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Who Has Got Our Group-Intentions?

Ludger Jansen, Bonn, Germany

1. Groups as Agents

States can declare war, football teams can play defensive, my family can help me to push my car. It seems to be obvious: Groups can act. And they can do so intentionally. Thus there seem to be not only group-actions but also group-intentions. States may intend to defend themselves by declaring war to a neighbouring country, football teams may intend to win the championship by choosing a certain strategy, my family may intend to help me to go to work by pushing my car, and so on. My choice of examples shows that I use the term "group" quite loosely here to cover both collections of persons and collective persons, both plural persons and unified plural persons (Jansen 2004). But intentions are normally construed as mental attitudes: I can intend to do something only because I have mental attitudes. Who has got a group's intention? The group? This seems to be the natural answer. But groups do not have a mind or brain on their own. Witness on this, e.g. John Searle:

"And how could there be any group mental phenomenon except what is in the brains of the members of the group? [...] One tradition is willing to talk about group minds, the collective unconscious, and so on. I find this talk at best mysterious and at worst incoherent. [...] there cannot be a group mind or group consciousness. All consciousness is in individual minds, in individual brains." (Searle 1990; quotes from pp. 402, 404, 406)

One response to this is the attempt to reduce the group-intention in Lewis-style (Lewis 1969) to the individual I-intentions plus mutual knowledge of them:

We two do F if and only if

- (i) I do (my part of) F and you do (your part of) F and
- (ii) I know that you do (your part of) F and you know that I do (my part of) F,
- (iii) you know that I know that you do (your part of) F and I know that you know that I do (my part of) F, and so on.

There are several problems with such an account:

- (1) The analysis of mutual knowledge in terms of individual attitudes requires an infinity of conjuncts. Can such an infinitistic analysis be plausible for finite minds?
- (2) How can even an infinity of I-attitudes give rise to a we-attitude? How comes that we have feelings of group membership, of co-operations etc., if all there is are I-attitudes? (Searle 1995, 24)
- (3) All requirements for I-intentions and mutual knowledge may be fulfilled without a group-action and thus a group-intention being present (Searle 1990, 404 against Tuomela/Miller 1988). Imagine two fishermen, sitting accidentally near each other at a small lake. They both fish in this lake. They see each other and maybe even talk to each other, thus they mutually know that they fish in this lake. But they do not fish *together*.

The last two points, (2) and (3), give evidence that the existence of a complex of individual I-intentions is not sufficient for the existence of a group-intention, though it may be necessary.

2. We-Intentions and Their Properties

Because of the difficulties of the attempt to reduce group-intentions to the individuals' I-intentions, John Searle suggests to analyse group-intentions in terms of we-intentions. Every member of the football team may say "We have the intention to win the championship" and every member of my family may say "We intend to push the car". By saying this, or so Searle says, these persons express one of their we-intentions. A Searlian we-intention is, in a sense, as individualistic as the common I-intentions: it is an intention had by an individual mind; its bearer is an individual person. But, as its name indicates, a we-intention is an intention not in the first person singular, but in the first person plural. Searlian we-intentions have the following properties:

