Conversation and Collective Belief

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Conversation and Collective Belief

Margaret Gilbert and Maura Priest

Abstract This article proposes that paradigmatic conversations involve the development of a *collective cognitive profile* of the parties. This occurs through the negotiation of a series of *collective beliefs*. Collective beliefs are constituted by commitments that are *joint* in a sense that is explained. The parties to any joint commitment have associated rights and obligations. This helps to entrench a given collective belief once established. Even when interlocutors do not manage to negotiate a collective belief whose content has explicitly been specified, they are likely to establish one or more associated *implicit* collective beliefs. This supports the idea of a conversation as a collective activity whose stages are marked by the development of a relatively stable collective cognitive profile of the parties. This idea is briefly related to some of the existing literature on conversation, including classic articles by Stalnaker and Lewis on presupposition and conversational score.

Keywords Collective belief · Conversation · Conversational score · Common ground · Groups · Individualism · Negotiation · Joint commitment · Presupposition · Obligation · Rebuke

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1 Introduction

This paper argues that *collective beliefs* as understood here play a central role in conversation. In particular, whatever else is going in the course of a paradigmatic conversation, the parties are negotiating the establishment of one or more collective beliefs on the basis of proposals made by one or another participant. In so arguing the paper draws on and develops in various ways an idea proposed by Margaret Gilbert some years ago.[1]

The first part of the paper introduces the relevant idea of collective belief, associating it with *collective belief ascriptions*—a familiar type of everyday utterance. The second part discusses the thesis about conversation just described. The third part relates this thesis to several other ideas about conversation, including influential positions expressed in classic articles by Robert Stalnaker and David Lewis.

The discussion of collective belief in the first part brings together points on the topic from a body of previously published philosophical work by Margaret Gilbert, and is intended primarily for those readers who are unfamiliar with that work.[2] It not only articulates the particular concept of collective belief at issue here, but argues that there are good reasons for thinking that this is the concept expressed when everyday collective belief ascriptions are made. In other words, it is not a technical concept.

2 Collective Belief

2.1 How are Collective Belief Ascriptions to be Understood?

In everyday language, we speak about the beliefs of individuals and also about the beliefs of groups. For example, we say things like "Professor Smith believes that analytic philosophy is overly technical." We also say things like "The Philosophy Department believes analytic philosophy is fine as it is." The groups in question may be of a wide variety of kinds. Thus they may be informal, transient, and have no specific name or label, like the group constituted by a couple of strangers who have just begun a conversation.[3] Participants in such cases, like those in the case of

[1] See Gilbert (1989: esp. 294–298).

[2] The initial presentation of these ideas in Gilbert (1987) and—at greater length—Gilbert (1989 ch. 5) has been followed by amplifications and clarifications in such articles and chapters as Gilbert (1994), (1996: Introduction), (2002), (2004), (2010a) (2010b).

[3] Does such a conversational pair constitute a group as opposed to a mere plurality of persons? Perhaps not prior to the conversation; once the conversation has started, it would seem that the answer is affirmative. See Simmel (1971: 24). For lengthy exploration of the relatively substantial idea of a group that is in play here see Gilbert (1989: ch. 4; 2006: ch. 8). Groups of this kind differ among themselves, of course, in important ways. One intuitive starting point that will be assumed in what follows is Rousseau's idea that a group in the sense in question is an *association* of some kind as opposed to a mere *aggregate* of persons.

more formally constituted, long-standing, named groups such as "the Philosophy Department," may all speak of what "we" [sc. collectively, or as a group] believe.

Sometimes what looks like the ascription of a belief to a group or, as we shall put it, *a collective belief ascription*, may not be so intended at all. Thus someone who says on some occasion, of himself (or herself) and another person "We believe that Jane's going to be late" might go on to clarify his meaning in some such way as this: "What I mean is, we all believe Jane's going to be late" or "What I mean is, we both believe Jane's going to be late." In that case, the speaker disclaims any intent to ascribe a belief to "us" as a group. In more technical terms, he explicitly gives his utterance a distributive reading. From here on out, we set such cases aside.

Collective belief ascriptions may appear problematic. They apparently ascribe one or more beliefs *to a group*. But can groups have beliefs? One may be happy with the idea that individual members of a group have beliefs, but not with the idea that the group itself has beliefs. Nonetheless we often make such statements. What provokes them? That is, what do they refer to? In short, what are *collective beliefs*?

Before the account of collective belief that will be central to this paper is introduced, some of the considerations that support it will be explained.

