something along the lines of "Do you mind that I stop here?" his reaction would have been different (2014b, 105–11). According to Gilbert, this suggests that Queenie and Rom's shared intention consists in a joint commitment to intend as a body to do some shopping together.

Gilbert's own work emphasizes the persistence of joint commitments. She has written almost nothing about the impersistence of joint commitments, although she acknowledges the importance of examining this topic (we return to this in the next section). One may thus easily get the impression that joint commitments are more persistent than they actually are.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Gilbert (2000a) also focuses on the implications of the *persistence* of joint commitments when examining the role of joint commitments in science. She argues that joint commitments to *beliefs* in a certain sense play a negative role in science. Scientists who are

In this paper, we shed light on the imperistence of joint commitments. We shall assume that Gilbertian joint commitments exist and provide an extension, not a revision, of Gilbert's account of joint commitment. In doing so, we focus on situated joint commitments and discuss how joint commitments behave relative to each other and as instances of one social phenomenon among other social and natural phenomena (such as division of labor or physical conditions). We argue that an unexpected event under some circumstances indirectly dissolves a joint commitment by enabling one or more parties to the joint commitment to violate it without the risk of rebuke. How persistent a joint commitment is in the face of an unexpected event depends on the nature of the unexpected event and the circumstances and content of the joint commitment.

By providing a fuller picture of joint commitments, we are able to respond to at least some of the criticism raised against the plural subject account of shared intention. Some philosophers have suggested that it is implausible that rescinding a shared intention requires concurrence on everyone's part (Roth 2011, sect. 2; Schweikard and Schmid 2013, sect. 3.3). However, as we will argue, participants in a joint commitment can under some circumstances violate the commitment without the risk of rebuke and its violation often dissolves the commitment. Hence, while rescinding a joint commitment requires concurrence on everyone's part, dissolving a joint commitment does not. This provides a response to the criticism that rescinding a shared intention does not require concurrence on everyone's part, since the critics seem to make no distinction between 'rescinding' and 'dissolving' a shared intention.

Others have criticized the obligations of conformity that shared intentions generate on the plural subject account. Gilbert claims that these obligations are absolute in the sense that they persist as long as the corresponding joint commitment persists (1996, 299). According to the critics, such absolute obligations are not necessary for a shared intention (Bratman 1999, 125–29; Tuomela 2005, 332–33; Alonso 2009, 445–47). In particular, many believe that the no-unilateral withdrawal condition is too strong (cf. Roth 2011, sect. 4). While obligations inhere in joint commitments and thus in Gilbertian shared intentions, our argument that these obligations can sometimes be violated without the risk of rebuke may also provide a line of defense against the criticism that absolute obligations in Gilbert's sense are not necessary for a shared intention.

Consequently, the described criticisms of the plural subject account of shared intention do not necessarily give us reason to reject this account. In general, this

---

participants in a joint commitment to some belief are obligated not to question that belief and this may incline them to ignore recalcitrant evidence. Joint commitments to beliefs thus come to act as a brake on scientific change on Gilbert's account.

paper strengthens the plural subject account of shared intention by shedding new light on the level of persistence of joint commitments. But we do not want to argue that the plural subject account is necessarily the most adequate account of the general phenomenon of shared intention. Tollefsen and Dale (2012) convincingly argue that we may need all of the accounts of shared intention mentioned above to understand the complex phenomena of shared intention and joint action. Tollefsen and Dale argue that lower-level cognitive processes give rise to and are influenced by the type of higher-level processes described in the philosophical accounts of shared intention and, one would expect, give rise to a variety of them. A next step is to empirically test the philosophical accounts using cognitive data. For this reason, the implications of having a joint commitment to intend something are worthy of examination even if the plural subject account does not adequately capture the general phenomenon of shared intention.

