

## **Social Glue and Norms of Sociality\***

David Copp

University of California, Davis

Human beings need to live in at least minimal social groups in order to survive and to meet their basic psychological and social needs, including needs for affection and friendship. Most of us have values that we could not realize outside a society. It seems to me that these facts are of central importance in understanding the nature and normativity of morality. If we are going to understand morality, it is important, I think, to understand the nature of societies. What is the glue that holds them together?

Michael Bratman's account of *modest sociality* in his book, *Shared Agency*, casts significant light on these issues.<sup>1</sup> Bratman defends a thesis he calls the *primacy of intentions* thesis for modest sociality (29). People can act together in accomplishing various things, such as painting a house. On Bratman's account, a sufficient condition for a group of individuals to act together in such cases is that they share interlocking and meshing intentions of specific kinds under conditions of common knowledge, given a few other conditions (103). A group may be connected by forms of "intentional interconnection and interpersonal support" along with a "mutual responsiveness in sub-intentions" and "normative pressures of social rationality" (87, 123-125). In some cases, people also share policies or general intentions, such as policies about

the weight to give to various considerations in decision-making (142, 20, 97). Bratman's account focuses on small-scale interactions, and it would be non-trivial to scale it up to provide an account of the social glue holding together societies. But his account is nevertheless instructive of the kinds of factors that can enter into explaining sociality more generally. It suggests that shared intentions, plans and policies can contribute to the glue holding together a society.<sup>2</sup>

Norms of "social rationality" are important to Bratman's account (87, 123-125). My goal in this paper is to explore Bratman's idea that these norms have genuine *normative force*. I shall contend that, to the extent that acceptance of or compliance with norms of social rationality plays a role in enabling cooperative interactions to succeed, these norms have both a rational and a moral significance that, to the extent we are rational and moral persons, can strengthen the social glue. I begin with an account of the role played in Bratman's account by norms of social rationality. I then consider Bratman's account of the content of the norms and his account of their normative force. Finally, I provide my own account.

## 1. Norms of Social Rationality

According to Bratman's *continuity thesis*, shared intentional agency, such as Alan and Brenda's painting a house together, can be explained in a way that is continuous with the explanation of individual agency (3-4). There need be nothing in a case of shared activity that is different "in kind" from what we would find in typical cases of individual activity (8). In shared intentional activity, for example, the intentions of the people who are acting together are ordinary intentions. Each intends that *we* paint the house, so "we-intentions" are involved, but for

Bratman, we-intentions are just ordinary intentions with a first-person plural content.<sup>3</sup>

*Norms of social rationality* play two important roles in Bratman's account. First, acceptance of the norms, or at least conformity to them, plays a role in ensuring the proper functioning of the intentions involved in shared agency and so in explaining shared agency when it is successful. The parties to shared intentions, when they succeed in working together, are disposed to intend and to act in accord with the norms of social rationality. Second, these norms have *normative* force (16). It is not simply that the participants in shared activity *believe* the norms have force, but they *do* have force in Bratman's view.

Bratman considers a "positivist" version of the theory that claims merely to describe what shared intention involves, and the norms that participants accept, without taking a stand on the question of whether the norms have any genuine normative force (17). The problem, he contends, is that we ourselves are planning agents who can be involved in arrangements of modest sociality and, according to the theory, we therefore at least implicitly accept the norms of social rationality. Hence, if the theory did not make it plausible that the norms are normative – that they warrant our allegiance – the theory would not be in a position to *recommend* accepting the norms even though, according to the theory, accepting them is *inter alia* constitutive of the structures of modest sociality that the theory postulates. Bratman contends, then, that unless the norms have a suitable normative significance, the structures of modest sociality would not be "stable under reflection by planning agents like us." The claim that the norms have normative significance therefore is "an element in our overall theory" (16-17).

I am not persuaded that a positivist version of Bratman's theory would be unsatisfactory, but I shall not pursue this issue. Instead, I shall explore the idea that the relevant norms do have

normative force. I aim to develop an account of the normative force of these norms that comports with my “pluralist-teleology” (2009).

This project is important both to my thinking about normativity and to my thinking about social glue. For I intend pluralist-teleology to be a general account of normativity. If the norms of social rationality are indeed normative, I need to consider whether their normativity can be accounted for in pluralist-teleology. Moreover, pluralist-teleology aims to explain the normativity of morality on the basis, *inter alia*, of the idea that the currency in a society of an appropriate system of norms can contribute to our thriving by facilitating cooperation and coordination. To the extent that acceptance of norms of social rationality plays a role in the social glue that enables cooperative interactions to succeed, it may be that these norms have moral significance – according to pluralist-teleology.