2.2 *Summative Accounts of Collective Beliefs*

What may at first seem to be an attractive account of collective belief ascriptions is expressed by Anthony Quinton who writes:

> We do, of course, speak freely of the mental properties and acts of a group in the way we do of individual people. Groups are said to have beliefs, emotions, and attitudes and to take decisions and make promises. But these ways of speaking are plainly metaphorical. To ascribe mental predicates to a group is always an indirect way of ascribing such predicates to its members. With such mental states as beliefs and attitudes the ascriptions are of what I have called a summative kind. To say that the industrial working class is determined to resist anti-trade union laws is to say that all or most industrial workers are so minded.[4]

The above account will be referred to as "summative" here, but the term will be used in a broader sense than Quinton's: A *summative account* of collective beliefs is one according to which, for a group G to believe that p it is *logically necessary* that all or most members of G believe that p. The condition that *all or most members of G believe that p* will be referred to as *the summative condition*.

[4] Quinton (1975-6: 17, see also p. 9).

Is the correct account of collective belief a summative one? Emile Durkheim, one of the founders of sociology, can be read as rejecting a summative account of collective beliefs. In *The Rules of Sociological Method* Durkheim expressed the view that anything properly called a collective belief will be "external to individual consciousnesses." How should this phrase be interpreted? Textual evidence suggests that a collective belief is "external to individual consciousnesses" insofar as it is not necessary for *any* individual member of a group to believe that p in order for the group to believe that p.[5]

Could that possibly be correct? While this paper will not attempt further to discuss Durkheim, it will present considerations that support a positive answer. First, it argues *that fulfillment of the summative condition with respect to some proposition p is neither necessary nor sufficient for the collective belief that p.* It starts with the issue of *sufficiency.*

2.3 The Insufficiency of the Summative Condition

According to the type of summative account Quinton envisages:

> A group G believes that p, logically speaking, if and only if all or most members of G believe that p.

This is perhaps the first account of collective belief that is likely to come to mind. Call it *the simple summative account.*

In connection with this account, suppose that every member of the marching band believes that driving at speeds of over 50 mph is dangerous. But no member has ever discussed this belief of his with any other member. On the contrary, in conversation with others most are inclined to deny they have it for fear of mockery. In this case, despite every group member holding this belief we would not be inclined to ascribe it to the marching band.

It seems, then, that fulfillment of the summative condition is not sufficient for collective belief. The simple summative account of collective belief must, then, be rejected, for it entails such sufficiency.

Perhaps something very close to the summative condition is sufficient for collective belief. The marching band case illustrates the point that individual beliefs may be kept private. Do we find that the *marching band* does not believe that driving at speeds over 50 mph is dangerous *only* because the band members' beliefs are private? It seems not: even if every member of the band knows about the belief of every other member this does not seem enough: each member may think he is the only one with this piece of knowledge.

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[5] See Gilbert (1989: ch. 5) on this point and for further discussion of Durkheim (1895) on collective belief.

Perhaps the summative account can be saved by adding a condition of *common knowledge* of the kind familiar from the work of David Lewis (1969), Stephen Schiffer (1972), and others. According to one popular account of common knowledge: it is common knowledge in G that p if and only if (a) p; (b) everyone in G knows that p; (c) everyone in G knows that (b), and so on, *ad infinitum*. There is no need to consider whether or not this is the best account on offer for present purposes. Certainly the "ad infinitum" clause in this account has given some pause.[6] The reader may substitute his or her preferred account in considering the following *complex summative account* of group belief:

> A group G believes that p, logically speaking, if and only if (1) all most of the members of G believe that p, and (2) it is common knowledge in G that (1).

Though it may appear more promising than the simple summative account, the complex account faces a difficulty it shares with the former account. At its core lies a fact about what all or most individual members of G *personally believe*. That is what the common knowledge, in this case, concerns. A collective belief, however, is supposedly a belief *of the group*. Intuitively, that each member of the group personally believes p does not make the belief that p a belief of the group, and the addition of common knowledge as in the complex account does not change this. The group plays no essential role in such a set-up.

An example may help to back this up. Suppose—as seems likely—that that every member of a given philosophy department believes that ants are smaller than elephants. Further suppose that it is common knowledge in the department that each member believes this. Despite each member of the department so believing, and despite the common knowledge of this belief amongst all members, we would not be inclined to say "The Philosophy Department believes that ants are smaller than elephants". At least, we would not be so inclined without more information about the case.