## **2. Gilbert on the Impersistence of Joint Commitments**

Gilbert has focused on the persistence of joint commitments and written very little about the impersistence of joint commitments. While a joint commitment cannot be rescinded unilaterally by any one party, she writes that “in some cases there may be special background understandings or explicit preliminaries that allow, in effect, for unilateral rescindability [of a joint commitment]” (2014a, 40). She does not go into details with how such special circumstances can be characterized and seems to have in mind primarily two-party cases in which one party has beforehand explicitly reserved the right to rescind from the joint commitment (see, e.g., 1996, 293–95; 2000c, 35, n. 36; 2003, 42–44; 2014a, 40, 54, 65; 2014b, 106–7). This allows, in effect, for unilateral rescindability of the commitment, since there are only two parties to it. To give an example of “special background understandings” that in effect allow for unilateral rescission of a joint commitment, Gilbert modifies the example of Queenie and Rom who intend to do some shopping together. In this version of the example, “Queenie is not sure she wants to walk all the way into town that afternoon, so before she and Rom set out on their shopping expedition she gets him to agree in advance that if at any time she feels like stopping, she is free to do so” (Gilbert 2014b, 107). In this case, Queenie *can* just decide to stop and not go any further. She has no obligation towards Rom to keep walking.

Parties to a joint commitment can of course choose to violate it, as Queenie does in the original story when she just declares that she will not go any further. However, it is not clear what a violation of a joint commitment amounts to in terms of the persistence of the joint commitment. Gilbert has said very little about this, but she acknowledges that, “Exactly what a violation achieves in terms of the persistence or otherwise of a given joint commitment needs careful consideration” (Gilbert

2014a, 32). It is this “careful consideration” that we intend to provide in this paper. Gilbert inclines to the view that “generally speaking violation by one or more parties renders a joint commitment voidable by the remaining parties, as opposed to immediately voiding it” (Gilbert 2000b, 48, n. 8; cf. Gilbert 1996, 14–15). In two-party cases, violation thus renders a joint commitment unilaterally voidable by the party who has not violated the joint commitment. However, Gilbert notes that there are indeed cases where the violation of a joint commitment “destroys” the commitment. The example she gives is that of X and Y who jointly commit to the plan that X will go to the beach with Y today and Y will go to the movies with X tomorrow. If X violates the joint commitment, Y will have no obligation in the relevant sense to go to the movies with X, i.e. in the sense of being bound by a commitment that she cannot remove on her own. This is true of all two-party cases where each party has effectively only one thing to do in order to meet the joint commitment (Gilbert 1996, 14).

### 3. Impersistence Due to Unexpected Circumstances

In this and the following two sections, we examine the level of persistence of a joint commitment to intend as a body to do A. For the sake of brevity, we will speak of a joint commitment to do A as shorthand for a joint commitment to *intend* to do A.

The *impersistence* of joint commitments stems from the fact that joint commitments are established and retained in a context that is subject to change. In this section, we illustrate through an example the impersistence of joint commitments when faced with an unexpected event.

Suppose that Alex, Brian, and Corinne one morning jointly commit to make lasagna bolognese together at Brian’s house that night. We will later refer to this joint commitment as **JC1**. Each of them then has an obligation towards the others to act in accordance with their joint commitment to make lasagna bolognese on this night. This involves, among other things, an obligation for Alex and Corinne to go to Brian’s house that night. But suppose that the weather takes a surprising turn for the worse as a violent storm comes through, rendering the roads treacherous and prompting authorities to advise people to stay indoors. It seems that Alex and Corinne would run no risk of rebuke by not going to Brian’s house in these circumstances. In other words, their joint commitment to make lasagna bolognese together will not work as a behavioral constraint in the face of this unexpected event.