- (1) Searle builds his theory of collective intentionality upon a *methodological individualism*. He is committed to "an ontology and metaphysics based on the existence of individual human beings as the repositories of all intentionality, whether individual or collective" (Searle 1990, 407). Thus, we-intentions have *individual bearers*.
- (2) In addition, Searle embraces a *methodological solipsism*. There is no valid inference from our intentions to what is actually going on in the world. Even a brain in a vat can have any kind of intentionality, including we-intentions (Searle 1990, 407-8).
- (3) Thus, there is *no infallibility* with regard to our intentions: "[...] I could have all the intentionality I do have even if I am radically mistaken, even if the apparent presence and co-operation of other people is an illusion" (Searle 1990, 407). Don Quixote is wrong with both of "I intend to fight that giant" and "We, Quixote and Sancho, intend to fight that giant", in that there is no giant to fight against. With regard to the we-intention, Don Quixote makes the additional mistake of wrongly assuming that Sancho Pansa is also up to fight the giant. Of course, he is not. This is, however, only a modest error with regard to we-intentions. A lunatic may even hallucinate those people with which he feels connected via a we-intention: "Collective intentionality in my head can make a purported reference to other members of a collective independent of the question whether or not there actually are such members." (Searle 1990, 407) These two possibilities to err are special to we-intentions; no similar error can occur with I-intentions.
- (4) On the other hand, there is *no omniscience* about the intentions of the groups I belong to. An academic society of which I am a member may decide to merge with another society without a corresponding we-intention existing in my mind.
- (5) Searle aims at incorporating we-intentions in the wider framework of his theory of intentionality (as presented in Searle 1983). Thus he considers we-intentions as having *causal relevance* for the intended actions to come about.
- (6) If we-intentions have causal relevance, they should also have *explanatory relevance* and *predictive force* with regard to the intended actions.

- (7) Finally, we-intentions may have *moral relevance* for the evaluations of the intended actions within, say, a Kantian framework.

3. Are Group-Intentions Based on We-Intentions?

We have seen that group-intentions and we-intentions are not quite the same. But maybe group-intentions are based on our we-intentions? Is it feasible that group-intentions come about by the members having certain we-intentions?

Firstly, are we-intentions sufficient for group-intentions? Certainly, the we-intention of a single individual is not sufficient for the existence of a group-intention. This is due to the methodological solipsism in Searle's account of we-intentions. In case a person hallucinates the entire co-operating group, the group-intention is at best hallucinated. But even if the group itself is not hallucinated, the individual may still be wrong in his supposition of a collective intention: the we-intention might not be shared by other members of the group. How many members of a group have to have corresponding we-intentions for there to be a group-intention? Does the majority suffice? Do all group-members have to have the corresponding we-intentions? I will argue that not even this is enough. Even if all group-members have the corresponding we-intention the group-intention can still fail to exist. If all members of parliament dream of a debate, at the end of which all of them vote for signing a peace-contract, each of them may form the we-intention "We intend to sign the peace-contract". The respective group-intentions of the parliament or the nation do not exist: Group-intentions of nations come into existence by actual votes of members in parliament, not by votes only dreamed of.

Secondly, are we-intentions necessary for group-intentions? On the one hand, it seems to be plausible that the members have certain we-intentions if the group is to have a corresponding group-intention. If no member of my family has the we-intention "We intend to push the car", it would be highly implausible that there is a corresponding group-intention of my family. On the other hand, if ignorance of the members about group-intentions is possible, there may be members that do not have corresponding we-intentions. A state's intention may be formed by a vote in parliament. But a member of parliament who slept over the vote has had no opportunity to form his personal we-intention. Thus there may be several group-members that do not have the corresponding we-intentions. Moreover, if a state is not a democracy but a dictatorship, the nation's intention may even be formed by the will of the dictator alone. In this case there may even be no citizens with corresponding we-intentions. Nor does the dictator have to have a corresponding we-intention. His intention might be a plain I-intention like "I intend to raise taxes" instead of a we-intention like "We intend to pay more taxes". We-intentions are thus neither sufficient nor necessary for the existence of a group-intention.

4. Group-Intentions and Their Properties

I have argued that group-intentions are to be distinguished from we-intentions. To get a grip on group-intentions themselves, we should now discuss the properties of group-intentions. Now, one of the peculiarities about group-intentions is that it is so difficult to tell who is the bearer of these intentions. Another peculiarity of group-intentions is that there may be even a complete lack of corresponding I-intentions, as has been observed by Margaret Gilbert:

"[...] there could be a shared intention to do such-and-such though none of the participants personally intend to conform their behavior to the shared intention." (Gilbert 2000, 18)

Thus, such a "shared intention" is not an intention of any of the participants. Gilbert ascribes such shared intentions to what she calls "plural subjects", to groups of people. The crucial mechanism for this is Gilbert's "schema S":

For the relevant psychological predicate "X" and a group of persons, members of this group may truly say "We X" with respect to this group, if and only if the members of the group are jointly committed to X-ing as a body (generalised version of Gilbert 2000, 19).