## 2. The Norms and their Normativity

Bratman distinguishes between intentions and other contentful psychological states, such as beliefs and (ordinary) desires, on functional grounds. Intentions play a distinctive psychological role in guiding agents’ planning and acting (11). They coordinate, structure, organize, and guide action and they play a distinctive role in “settling” what we will do (17, 27). They typically are the upshot of deliberation. In addition, Bratman holds that intentions are “assessable” by distinctive norms of rational planning agency, norms that do not apply to beliefs and (ordinary) desires (15-17). Normally, agents “accept the norms of individual planning agency.” That is, agents normally are disposed to adjust and modify their intentions in order that

their intentions have the properties called for by the norms (15), and they normally are disposed to see themselves as having made a mistake if their intentions fail to have these properties (16).

The norms in question are norms of consistency, agglomeration, means/end coherence, and stability (15). Bratman holds that an agent's intentions are rational only if they are internally consistent and consistent with her beliefs, and only if they are related to each other in such a way that, if she were to agglomerate her various intentions into larger intentions, the resulting intentions would also be internally consistent and consistent with her beliefs. In addition, to the extent that an agent is rational, she will "settle as needed and in a timely way on means and preliminary steps" to carrying out her intentions. Finally, although an agent may reconsider and change her intentions, to the extent that she is rational, she has a tendency toward stability in intention (15). These are the "norms of individual planning agency" (33).

The norms of social rationality also include norms of consistency, agglomeration, means/end coherence, and stability. As Bratman says, in a case of shared intentions, "it should be possible to agglomerate relevant intentions into a larger social plan that is consistent, that in a timely way adequately specifies relevant means and preliminary steps, and that is associated with appropriately stable social psychological structures" (27-28). The norms of individual planning agency set conditions on the rationality of a person's intentions as well as conditions on the (practical) rationality of the person. Similarly, the norms of social rationality set conditions on the rationality of a person's intentions as well as conditions on the (practical) rationality of the person, in cases in which she participates in a group action (33).

Bratman argues that the norms of social rationality "emerge" from the norms of individual planning agency. That is, a person who at-least-implicitly accepts the norms of

individual planning agency and conforms with them will thereby (at least normally) conform to the norms of social rationality (87). For example, if Alan and Brenda are acting together in painting the house, and if each at-least-implicitly accepts the norms of individual planning agency and conforms with them, the intentions each of them has that partially constitute their acting together will thereby conform to the norms of social rationality (33, 89). Each of them will be under rational pressure to be responsive to each other and to coordinate with each other given that the relevant intentions of each of them contains reference to the relevant intentions of the other, and given that all of this is common knowledge (108-110).

Unfortunately, I think, Bratman's account of the emergence of the norms of social rationality is not completely successful. Bratman points out that agents might decide to work together to achieve certain goals even if some of them do not actually value these goals (132-143). An agent might share an intention with her co-participants to achieve a goal even if she has a "personal policy" of pursuing goals that turn out to be incompatible with the group's goal. If so, then if the agent complied fully with the norms of individual planning agency, she might not successfully comply with the norms of social rationality.<sup>4</sup> So it is not necessarily the case that a person who conforms with the norms of planning agency will thereby conform to the norms of social rationality.<sup>5</sup> At one point, Bratman concedes that "conflict of ... goals might turn out to thwart our efforts to act together" (29). I will return to this issue.

I now turn to the question whether the norms of individual planning agency and social rationality have normative significance. To avoid begging any questions, I will henceforth refer to the norms as "rules," and I will refer to rules of "shared agency" rather than rules of social rationality.

Bratman's account of the normativity of the rules has both an instrumental strand and a more intrinsic strand. As for the instrumental strand, he seems to be thinking that we can efficiently achieve our goals only if we regulate our intentions in accord with these rules. To achieve her goals, a person needs to plan and coordinate her activities cross-temporally and to settle what she is going to do, and she does better at this if she regulates her intentions in accord with the rules (17, 22). Second, to achieve these goals, she needs to work cooperatively with others by jointly intending various things. And people do better at this if they regulate their intentions in accord with the rules (28). For example, if you and I intend to paint the house together by way of our interlocking and meshing plans, I do better at achieving this if I am ready to support your intention by meshing my sub-plans with yours – by being disposed to help you if necessary, for instance (109-110). The upshot, it seems, is that we have instrumental reasons to accept the rules of individual planning agency and shared agency.