It may be argued that the most straightforward interpretation of this is that Alex, Brian, and Corinne have jointly committed to make lasagna bolognese together on the implicit condition that doing so will not put their lives in danger. They would

never have committed to meet that night had they known about the violent storm. Consequently, when the condition fails, this by itself dissolves their joint commitment. We would then say that the background conditions for their joint commitment have failed and the commitment been dissolved. Alex and Corinne run no risk of rebuke by not going to Brian's house simply because they are not violating a joint commitment. But this leads to an unwanted asymmetry. Had Alex lived in the same apartment building as Brian, the two of them could have held on to the joint commitment to make lasagna bolognese together that night. In this case, the joint commitment is not immediately dissolved and Corinne's not coming to Brian's house strictly speaking amounts to a violation of the joint commitment. Thus, this interpretation has the unfortunate consequence that Corinne's action will be characterized differently depending on the situation Alex is in. Furthermore, Gilbert explicitly writes that the parties to a joint commitment "are in a position to keep [the commitment] in existence *through whatever changes in the circumstances*" (1996, 299; italics added).<sup>2</sup> Hence, claiming that joint commitments are conditional in the described sense is inconsistent with Gilbert's account, so if we do so, one may reasonably ask whether we are still talking about Gilbertian joint commitments.

There is another interpretation of why Alex and Corinne run no risk of rebuke by staying home that avoids these two problems. The unexpected storm has not immediately dissolved their joint commitment to make lasagna bolognese, but the fact that Alex and Corinne will risk their lives if they attempt to go to Brian's house has given rise to a moral obligation for Brian to waive his right to rebuke them if they violate the joint commitment by not going. Since Brian is morally obligated to waive his right to rebuke Alex and Corinne for violating the joint commitment, they will have no hesitancy in doing so. Their violation of the joint commitment, in turn, immediately dissolves it, since there is no one left for Brian to make lasagna bolognese with. In this case, there is no impetus for Alex and Corinne to keep the joint commitment in existence. The unexpected event may still be said to have dissolved the joint commitment, although it has not done so directly, but indirectly by way of violation. Note that, given this interpretation, Corinne's not coming to Brian's house amounts to a violation of the joint commitment whether or not Alex lives in the same apartment building as Brian.

Two qualifications are in order. First, it is not the unexpected storm that by itself has given rise to a moral obligation for Brian to waive his right to rebuke Alex and Corinne if they violate the joint commitment. It is the fact that, given the unexpected storm, it is no longer reasonably possible for Alex and Corinne to meet the joint commitment. In other words, insofar as the storm makes it so that it is no longer

---

<sup>2</sup> In the example, this implies that Alex, Brian, and Corinne may agree to defy the weather and hold on to their joint commitment.

reasonably possible for them to get to Brian's house, Brian is morally obligated to waive his right to rebuke them, which makes it safe for them to violate and thus dissolve the joint commitment. Had Alex and Corinne had access to a storm-proof vehicle that could transport them safely to and from his house, the situation would be different. Alex, Brian, and Corinne's joint commitment to make lasagna bolognese together at Brian's house would seem to obligate Alex and Corinne to make use of this access. As long as it is reasonably possible for Alex and Corinne to get to Brian's house, they are likely to act in accordance with the joint commitment and thus keep it in existence. In this sense, the joint commitment is persistent and forceful enough to bring into play several ways to make the dinner happen.

Second, what makes the joint commitment impersistent in the face of the unexpected event is strictly speaking that Alex and Corinne expect it to be safe to violate the commitment by thinking that it will be clear to Brian that he has a moral obligation not to rebuke them. We have picked an example in which the moral obligation on Brian's part is so obvious that this is likely what will happen. With respect to many other changes in circumstances, it will be less clear whether Brian has such moral obligation or rather whether Alex and Corinne will think it safe to assume that Brian believes that he has such moral obligation. In such cases, Alex and Corinne will be unlikely to just violate the joint commitment, which will thus be more persistent. Such changes in circumstances are more likely to give rise to a collective reevaluation of the joint commitment or to Alex and Corinne asking Brian for permission to violate the joint commitment. Our aim is to describe a mechanism of dissolution of joint commitments, so exactly who will think what when is not so important. Still, it is important to emphasize that the level of persistence of a joint commitment depends on the moral intuitions of the parties to the commitment.

#### **4. Persistence in Spite of Unexpected Circumstances**

In the last section we examined the impersistence of joint commitments when faced with an unexpected event. But sometimes a joint commitment will be persistent *in spite of* being faced with an unexpected event. In this section, we illustrate this through an example.