The Philosophy Department is already a group. One might think however that were certain parties collectively to believe something, that would make them into a group. If this is right, it too casts doubt on both of the summative accounts so far considered. Suppose—as seems likely— that all females 59.7 inches high believe that ants are smaller than elephants. Intuitively, this does not raise the population consisting of such females to the level of a group. Nor does the supposition that it is common knowledge among them that they all have the belief in question have this effect.

To help sharpen the point that the conditions posited in neither of the summative accounts considered are sufficient for collective belief, consider the following example. Imagine that the same fourteen individuals make up both the philosophy club and the humanities soft ball team. Most of these individuals believe it is always best to run on a fly ball; this belief is common knowledge among them. Let us assume that the humanities softball team believes that it is

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[6] See Vandershraaf and Sillari (2009) for an overview and comparison of a variety of accounts, some highly technical. The account in Gilbert (1989: ch. 4), introduced in the course of discussion of the nature of acting together, is one of the accounts discussed.

always best to run on a fly ball, as well it might. There is no contradiction in also saying that the *philosophy club* holds no opinion whatsoever on the matter. Indeed, this is very likely true.

It seems, then, that for a group to believe that p it is not logically sufficient either that all or most group members believe that p, or that there is common knowledge within the group that all or most members believe that p. A further argument for this conclusion will be offered shortly.[7]

2.4 The Non-Necessity of the Summative Condition

Imagine that the University Event committee is meeting to discuss the celebration of the University's 50th anniversary. Phyllis, a member of the committee, suggests, "J.K. Rowling would make a great keynote speaker." Some discussion ensues, with positive comments outnumbering negative ones. After a while someone asks, "So we agree that Rowling would make great speaker?" This time the members of the group either voice their agreement or remain silent. The matter is settled: Rowling would make a great speaker.

At this point it would be natural and appropriate for any member of the committee to make any of the following collective belief ascriptions:

"We agree that Rowling would be a great speaker"
"We think that..."
"In our opinion..."
"We decided that.."
"Our view at this point is that..."

Indeed, it seems that all of these statements are true.

It has already been argued that the summative condition is not sufficient for collective belief. It will now be argued that it is not necessary.

Though the Event committee now believes that Rowling would be a great speaker, it is possible that most members of the committee do not personally believe what the group believes. There are various possibilities here, including the following.

Perhaps most of the members of the Event Committee thought at the time of the discussion that Rowling would be a poor speaker. Perhaps they did not speak up during the discussion out of fear of disapproval from certain other members. Thus they let the belief that Rowling would be a great speaker become established as the

[7] Our argument so far leave it open whether a summative account of collective belief other than those considered here may offer conditions *sufficient* for collective belief. That said, an account that offers both necessary and sufficient conditions is preferable. This, as we argue in the text below, will have to be a non-summative account. See Gilbert (1989: ch. 5) for discussion of a summative account that is more complex than those considered here. Gilbert argues that that account also fails to offer conditions sufficient for collective belief.

group's belief. Having done so, they did not then change their own minds on the topic.

Or perhaps most of the members had no opinion on the matter. They may never have heard of Rowling or did not feel they knew enough about her to form any *personal opinion* about her speaking skills. This does not prevent the Event Committee *as a group* from forming the pertinent belief about Rowling's speaking skills.

Given that these points are accepted, we must infer that the summative condition is not a necessary condition for the existence of a collective belief. Thus no form of summative account of collective belief—all forms of which, by definition, include the summative condition—can be correct as a general account. By a "general account", here, we mean an account that purports to provide a set of conditions that are both individually necessary and jointly sufficient for collective belief.

One can easily go further here, and in so doing back up a point that was suggested earlier to be Durkheim's. That is, one can argue that not only is it not necessary to the existence of a collective belief that p that all or most members of the group in question believe that p, *it is not necessary that any members of the group personally believe that p in order that the group believes that p.*

To make this more concrete, consider again the Event committee. One might think Phyllis, who initially said that Rowling was a great speaker, must have believed this. But of course she need not have. Perhaps Phyllis believed Rowling was a terrible speaker and, having some grudge against her, wanted to see her make a fool of herself in front of the group. Evidently, in principle at least, the whole Event committee scenario could have transpired without a single member of the committee personally believing what the committee came to believe about Rowling. Nor need anyone change his or her personal position after the collective belief was formed.

It is perhaps worth emphasizing that the present point is not that such a radical disjunction between collective belief and the personal beliefs of members is *common*. Whether or not that is so is ultimately an empirical matter. The point is that such a radical disjunction is *possible*.