Bratman also seems to argue for the normativity of the rules from the assumed value of self-governance (17, 22). For Bratman, being self-governing consists at least in part in being a planning agent who at least implicitly accepts the rules of individual planning agency. If so, and if it is valuable to be self-governing – if it is better other things being equal to be self-governing than to be unable to regulate one's actions at all, and better to be self-governing than to be governed by the intentions of *others*, or by intentions or whims one does not stand behind – there is reason to accept the rules of planning agency. Furthermore, if acceptance of the rules of shared agency emerges in the sense Bratman explains from acceptance of the rules of planning agency, then the argument carries over to the rules of shared agency (142). The upshot seems to be that in addition to having instrumental reasons to accept the rules of planning agency and shared

agency, we also have reasons grounded in the value of autonomy to accept these rules.

### 3. Pluralist-Teleology and Norms of Sociality

The rules of planning agency and shared agency are normative according to pluralist-teleology (2009). They are among the standards of what I call “self-grounded rationality.” And to the extent that acceptance of the rules of shared agency plays a role in the social glue that enables cooperative interactions to succeed, these rules have moral significance. Compliance with them is normally a requirement both of self-grounded rationality and of morality.

According to pluralist-teleology, *normative facts* are grounded in facts about solutions to, or ways to ameliorate, certain generic problems faced by human beings in the circumstances they face in their ordinary lives.<sup>6</sup> These are problems we can better cope with when we subscribe to appropriate systems of norms, so I call them *problems of normative governance*. Intuitively, a problem of normative governance is a generic kind of situation that limits our ability to achieve what we value or to get what we need. Since there are more than one problem of this kind, the theory is pluralist. It implies that there are different kinds of normative requirement. There are for example epistemic reasons, moral reasons, and practical or prudential reasons. The theory treats each of these different kinds of normative consideration as corresponding to a different problem of normative governance. Let me explain.

There is a problem of normative governance just in case there is a state of affairs or set of facts such that, first, these are general facts about the circumstances of human life and about human beings’ biological and psychological nature that, other things being equal, interfere with



or hinder humans' ability to meet their basic needs and to serve their values – no matter what they value, within a wide range of possible things to value – or would so hinder them if they did not subscribe to appropriate norms.<sup>7</sup> Second, people's ability to cope with this state of affairs is affected by their actions and choices. Third, the state of affairs is better coped with when people comply with an appropriate system of standards or norms than would otherwise be the case. Situations of this kind are problems of normative governance.

In my view, practical rationality consists centrally in being guided by a norm or system of norms subscription to which enables one to cope with a problem I call the problem of *autonomy*. The problem is that we have a tendency to seek short-term or short-sighted advantages that are at variance with our values and that may even threaten our ability to meet our basic needs. Whatever we value, within a wide range of things that we might value, this tendency makes us less likely to achieve what we value than would otherwise be the case. To address this problem, we need a kind of self-control that dampens our susceptibility to temptations. The problem can be mitigated if we subscribe to a standard that calls for behavior that serves our values and meets our needs (Copp 2007a, ch. 10; compare Bratman 2014, 17). Call this the *standard of autonomy*. My contention is that this standard determines what we are required to do as a matter of practical rationality or self-grounded rationality. Two ideas lie behind this contention.

First, I hold that practical rationality is a matter of doing well at living one's life by one's own lights. Unfortunately, the phrase "practical rationality" is contested. Some would object that one does not do *well* at living one's life unless one acts *morally* well. I agree that one does not do well at living one's life in *all respects* unless one lives morally well. However we should distinguish the issue whether a person is doing well at living her life as judged by *her own*

standards from the issue whether a person is doing well at living her life as judged by *objective moral* standards. I want to focus on the first issue. To avoid verbal dispute, I avoid the term “practical rationality” and instead speak of “self-grounded rationality.”<sup>8</sup>

Second, according to pluralist-teleology, as I said, normative facts are grounded in facts about solutions to, or ways to ameliorate, certain generic problems. I claim that the normative truth about an issue is determined by the content of the system of norms the currency of which would do most to ameliorate the relevant problem of normative governance.<sup>9</sup> Since the problem of autonomy is one of the relevant problems, then if the standard of autonomy is the standard subscription to which enables one to best cope with the problem of autonomy, the truth as to what we are required to do as a matter of self-grounded rationality is determined by the content of the standard of autonomy. A person who is self-groundedly rational acts so as to serve her values and meet her needs.