Gilbertian joint commitments, even joint commitments to do something bad, always involve obligations to act in accordance with them. But the obligations that inhere in joint commitments are of a special type; they are not moral obligations (Gilbert 2014b, 112–13). Gilbert writes that these non-moral obligations “need not lead to uncritical compliance” (1996, 299). One may even be morally required to violate a joint commitment. With this in mind, Gilbert emphasizes that, “Moral considerations can surely ‘override’ joint commitments in terms of what rationality

requires one to do” (Gilbert 2014a, 91). Gilbert does not go into detail with what this means in terms of the persistence of joint commitments, but she clearly acknowledges here that moral obligations have some ability to make joint commitments impersistent. In the previous section, we showed that there is another sense in which this is true: Group members may violate a joint commitment because the others are morally obligated to waive their right to rebuke them.

Gilbert has not examined the ability of moral obligations to do the opposite, to make joint commitments more persistent. In the example from the previous section, moral obligations are of no use in keeping the joint commitment (JC1) in place in the face of the violent storm. Absent special circumstances, such as access to a storm-proof vehicle, Alex and Corinne have no moral obligation to try to get to Brian’s house in spite of the storm. Even if they had access to a storm-proof vehicle, moral obligations would play no significant role in keeping the joint commitment in place. The non-moral obligations inherent in the joint commitment would by themselves require that they use this vehicle to go to Brian’s house. But sometimes moral obligations play an important role in making joint commitments persistent.

Suppose that everything is as above, except that Brian is a single father and since it is his daughter’s sixth birthday he has invited her 19 classmates to spend the day with her. The joint commitment that Alex, Brian, and Corinne have made is the joint commitment to make lasagna bolognese for the kids that night. Brian, who also has to look after the kids, would not be able to make dinner for them alone. We call this joint commitment **JC2**. In the case of JC2, Alex and Corinne seem to be obligated to make an effort to find a safe way of getting to his house in spite of the violent storm. Compared with JC1, more is required before we can say that it is not reasonably possible to meet JC2. The reason for this is apparently moral obligations that Alex and Corinne have towards Brian and the kids. Alex and Corinne are morally obligated to help Brian make dinner for the kids who otherwise would not get dinner that night. These moral obligations thus increase the persistence of the joint commitment.<sup>3</sup> As one may be morally required to violate a joint commitment, as Gilbert emphasizes, one may also be morally required to really make an effort to avoid violating it.

---

<sup>3</sup> It may be suggested that the large obligation towards Brian is mainly non-moral. It would then only be the moral obligation towards the kids that plays a significant role in increasing the persistence of the joint commitment. This would require that the non-moral obligations inherent in JC2 somehow outweigh the non-moral obligations inherent in JC1. But the non-moral obligations inherent in a joint commitment to do  $\varphi$  are the obligations of each group member towards the others to emulate with them a single doer of  $\varphi$ . It is unclear how the weight of these non-moral obligations could vary with the importance or significance of the activity  $\varphi$ .

This example illustrates how a joint commitment is relatively persistent when many people depend on the fulfillment of the commitment. A joint commitment is similarly persistent when some people depend a lot on the fulfillment of the commitment. Imagine, for example, that Brian is on his deathbed and has requested to have lasagna bolognese one last time. Alex, Brian, and Corinne have consequently jointly committed to Alex and Corinne making lasagna bolognese at Brian's house that night. This would obligate Alex and Corinne to try hard to find a safe way of getting to his house.

What makes the joint commitment persistent in spite of the unexpected event is strictly speaking that Alex and Corinne consider themselves to be morally obligated to try hard to find a safe way of getting to Brian's house. Most people would presumably do so in the described cases. But in one of the examples the content of the joint commitment is quite extreme (cooking lasagna bolognese for 20 kids) and in the other example the general circumstances of the joint commitment are quite extreme (Brian being on his deathbed). When the content and circumstances of the joint commitment are less extreme, it will be less clear to Alex and Corinne whether they are morally obligated not to violate the joint commitment. Such cases may well instead give rise to a collective reevaluation of the joint commitment.