2.5 *Collective Belief and Corresponding Rights and Obligations*

Now consider a possible continuation of the Event committee example. The committee moves on to other matters. Eventually, the meeting begins to wind down. The group is reviewing their accomplishments of the day when one member unexpectedly speaks up, "J.K. Rowling will be an awful speaker." In a tone of rebuke, another member objects: "But we thought she would be great!"

This brings to light an important aspect of collective belief: when one group member speaks against an established group belief, he is liable to be met with a negative response from the other members, such as "But...!" in the above dialogue. This response is directed specifically at the speaker's contradiction of the collective belief as such. Thus the person who responds justifies his "But..." by saying "We thought".[8] As is also indicated in the above dialogue, the response in such situations may take the form of a *rebuke*. What is it to rebuke someone? Though it implies that person has done something wrong, it does more than that. One person may say to another, "You just did something wrong. Thank goodness you did! You were beginning to seem too perfect." In this case the speaker tells someone he did something wrong without rebuking him. What, then, distinguishes telling someone of his error from rebuking him or, in other terms, *telling him off*?

A rebuke is a verbal form of punitive behavior.[9] One needs a special standing or authority to punish a person—or to rebuke him.[10] In what does that standing consist?

Pursuing this question, let us return to the example. It seems that the dissenting group member may appropriately respond with an apology, perhaps accompanied by an excuse. He might reply, "Oh, of course, you're right. I'm sorry. We agreed that Rowling would be a great speaker. I was thinking of someone else." His responding apologetically suggests that his comment was more than a simple error; it was an *offense* against his interlocutor, qua group member. His apology also suggests the aptness of a group member's *demanding* that he not speak against the group belief, should it seem that he was about to do so. As with a rebuke, a demand of the kind in question requires a special standing.

All of this suggests, again, that the group members as such were *entitled* to the absence of the action that caused the offense—that a *right* of theirs been violated by the offender. The offender had a correlative obligation *to them* not to perform the offending action. This is what puts the other members in a position to *rebuke* him for performing it.[11] Because a right of theirs was violated, the group members, as such, may engage in this form of behavior. They will thereby enforce their right, call the offender to account, and put him on notice that any similar behavior may provoke a similarly punitive reaction.

What is it about a collective belief that gives the parties the standing to rebuke one another for gainsaying the proposition in question? How does a collective belief generate rights that, when violated, justify verbally punitive measures?

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[8] For further discussion on this point see Gilbert (1987).

[9] Cf. Hart (1961).

[10] Such "authority-presupposing" terms often have broader senses, which can lead to confusion. See Gilbert (2006: ch. 1).

[11] Cf. Hart (1961). Note that the obligations here are obligations *to* someone to do a certain thing. Such obligations are generally referred to as "directed" obligations. It is this type of obligation that correlates with rights of the type at issue here, referred to as "claim-rights" in rights theory.

A positive answer is proposed in the next sub-section. First we revisit the complex summative account of belief with this question in mind.

Consider a situation in which the conditions of the complex summative account are satisfied: most members of a breakfast club believe that getting up at 4:30 am is unpleasant, and this is common knowledge amongst them, qua members of the club. One day a club member, Sue, says to another member, Brian, "My new job requires me to get up at 4:30 am every day. That's fine with me. I love being an early riser." Is this enough to justify an offended rebuke on Brian's part, all else being equal? It does not seem so. Brian seems not to be in a position to demand that she say anything else, or to rebuke her for saying what she says. Of course, Brian may be *surprised* by Sue's statement—but to be surprised is not in itself to have been offended against. In expressing a minority view Sue is doing something *unusual* but this does not mean she violates anyone's right.

This is another argument against the sufficiency of the conditions of the complex summative account of collective belief (and, a fortiori, against the sufficiency of the summative condition). As was observed earlier, the simple fact that *we believe* certain things appears to put any one member of the pertinent group in a position to rebuke a group member who says something contrary to what we believe. The Sue and Brian example shows that even when the conditions of the complex summative account are fulfilled that does not suffice to put group members in that position.

There is a non-summative account of collective belief that better accords with all the observations made so far concerning everyday collective belief ascriptions. To invoke a technical term that will be explained shortly, it is a *plural subject* account of collective belief.