Am I correct, however, that the standard of autonomy, as I formulated it, is *the* standard, subscription to which enables one to best cope with the problem of autonomy? Bratman’s arguments suggest otherwise. First, we often face important choices where the balance of values is unclear or indeterminate or where the values on each side are roughly equal. In such cases, our choices are underdetermined by our value judgments (21), yet we often need to make a choice. Bratman discusses, for instance, Sartre’s example of the boy who has to decide between joining the Free French and staying home to care for his mother (19). Second, there can be cases in which several values come into conflict and in which the agent herself does not have a clear ranking of the values. In such cases, the agent needs to decide how to rank the conflicting values. Bratman proposes that in such cases an agent may form policies about how to weight the

different considerations (20-21, 165 n. 52). The boy in Sartre's example might decide, for example, to give more weight to the success of the Free French in subsequent deliberation than to the well-being of his mother. Either way, having made a decision in such cases, a person who is self-governed by her own lights will pursue her chosen route even if it was not initially any better supported by her values than alternatives that she rejected. As Bratman says, a person who is self-governing "governs his life by appeal to his own basic practical commitments" (21).

I agree with Bratman about these points, and this gives me reason to reconsider the standard of autonomy. Let me clarify, to begin, that I agree with Bratman that self-governance should be understood in relation to one's own policies and commitments. Indeed, when I refer to persons' *values*, I intend to refer to stable long-term policies a person may have and be content to have and to which she may give and intend to give significant weight (Copp 2007a, ch 10). It seems to me that what is of primary relevance to self-governance is governance by one's values understood as *policies*, not governance by one's value *judgments*, which can be psychologically rather superficial compared to the policies that govern one's life. For example, a person who believes that jazz is inferior musically to classical music should not be convicted of failing to be self-governing when she chooses to listen to jazz, assuming that her preference for jazz reflects a stable long-term policy she is content to have and to which she has a policy of giving significant weight. The standard of autonomy should be understood in this light. With this understood, it makes room for the kinds of commitments and policies that Bratman has in mind.

Beyond this, however, the standard does need to be revised to take into account Bratman's rules of planning agency. I find it very plausible that agents do better at addressing the problem of autonomy, other things being equal, if they are planning agents who at least

implicitly accept the rules of planning agency. Bratman in effect argues for this claim. He contends that acceptance of the rules supports the role of intentions in coordinating and organizing our activities over time and in settling what we will do (17). Plausibly, then, the set of norms acceptance of which does most to enable an agent to cope with the problem of autonomy includes the rules of planning agency – the norms of consistency, coherence, agglomeration and stability.

I therefore propose to revise the standard of autonomy to include in it a requirement to comply with the rules of planning agency. According to pluralist-teleology, this means that a person who is self-groundedly rational acts and intends to act so as to serve her values and meet her needs – and in addition, she forms and revises her intentions and policies in compliance with the norms of consistency, coherence, agglomeration and stability, and she views violations of these norms as mistakes. We can say that self-grounded rationality requires a person so to act and to be disposed so to act.<sup>10</sup>

I now turn to the rules of shared agency. We saw above that Bratman thinks these rules are in a sense corollaries of the rules of individual planning agency. I argued, however, that this is not clearly so. If I am correct, it does not follow from the arguments we have been considering that there is a requirement of self-grounded rationality to comply with the rules of shared agency. Nevertheless, in the normal case, if a person is self-groundedly rational, she will be under pressure to coordinate with those with whom she acts together (108-110), for she will view violations of the rules of planning agency as mistakes. This means that she will view her failures to comply with the norms of shared agency as mistakes as well, to the extent that complying with them is called for by the rules of planning agency.

The interesting next step is that, it seems to me, the rules of shared agency have moral significance to the extent that acceptance of these rules plays a key role in enabling cooperative interactions to succeed. This claim can be supported by pluralist-teleology. To explain this, I need to introduce the *problem of sociality*.

Humans need to live in societies in order to meet many of their basic needs and to be in a position to achieve the things they value, but there are a variety of familiar causes of discord and conflict that can undermine cooperation and make a society less successful than it otherwise could be at enabling people to pursue what they value with a reasonable prospect of success. This is the problem of sociality. Unless it is mitigated in some way, members of the society are less able than would otherwise be the case to achieve what they value. Plainly, I think, widespread subscription to a moral code can help to ameliorate the problem, provided that the code calls for people to be willing to cooperate, and generally to avoid discord and conflict.<sup>11</sup> Of course, some moral codes would do better than others at ameliorating the situation.