## **5. Modifiability of Joint Commitments**

In section 3 and 4, we examined the level of persistence of joint commitments when faced with an unexpected event. In this section we want to suggest that a joint commitment is sometimes modified rather than just dissolved by an unexpected event. We illustrate this through the two joint commitments JC1 and JC2 introduced in section 3 and 4, respectively.

Consider JC1 again. Suppose there is no violent storm and that Alex, Brian, and Corinne do meet to make lasagna bolognese that night, but when they open the package of meat, they discover that the meat has gone bad. It is Sunday night and stores are closed. Similarly to the example presented in section 3, the unexpected discovery gives rise to a moral obligation for Alex and Corinne to waive their right to rebuke Brian for violating the joint commitment by not providing meat for the lasagna. But since Alex and Corinne are morally obligated to waive their right to rebuke Brian for violating the joint commitment, he will have no hesitancy in doing so; he will not, e.g., go to extremes to try to provide fresh meat. His violation of the joint commitment, in turn, immediately dissolves it, since there is no meat to make lasagna bolognese with.

It is not the discovery that the meat has gone bad that by itself has dissolved Alex, Brian, and Corinne's joint commitment to make lasagna bolognese together. It is

the discovery that it is not reasonably possible for them to get access to the missing ingredient. For example, this would have been reasonably possible if Brian's responsibility of providing the ingredients could have been redistributed to other parties to the joint commitment. Had Alex lived next door and had meat in his fridge, the joint commitment to make lasagna bolognese would not have been dissolved by the unexpected event. The joint commitment would have obligated Alex to provide the meat instead of Brian to enable them to meet the joint commitment. Thus, this example illustrates how joint commitments can be quite impersistent when they involve division of labor in the sense of responsibilities given to individual group members that cannot be redistributed to other parties to the commitment.

One may ask whether Alex, Brian, and Corinne are now left with no commitment towards each other or whether their joint commitment is replaced by a joint commitment to something similar to making lasagna bolognese that night. Joint commitments are clearly flexible to some extent. It is often unimportant that a joint commitment cannot be fulfilled to the letter. If we are jointly committed to go to the candy store on the corner to buy 20 mint drops, but it turns out that they only have 19, we still seem to be jointly committed to buy the 19 mint drops or to go to the candy store on the next corner to buy 20. In the remainder of this section we elaborate on this intuition.

We suggest that when Alex, Brian, and Corinne jointly committed to make lasagna bolognese together that night, they were at the same time implicitly making the more general joint commitment to cook together that night.<sup>4</sup> We may say that their joint commitment JC1 to make lasagna bolognese together that night has a substructure of a more general joint commitment **JC1\*** to cook together that night. The reason for this is that Alex, Brian, and Corinne still appear to have a joint commitment to cook together after they have discovered that the meat has gone bad and no longer have a joint commitment to make lasagna bolognese. For example, it seems that Brian would have the standing to rebuke Alex and Corinne if they do not stay and cook with him. Each of them has acted in accordance with their joint commitment to make lasagna bolognese together that night; they have declined any invitation to coinciding activities, Brian has tidied his house and opened a bottle of wine, Alex and Corinne have taken the bus to Brian's house, and so on. When it turns out that they cannot make lasagna bolognese, this is not by itself enough to render their efforts futile, for it is the cooking together and not the cooking lasagna bolognese that is most central to the activity they have explicitly committed to. We suggest that a joint commitment to a relatively general activity

---

<sup>4</sup> Gilbert briefly mentions that people can make more than one joint commitment "at one and the same time by one and the same pair of expressions" (2014b, 122–26).

can thus arise when the joint commitment explicitly made is to a less general activity.<sup>5</sup>