2.6 A Plural Subject Account of Collective Belief

In everyday speech one hears frequent references not only to what we *believe*, but also to what we are doing, what we like, what we prefer, what we intend, and so on. In earlier work Margaret Gilbert has argued that all of these expressions refer to those who are connected in a specified manner. To use a phrase that will be explained shortly, they must be *jointly committed* in a certain way. The following discussion focuses on the *basic case* of joint commitment in which no prior authority relations are involved. This is the case most apposite for present purposes.[12]

What does it take for there to be a joint commitment? Roughly: in conditions of common knowledge, each party must have openly expressed his or her willingness

[12] On basic versus non-basic cases see e.g. Gilbert (2006: ch. 7).

jointly to commit them all to believe some proposition, accept some goal, endorse some value, and so on, as a body, thus effecting such a *joint commitment* of them all.

Gilbert has used her technical phrase "plural subject" to refer to those who are jointly committed with one another in some way: these people constitute a plural subject in her sense. The key to plural subject-hood, then, is joint commitment.

According to *the plural subject account* of collective belief, for persons A and B. A and B collectively believe that p if and only if A and B form a plural subject of the belief that p.

Alternatively and equivalently (and more perspicuously):

A and B collectively believe that p if and only if A and B are jointly committed to believe that p as a body.

Though for present purposes this type of two person case will be our focus, there would seem to be no limit in principle on how many persons can be involved.

Some further amplificatory remarks are in order.[13] Those who are jointly committed need not know each other personally or know of each other. Thus A and B may collectively believe that p *qua persons who share a certain feature*, such as "being part of the crowd in the square" or "being members of Indiana University".

The notion of *commitment* at issue here is a *normative* one: to be committed in the sense at issue here is to be subject to a type of normative constraint as opposed to being in a particular psychological state.[14] A joint commitment falls into a class of commitments that may plausibly be thought of as *commitments of the will.*

A joint commitment as understood here is not an aggregate of independent personal commitments such as one accrues by virtue of making a personal decision. By definition here, a *personal commitment* is created by the person in question and unilaterally rescindable by him. If Sarah and Nick are jointly committed in some way they have *together committed the two of them.*

As a result each of them is, of course, *committed*, but these commitments are not personal commitments as just defined. What we may call the *associated individual commitments* of Sarah and Nick are such that neither one holds sway over his or her commitment as one does over the personal commitment engendered by one's personal decision: if I want to change a personal decision of mine it is as simple as changing my own mind. But a joint commitment to which I am subject is not mine to change. It is *ours,* rather, and only *we* together can rescind it. Hence each is stuck with his (or her) individual commitment till the joint commitment is rescinded by both.

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[13] For extended discussion see Gilbert (2006: ch. 7); also Gilbert (2003).

[14] See Gilbert (2013).

What is it for people jointly to commit one another to believe some proposition *as a body*—the particular form of joint commitment at issue in the plural subject account of collective belief? One way of explaining this is roughly as follows: the parties will fulfill their joint commitment if—at least in the context of the present interaction, and to the extent that this is possible, they emulate, by virtue of the several actions and utterances of all combined, a single body that believes that p.[15] In more familiar terms, they are to act as if they are "of one mind" with respect to p.

In this connection it is important to emphasize that in order that the parties conform to their joint commitment to believe that p as a body *it is not necessary for each individual personally to believe that p*. Thus no one is committed through the joint commitment to himself personally believing that p. That is perhaps just as well since many philosophers have doubted whether one can believe something at will.

What difference does it make to a person, normatively speaking, that he is subject to a joint commitment? On the one hand, he is subject to a commitment of the general type a personal decision subjects him to. Though this matter is controversial, it can be argued that one who is subject to any such a commitment *has reason* to act accordingly, where that means something like this: all else being equal, he must act accordingly if he is to respond appropriately to the considerations bearing on his situation.[16] Indeed, he must ignore his own inclinations, at least, in face of an unrescinded commitment of this type—a type that may be referred to as a *commitment of the will*.[17]

A *joint* commitment, however, does more than commit the individual parties in corresponding ways; *it establishes an important, many-faceted relationship between the parties*. Discussion of this here must be relatively brief.[18]

Consider the situation in which one party fails to conform to a joint commitment. It seems that, intuitively, the other party or parties have the standing to rebuke him for this failure. Again, if one party threatens not to conform, the other party is in a position to demand that he conform after all. As indicated in our previous discussion of the continuation of the Event Committee case, this suggests that *any one party to a joint commitment has a right to any other's conformity to the commitment, and that each party is correspondingly obligated to each party to conform*. That the parties to a joint commitment have these rights and obligations will be assumed in what follows.