According to pluralist-teleology, roughly, the moral truth is a function of the content of the moral code the currency of which in society would do most to ameliorate the problem of sociality. Call this the *ideal code*. The idea, to a first approximation, is that there is a moral requirement to do something if and only if, and because, the ideal code requires us to do it.<sup>12</sup> In effect, we can say, morality is the solution to the problem of equipping people to live comfortably and successfully together in societies.<sup>13</sup>

It seems highly plausible to me that the ideal moral code would include a requirement to be disposed to conform to Bratman's rules of shared agency. If this is the case, then pluralist-teleology says we ought morally to be disposed to conform to these rules. Bratman has argued in

effect that subscription to the rules of shared agency would help to ameliorate the problem of sociality. He points out that to achieve what we value in many cases we need to work cooperatively with others by jointly intending that we do various things and he contends that we do better at this if we regulate our intentions in accord with the rules. The upshot of Bratman's reasoning, from the point of view of pluralist-teleology, is that the ideal moral code includes a requirement to comply with the rules of shared agency. We ought morally to be disposed to conform to these rules. Acceptance of the rules of shared agency is a requirement of morality.

One might ask whether there is a moral requirement to be willing to act together or only a requirement to follow the rules once we are acting together.<sup>14</sup> I think both are plausible. A readiness to cooperate, or a readiness to enter into shared activity, would help ameliorate the problem of sociality when combined with the other dispositions and attitudes called for by the ideal code. Plausibly, then, the ideal code would call on us to be open to shared activity as well as to comply with the norms of shared activity once we are acting together.

My proposal does not conflict with Bratman's continuity thesis. There is no suggestion that we must postulate primitive obligations in order adequately to understand shared agency. Yet, I am suggesting, the rules of shared agency have moral significance. The best way to understand this, it seems to me, is to think of these rules as setting conditions on moral virtue and self-grounded rationality. A virtuous person would be disposed, other things being equal, to be willing to act together with those who are willing to act with her, willing to form interlocking and meshing intentions with those willing to act with her, and willing to support the efforts of those with whom she is acting.

#### 4. Conclusion

Bratman's account of modest sociality points the way to an account of one kind of social glue that binds people into societies. In this account, shared intentions, plans and policies can contribute to the glue holding together a society. Moreover, according to pluralist-teleology, compliance with the norms governing both individual planning agency and shared agency is normally a requirement of self-grounded rationality. In addition, as we have seen, in most cases, compliance with the norms of shared agency emerges from compliance with the norms of individual planning agency, which means that rational planning agents will normally comply with the norms of shared agency. And virtuous agents will be willing to comply with these norms. Hence, rational agents can be tied together by the shared intentions, plans, policies and "mutual responsiveness" of shared agency and also by normative pressures from the direction of both morality and rationality. Rational and moral agents will tend to be willing to act together with those who are willing to act with them, and willing to support the efforts of those with whom they are acting.

## References

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## Notes

- \* This paper was presented to the annual meetings of the Pacific Division of the American Philosophical Association, April, 2015.
- 1 Bratman (2014). Parenthetical references are to this book unless indicated otherwise.
- 2 I have discussed social glue elsewhere. In Copp (1995, ch. 7), I discuss the role of temporally extended networks of affection and kinship as well as networks of cooperative relationships. In Copp (2007b), I discuss the role of “identification” with a political community.
- 3 We-intentions violate the “own action” condition. Bratman rejects this condition (60-64).
- 4 A further problem may arise because agents working together need to share assumptions about what is possible and effective (30). As Bratman points out, in some cases, agents working together might plan in light of certain assumptions about what is possible and effective even though they do not all believe these propositions (147-149).
- 5 Bratman says “violation of such social norms will *normally* consist of a violation of associated norms of individual planning agency” (87, my emphasis). He may here be conceding the point I am making in the text.
- 6 See Copp (2009). The theory is a generalization of the “society-centered” moral theory proposed in Copp (1995) and (2007a).
- 7 Take it that something is needed by humans just in case, given the circumstances of

human life and the nature of human beings, humans must have this thing in order to achieve what they value, no matter what they value, within a wide range of possible things to value.

8 The term, “self-interested rationality,” can be misleading. A person who devotes her life to helping other people may be doing well as judged by her own standards even if she is not self-interested.

9 Here I simply assume this is correct. Attempting to argue for it would take me far afield.

10 This means that, if she is self-groundedly rational, the jazz lover who believes listening to jazz is not worthwhile will believe she is making a mistake in virtue of the lack of coherence between her listening policy and her belief. To the extent that she is rational she will tend to revise either her belief or her listening policy.

11 To *subscribe* to a norm is to have a general intention to conform to it and to be disposed to experience a negative emotional response if one fails to conform.

12 I am simplifying here. I address some complications in Copp (1995, 199-200, 213-245) and Copp (2007a, 25-26, 55-150, 203-283).

13 For details, see Copp (2007a), especially the introduction, and Copp (1995).

14 Bratman raised this question in discussion.