It follows that the joint commitment to make lasagna bolognese together can dissolve without the more general joint commitment to cook together dissolving. In addition, the joint commitment to cook together may exist latently and only really become manifest once the joint commitment to make lasagna bolognese is dissolved. But the opposite does not hold: If Alex, Brian, and Corinne's joint commitment to cook together that night was dissolved – for example by a terrible storm that forced Alex and Corinne to stay home – then their narrower joint commitment to make lasagna bolognese together that night would be dissolved as well. For, if it is not reasonably possible for Alex, Brian, and Corinne to cook together, then it is not reasonably possible for them to make lasagna bolognese. We may think of Alex, Brian, and Corinne's two joint commitments as a two-tiered wedding cake where the top tier represents the more specific joint commitment to make lasagna bolognese together that night and the bottom tier represents the more general joint commitment to cook together that night. It can be useful to think of the joint commitments in this way, for if we take away some tier from a wedding cake, we also take away any tier above it, while any tier below it remains. Likewise, if the bottom (and more general) joint commitment dissolves, the top (and more specific) joint commitment dissolves as well, but the opposite is not true; the top joint commitment can dissolve without the bottom joint commitment doing so. The bottom tier or the bottom joint commitment is thus the most persistent part of the structure. This picture is also suitable because the joint commitment to the most general activity is represented by the widest tier.

Suppose something similar happens in the case of JC2. Brian has bought the ingredients needed to make lasagna bolognese for 20 people, but when he opens the large package of meat, he discovers that the meat has gone bad. We suggest that there is, underlying JC2, a more general joint commitment **JC2\*** to cook dinner for the 20 kids for reasons parallel to those just given. While moral obligations made JC2 quite persistent in the face of the violent storm, they do not do so here. Alex, Brian, and Corinne are morally obligated towards the kids to make them dinner that night, not to make them lasagna bolognese. It is thus JC2\* whose persistence in the face of unexpected events is directly increased by these moral obligations. But when an unexpected event is only a challenge to JC2 insofar as it is a challenge to JC2\* – as is the case with the violent storm – any moral obligation that increases the persistence of JC2\* in the face of the unexpected event also increases the persistence of JC2: As long as it is reasonably possible to meet JC2\* in spite of the unexpected event, it is also reasonably possible to meet JC2. In particular, as long

---

<sup>5</sup> Note that JC1\* is only as persistent as JC1 in the face of the violent storm from the previous section. This is why we did not introduce JC1\* there.

as it is reasonably possible for Alex, Brian, and Corinne to get together to cook in spite of the violent storm, it is reasonably possible for them to get together to make lasagna bolognese. But the discovery that the meat has gone bad is not an unexpected event of this type. This event obligates Alex, Brian, and Corinne to try hard to find a way of making dinner for the kids, but does not thereby push them to find a way of getting fresh meat. The unexpected event thus dissolves JC2 unless they have quite easy access to fresh meat in spite of the stores being closed. Hence, while JC2\* by being more general is already more persistent than JC2 in the face of unexpected events, moral obligations further increase the difference in persistence between JC2\* and JC2. Compared with JC1\* more is required before we can say of JC2\* that it is not reasonably possible to meet it.

Under some circumstances, JC1\* and JC2\* may lead Alex, Brian, and Corinne to a joint commitment whose content is very similar to that of JC1 and JC2, respectively. Suppose that Brian, in the case of either JC1 or JC2, has invested quite some time in the planned joint activity of making lasagna bolognese. He may, e.g., have spent time making the lasagna pasta sheets himself. After having discovered that the meat has gone bad, Brian finds in his fridge some fresh vegetables and suggests to Alex and Corinne that they make lasagna vegetariana instead of the planned lasagna bolognese. Given Brian's efforts and their joint commitment to cook together that night, it would seem morally inappropriate for Alex and Corinne to decline. If Alex and Corinne agree to make lasagna vegetariana, we may say that the joint commitment to make lasagna bolognese turns into a joint commitment to the very similar activity of making lasagna vegetariana. We are thus given a new version of the two-tiered structure of joint commitments, where the joint commitment that forms the basis of the structure in both versions is the joint commitment to cook together that night.