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[15] Note that the idea is not that they are to emulate a human collectivity with the belief in question. To suppose that it is is to see the joint commitment account of collective belief as circular. "Single person" is an alternative that would presumably avoid any such thought. See also the alternative offered in the text.

[16] As understood here, to *have reason* to do something is not necessarily to have *a reason* to do it, where having a reason implies that some good will come of one's doing it. See Gilbert (2006: ch 2).

[17] For further discussion see e.g. Gilbert (2006: ch. 2).

[18] See e.g. Gilbert (2006: ch. 7) for further discussion.

Let us go back now to the plural subject account of collective belief. Given this account, if Max and Tom form a plural subject of believing that p, *each of them is obligated to the other* to do his or part in believing that p as a body. Should Max or Tom not act accordingly, they default on an obligation to the other, and the other's corresponding right to his performance has been violated. The other is then in a position to pressure him in the authoritative manner of a rebuke. Both Max and Tom will understand this. Forming a plural subject of believing that p gives Tom and Max *a basis for rebuking one another should the appropriate behavior not occur.*

We can now offer the following interpretation of what went on in the Event Committee. That committee forms a plural subject that is jointly committed to believe as a body that Rowling will be a great speaker. This obligates all members of such plural subject to act in certain ways. In particular, it obligates them to act as though each is the mouthpiece of a single believer of the proposition that J.K. Rowling would be a great speaker. When one group member violates this obligation, the other members may appropriately rebuke him. The group members had rights one against the other to his acting as though Rowling is a great speaker and the dissenting member violated that right. In this way he offended against them.

2.7 Concluding Remarks on Collective Belief

In this section of the paper we have outlined an account of collective belief in terms of a joint commitment to believe that such-and-such as a body. This plural subject account appears to fit quite well the phenomenon referred to when people say things like "The Philosophy department believes that it is too small to be viable" or "We [sc. collectively] think that she will come tonight". Among other things, it does not entail that any of the people in question personally believe what the group believes. This accords with observations made in discussion of the Event committee.

Given what has been argued so far in this paper, the plural subject account may well be correct as a general account of the phenomenon associated with everyday collective belief ascriptions.[19] Rather than pursuing that question further here, we discuss a thesis that links the dynamics of everyday conversation to the phenomenon of collective belief *according to the plural subject account.* If that thesis is correct, then whatever its relation to locutions common in everyday speech, the plural subject account of collective belief describes a phenomenon that cannot be ignored by theorists of conversation.

[19] Since Gilbert proposed this account of collective belief, a literature has grown up concerning whether collective belief in her sense is *belief* or rather some other cognitive state. There is no need to go into this discussion for present purposes. For references to this literature and for discussion of the issue, see Gilbert (2002).

3 The Negotiation of Collective Belief Thesis

3.1 Preliminary Remarks

The Event Committee case strongly suggests a particular thesis relating the dynamics of everyday conversation to collective belief. This section aims to introduce that thesis and explore some of its ramifications. It does not aim to present anything like a full treatment.

We shall not attempt to characterize conversations as such. We operate, rather, with an intuitive notion. We focus on verbal interchanges between two or more people that appear otherwise to have the character of conversations and that contain, *at a minimum*, an assertion made by one of the parties. The thesis at issue here can most easily be expounded in relation to assertions. The class of verbal interchanges just described may contain all *paradigmatic* conversations. To say this is not to say that the thesis we shall discuss has no relevance to other classes of conversation as well. On the contrary, it surely has such relevance, though we shall not explore that here.[20]

Evidently, people engage in conversation for a variety of collective or individual purposes, such as becoming better informed on some topic, making plans, shooting the breeze, or increasing mutual respect. We shall not pronounce on whether or not there is some purpose, collective or individual, that characterizes all conversationalists as such. We do not see the thesis we discuss as dependent on any particular assumption in this regard. We do suppose that the conversations at issue are genuine, as opposed to pretend conversations such as one observes on the stage at the theater.

We shall not discuss whether conversationalists as such must collectively believe that they are having a conversation, though we take that to be a plausible idea. We are concerned with collective beliefs that emerge in the context of any such "framework" collective beliefs.

Most likely there is more than one class of collective belief that so emerges. Our focus is one of these classes of collective belief. To give a rough advance explanation of what that class is: we are concerned with collective beliefs such that the proposition in question—the proposition that is collectively believed—has either been verbally expressed by one of the parties or implied by such verbal expression in the course of the conversation.[21]

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[20] Gilbert (1989: 296) briefly relates questions and orders to the thesis.

