

## BOOK REVIEW

*Shared Agency: A Planning Theory of Acting Together.* BY MICHAEL BRATMAN. (Oxford: OUP, 2014. Pp. xi + 219. Price £18.41.)

We all agree that the ability to act together with others is a fundamental human characteristic, one that comes easily to members of our species and which is central to our survival and flourishing. There is less agreement about how to understand this evident fact. At one extreme, one could take it as a consequence of a capacity for strategic thinking, facilitated no doubt by suitable heuristics and shortcuts. Many economists would choose this option. At another extreme, one could take it as evidence that individual humans are often parts of larger-than-individual wholes, social selves, which can perform acts of which the actions of their component individuals are parts, on the basis of intentions and other states that do not reduce to states of these component individuals. This option, group agency, has been developed and defended by philosophers such as John Searle and Margaret Gilbert. Bratman's aim in this clear and careful book is to avoid both extremes by developing a concept of 'modest sociality' that links individual agents more closely than strategic thinking while remaining ontologically restrained in that it does not require plural agents or distributed states of mind. Modest sociality is constructed out of the intentions of individual cooperating people, and a central aim of the book is to argue that, if we understand intention and planning as he has described it in his earlier work, we do not have to do a lot more work to get the required middle position. He is not arguing that strategic thinking is unimportant in human life, or even that there could not be such thing as collective agency. Instead, he argues that strategic thinking all by itself is explanatorily inadequate, collective agency is not ontologically required, and modest sociality in many cases gets the advantages of both. So it is a concept we need.

The central idea is simple, but Bratman has to develop it carefully to make a case that his modest sociality does not collapse into either of the two unwanted extremes. The simple idea is that there is normally a 'persistent interdependence' between the intentions of people doing something together.

Each forms their own independent intentions, which refer to those of the other person or persons and which develop between their conception and their instantiation—they are refined and adapted to changing circumstances—in ways that reflect among other things what each takes the development of plans of the other to be. It is important that each of these intentions and their evolution is entirely the property of a single person, though they have an influence over one another that can vary from the superficial to the intimate. He spells this out in an increasing series of conditions that are not complete until half way through the book. Philosophers wanting to criticize or develop the idea will need to work through these conditions but for the purposes of a review it is enough to say that collapse to strategicity is prevented by the causal interdependence of the two people's intentions, while collapse to collective mentality is prevented by the ontological independence of the two, the fact that they are states of two distinct people. I expect that critics of the view will nibble away at the latter, asking whether one person's psychology really can sustain the degree of independent interdependence required.

Several features of views which integrate the psychology of cooperators more closely than Bratman does can be roughly reconstructed on his approach, usually with exceptions in limiting cases. For example, groups of people can exist—we's—since they are glued together by the interacting intentions of their agents. They are like social institutions or characters in literature. But appeal to their aims and intentions is just a short cut in explaining joint accomplishments. And, an important theme of the book, acting together normally involves shared obligations and is subject to norms created by the interaction. This is because people doing things together normally come to rely on one another doing their part, and normally know that they are leading others to depend on them. But there are exceptions, as when we are defrauding a third person, and each would do better to betray their partner in crime. Moreover, he allows that shared activity normally has moral presuppositions: too much deception or coercion will block it. (However, as he does not say, humans have usually lived with great imbalances of power and authority, and are rarely completely frank with one another, and yet have always relied on joint accomplishment.)

Bratman speaks of norms in a way that is not inevitably moral, and I think what it amounts to is that when we act together we usually generate expectations about what we will do and how we will do it, and count on one another to live up to them. I have the impression that in the case where, for example, we are defrauding someone we still generate criminal norms, honour among thieves, though these do not add up to all-things-considered moral obligations. He is not very explicit here, and I have the sense that he is at once seeing shared activity as a necessary background to morality and as something that need not add up to the traditional thing. (And, when it is put this vaguely, that seems right to me.) Bratman's aims are to capture as much

as possible along the explanatory and descriptive dimensions while conceding as little as possible ontologically. The result is a bit like a Gricean picture of verbal communication, though he does not make the analogy. Speakers pass their individual beliefs to one another, says Grice, by producing words with the expectation that others will acquire beliefs in part from seeing that the intention is that hearers recognize these intentions and explain them by postulating the required beliefs. Similarly, for Bratman, people get things done together by aiming at results that can only be achieved by shared action and by intending that others act in recognition of these aims. Communication is a special case of shared activity. And just as one can accept that the Gricean picture captures some essential consequences of human linguistic capacities while still asking whether it gives the basic mechanisms which make us capable of these feats, one could in a parallel way grant that Bratman has put together the core of what is needed to explain individual cases of shared accomplishment while remaining unconvinced that he has isolated the basic human capacities that make it an ubiquitous feature of our lives. Perhaps the complex mutual reference and sensitivity to evolving intentions that his account requires would be more than our poor little brains could handle, if we had to manage it for each shared act. The explanations would then be a little shallow, though the ontological point would stand, since as a matter of real psychology we would need a closer integration of our psychologies, one that rests on states that do not reduce to his individually based intentions. (Consider a child helping an adult with a task she does not really understand, for example, and then ask how much human action is really very similar.) I raise this because it is a natural question to ask, not because it is clear that the answer will produce a definite problem for him.

Resolving such issues is made harder by the fact that Bratman does not take himself to be analysing a pre-existing widely held concept. Modest sociality is a creation that can explain enough that we ought to name and use it, he thinks. But it lives or dies by its explanatory success and what does and does not follow from attributing it. Does it have to provide fundamental answers to questions about the origins of our social capacities? Does it have to apply to all cases of shared accomplishment, or just block too-quick ontologies of irreducible joint intention?

The 'continuity thesis' that he states in the introductory chapter holds that we do not have to add a lot to individual action-planning intentions to get an account of how we could accomplish things together. Is this how we humans do it? He makes a powerful case, so perhaps it is.