To conclude, if we are right that some joint commitments are modifiable in the sense described in this section, the dissolution of a joint commitment will sometimes be almost unnoticeable. In some cases, the joint commitment may just become replaced by another joint commitment that is very similar or at least somewhat similar to it. Still, it is important to recognize the modifiability of joint commitments as a form of impersistence of joint commitments.

## **6. Conclusion**

To sum up, we have argued that unexpected events often indirectly dissolve joint commitments by giving rise to moral obligations to waive the right to rebuke group members for violating the joint commitments. Sometimes they appear to be

replaced by similar joint commitments. Hence, joint commitments and the corresponding obligations to conform to them can thus be quite impersistent.

It should be emphasized, however, that we are not claiming that joint commitments are generally highly impersistent. For example, we have shown how moral obligations can also help keep joint commitments in existence in spite of unexpected events. Hence, our account does not imply that individual joint commitments cannot unify people into persistent social groups. Furthermore, we have suggested that a joint commitment sometimes forms part of a relatively persistent, modifiable structure of joint commitments. It is then this structure that preserves the unity of the group, rather than any one joint commitment.

## References

- Alonso, Facundo M. 2009. "Shared Intention, Reliance, and Interpersonal Obligations." *Ethics* 119 (3): 444–75.
- Bratman, Michael E. 1992. "Shared Cooperative Activity." *The Philosophical Review* 101 (2): 327–41.
- Bratman, Michael E. 1993. "Shared Intention." *Ethics* 104 (1): 97–113.
- Bratman, Michael E. 1999. *Faces of Intention*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gilbert, Margaret. 1989. *On Social Facts*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Gilbert, Margaret. 1996. *Living Together: Rationality, Sociality, & Obligation*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Gilbert, Margaret. 2000a. "Collective Belief and Scientific Change." In *Sociality and Responsibility: New Essays in Plural Subject Theory*, edited by Margaret Gilbert, 37–49. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Gilbert, Margaret. 2000b. *Sociality and Responsibility: New Essays in Plural Subject Theory*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Gilbert, Margaret. 2000c. "What Is It for Us to Intend?" In *Sociality and Responsibility: New Essays in Plural Subject Theory*, edited by Margaret Gilbert, 14–36. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Gilbert, Margaret. 2003. "The Structure of the Social Atom: Joint Commitment as the Foundation of Human Social Behavior." In *Socializing Metaphysics: The Nature of Social Reality*, edited by Frederick F. Schmitt, 39–64. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Gilbert, Margaret. 2014a. *Joint Commitment: How We Make the Social World*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Gilbert, Margaret. 2014b. "Two Approaches to Shared Intention: An Essay in the Philosophy of Social Phenomena." In *Joint Commitment: How We Make the Social World*, edited by Margaret Gilbert, 94–128. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Meijers, Anthonie W. M. 2003. "Can Collective Intentionality Be Individualized?" *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 62 (1): 167–83.

- Roth, Abraham Sesshu. 2004. "Shared Agency and Contralateral Commitments." *Philosophical Review* 113 (3): 359–410.
- Roth, Abraham Sesshu. 2011. "Shared Agency." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta.  
<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2011/entries/shared-agency/>
- Searle, John R. 1990. "Collective Intentions and Actions." In *Intentions in Communication*, edited by Philip R. Cohen, Jerry L. Morgan, and Martha E. Pollack, 401–15. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Schweikard, David P., and Hans Bernhard Schmid. 2013. "Collective Intentionality." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta.  
<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2013/entries/collective-intentionality/>
- Tollefsen, Deborah, and Rick Dale. 2012. "Naturalizing Joint Action: A Process-Based Approach." *Philosophical Psychology* 25 (3): 385–407.
- Tuomela, Raimo. 2005. "We-Intentions Revisited." *Philosophical Studies* 125 (3): 327–69.
- Tuomela, Raimo, and Kaarlo Miller. 1988. "We-Intentions." *Philosophical Studies* 53 (3): 367–89.