[21] Drawing on Gilbert's account of collective belief and her notion of joint commitment, Carassa and Colombetti (2009a) propose that, centrally, conversations involve a negotiation of *joint meaning*. Joint meaning as they understand this is a collective belief to the effect that, roughly, the speaker intended to perform a particular speech act. For instance, he was simply making a statement, or he was both doing this and issuing an invitation. We take their discussion to be complementary to that in Gilbert (1989) and the present paper. See Carassa and Colombetti (2009a), (2009b) and references therein for related discussions in which the authors characterize

3.2 The NCB Thesis

In the Event committee case a collective belief came about through a discussion among committee members of the merits of a particular proposal. Because of its relatively formal context, this discussion may not count as a paradigmatic conversation. That said, it strongly suggests the thesis about such conversations that we discuss in this section. This is the thesis that the process of everyday conversation is structured around collective belief formation.[22] More specifically, in a paradigmatic conversation, whatever else is going on, *the parties are negotiating the establishment of one or another collective belief on the basis of proposals put forward by one or another interlocutor.* We shall call this the *negotiation of collective belief* thesis—more briefly the *NCB* thesis.[23]

In the rest of this section we give some examples of how the NCB thesis construes a variety of example conversations and conversational moves, to some extent elaborating the thesis further while doing so. In all of these cases we assume that there are no special background collective beliefs or other factors that might skew one's interpretation of what is going on.

Consider two individuals, call them Jenny and Tom, waiting together at a bus stop on a sunny day. The two fall into conversation. "Sure is a beautiful day!" says Tom cheerfully. Jenny, whose actual preference is cool cloudy weather, replies, "I suppose it is." She speaks pleasantly, but without great conviction. According to the NCB thesis what happened, among other things, was this.

First, Tom proposed for collective belief the proposition that the day in question is a beautiful day. In other terms, he made a particular *collective belief proposal.* More precisely he makes what we shall refer to as an *explicit* collective belief proposal. That is, he proposes that the parties collectively believe that p by uttering a sentence that expresses proposition p.

(Footnote 21 continued)
the conversational process in terms of Gilbert's idea of joint commitment. Another important discussion that suggests an "emerging" collective belief of a particular type (though it is not couched in these terms) is Brennan and Clark (1996) on what the authors refer to as "conceptual pacts". Here the envisaged pact or agreement [which we would construe as a matter of joint commitment as in Gilbert (2006: ch. 10)] relates to *the way in which each party is to conceptualize something.* In fact one might argue that insofar as conversationalists come to make various conceptual pacts these relate to how we are *collectively* to understand certain terms, and so on, as in "What's a vixen?" "It's a female fox" "Ah". The parties now collectively believe that a vixen is a female fox (whatever they personally believe). Fixing their collective belief about what a vixen is will be the primary need of the conversational process—given that vixens are the topic of conversation. We regret that there is no space in the present article for further consideration of these and related topics and publications, though see the note on Clark (1996) in the text and notes below.

[22] Here and in other statements of the thesis we refer to collective beliefs in the class roughly indicated earlier in this section.

[23] See Gilbert (1989: 294–298) and the rest of Chap. 5 of that work for further pertinent discussion.

Second, Jenny considered Tom's proposal and in spite of her personal belief to the contrary decided to go along with Tom and believe the proposition in question collectively with him, indicating that she was ready to do this by her reply. In other terms, *she accepted his collective belief proposal.*

Thus, through their conversation, Jenny and Tom together established a collective belief that would persist at least through their current interaction, all else being equal.[24] We shall refer to collective beliefs that are established through the making and accepting of an explicit collective belief proposal as *explicit collective beliefs.*

In this example, Jenny does not personally believe what the two collectively believe, but this does not matter. Our collectively believing that p does not entail that I personally believe that p nor does it entail that I do not personally disbelieve it. The same goes for the other person or people involved.[25]

One can imagine all kinds of variations on the first example conversation. For instance:

Tom: "Sure is a beautiful day!"
Jennie (in a tone of doubt): "Mmm"
Tom: "But...it is so bright and sunny!"
Jennie: "You're right: it really is a beautiful day."

Tom has to work harder here than in the previous example to establish the collective belief that it is a beautiful day.