Gilbert's analysis perfectly fits to small-scale informal groups, where group-intentions arise from mini-contracts based on communication between and agreement of all the group-members. For Gilbert, "walking together" is "a paradigmatic social phenomenon" (Gilbert 1992, title): If Ann and Bill arrange to go for a walk together, the two of them form a plural subject that goes for a walk. Ann and Bill are jointly committed to do this walking, even if both make up their mind because of, say, the long distance. Nevertheless, the joint commitment remains valid till further negotiations between Ann and Bill bring about a new group contract (Gilbert 2000, 26). Till then, being part of the plural subject brings certain deontic constraints with it:

"First, each participant has an obligation not to act contrary to the shared intention. More positively, each has an obligation to promote the fulfilment of the shared intention as well as possible. Second, corresponding to these obligations are rights or entitlements of the other parties to the appropriate performances. Third, if one participant does something contrary to the shared intention, the others have a special entitlement to rebuke that person. [...] Participants in a shared intention understand that they are not in a position to remove its constraints unilaterally." (Gilbert 2000, 17)

But not in all cases of group-intentions these deontic constraints obtain. Again, if an academic society I belong to decides to merge with another society, I am free to oppose this merging. I may publicly speak up against it, I may even go to court, or give up my membership. Mutual communication is no longer possible in large-scale systems, even in academic societies, and it is no longer mandatory in formal groups. Formal groups may have fixed procedures to establish their intentions. In democracies the majority (of members of parliament) decides, in dictatorships the dictator decides alone. Academic societies usually are constituted democratically, small companies often are constituted dictatorially: the owner decides what the company will do. In such examples, a group's intention may not be shared by individual members, and members may even have a right to oppose group-intentions.

5. Group-Intentions: Emergent System Properties

I argued in section 3 that group-intentions are not necessarily constituted by we-intentions. And section 4 led to the result that group-intentions are not in every case brought about by the "sharing" of intentions by means of joint commitments. The positive result was that there may be different procedures how groups establish what counts as their intention. We can thus modify Gilbert's schema S in order to fit to this variety of different cases:

For a group G of group-type T it might be truly said that G intends to do F, if and only if the procedure appropriate to the group-type T of G brought it about that G intends to do F.

In this new schema, the group-type plays a crucial role. If members of parliament want to bring forward a certain motion, they have to obey certain formalities, regulated in the constitution. If, however, the same members of parliament want to go for a walk, these formalities are out of place. In this case, personal communication leading to joint commitment is the appropriate procedure. Thus, Gilbert's schema S is a special case of my own suggestion.

There is a variety of procedures that may bring about group-intentions. If a group does not have such procedures, there cannot be intentions of this group. This is, e.g., the case for a large-scale informal group, like the visitors of a football match: As they form an informal group, there is no procedure they could follow to form a group-intention. And as they have so many members, they cannot form a group-intention by personal communication leading to joint commitment.

Again: Who is the bearer of group-intentions? I have argued that group-intentions are not reducible to we-intentions of group-members, and that group-intentions are reducible to shared I-intentions only in the special case of small-scale informal groups. Thus, group-intentions must not be attributed to the group-members. This suggests that the natural answer, maybe, was not that bad at all: Group-intentions do have to be attributed to the groups. This does not commit us to postulate that groups have a mental life of their own, independent of the mental life of individuals. On the contrary, group intentions are brought about by the mental life of individuals. They are not reducible to the intentions of the individuals, but they emerge from speech acts and other symbolic interactions of the individuals, like promising or voting. They are, however, no properties of the individual persons, but properties of the collectives, of the whole system these individuals constitute. Thus, group-intentions are emergent properties in the technical sense: They are properties of the systems, not of the constituents, they come about by interactions of the parts, but they are of a kind that cannot be attributed to individual persons, but only to systems of such.

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