What Tom does in his second move in the negotiation is *give a reason* for believing the proposition originally proposed for collective belief. Many negotiations over a given collective belief may be expected to involve such reason-giving. This may well lead to further collective beliefs, as well as the one originally proposed, to the effect that such-and-such a proposition is true *and that its truth is a reason for believing the original proposition.*

One might be inclined think that this has happened once Jennie responds as she does in the above dialogue. That it has happened, however, would be clearer had Jennie responded, as she might very well have responded, in some such way as this.

Jennie: "True! I guess it has to be a beautiful day, then!"

Here she indicates by "True!" and "...., then!" that she accepts the following propositions that Tom has proposed for collective belief. First: it is very bright and sunny. Second: If it is very bright and sunny, then it is a beautiful day" It is true that Tom does not spell out the second proposition, as he does the first. That he is indeed proposing it for collective belief, however, this is clearly indicated by his beginning with "But..."

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[24] In our discussion in this paper we shall not address the ways in which established collective beliefs can be amended. Suffice it to say that such amendment requires the concurrence of the parties.

[25] See section I above.

As the first example conversation shows, "negotiating" a collective belief can be as simple as making an assertion and receiving an affirmative response. More precisely, in conditions of common knowledge you may express to your interlocutor your readiness jointly to commit the two of you to believing some proposition as a body, and he may immediately do likewise in response, thus ensuring that the two of you are jointly committed to believe that proposition as a body. In other words, he may promptly seal the deal.

3.3 Ways of Closing the Deal: Accepting a Collective Belief Proposal

There are many ways in which one's acceptance of a proposed collective belief might be shown. It need not involve verbal behavior. A nod of the head, for instance, might suffice, as might a smile, in the right context. If words are used a simple "Yes" may suffice, depending on its tone. Similarly, the expression "Uh-huh", said in the right way, is a form of acceptance. Something like this is presumably the most economical way to make sure one's acceptance is verbally marked. A hesitant "Ye-es" or a quizzical "Uh-huh" may lead to further discussion, and be intended so to lead. Or it may serve to indicate that the proposition in question is *not* yet collectively believed, though it has not been pushed off the table. In such a case a participant may describe the situation to one who asks what they collectively think by saying: "We've not yet decided *what* we think about that".

In a given context silence may rightly be taken as acceptance. For instance, suppose two friends, Dan and Debbie, are out on a walk, and are engaged in conversation. Debbie is doing most of the talking and it is clear that Dan is focusing closely on what she says. She may preface some of what she says with locutions like "We both know that...", "It is obvious that ..." and "Everyone agrees that..." Such statements, which implicitly ascribe a particular view to the hearer, seem especially likely to move the hearer to voice an objection if he takes them to be false, so it may be especially reasonable to take his silence as acceptance in this context.

It is not clear that silence should always be taken as acceptance, even given that one knows one has been heard. One who maintains a "stony silence" in the face of someone else's assertion is likely to be thought to be refusing to negotiate any collective belief rather than to be accepting the other's proposal for such a belief, or offering a counter-proposal.

Nonetheless, in order to avoid misunderstandings, it is probably best to make an explicitly rejecting move such as saying "I can't speak to that", or the more sweeping "I don't want to talk to you", or physically turning away. If something like this is done, the proposal of a particular collective belief has gone nowhere, at least for the time being. A rather special kind of rejecting move will be mentioned shortly.

In some contexts it may be mutually agreed that a given person's silence counts as acceptance. Thus suppose someone has been rendered temporarily or permanently incapable of speech and almost all movement, but has the ability to understand his friend's speech and tap the table with his own finger, though with great difficulty. An understanding could be established between them that, roughly, as long as he does not tap the table with his finger, he is in agreement with what is said by his friend. These two are now in a position to establish a series of collective beliefs through a series of assertions followed by silence.

3.4 Ways of Rejecting a Collective Belief Proposal

Collective belief proposals can be *rejected* in various ways such as a refusal to negotiate (as with a stony silence), or a vocal rejection of the proposal. We say something about moves of the later kind in due course. Another thing one's interlocutor may do is, in effect, substitute for one's original proposal an alternative, perhaps one more, or less, sweeping in its scope. The following short conversation involves a special type of alternative proposal:

Tom: "Sure is a beautiful day!"
Jennie: "So *you* think!"

If Tom's response to Jennie is of the accepting variety, the two of them have come collectively to believe not that *it is a beautiful day*, but that *Tom thinks* it is a beautiful day.

Here Jennie's contribution to the negotiation is simultaneously to reject the proposition proposed for collective belief and, in effect, to offer to replace it with a closely related proposition about what Tom thinks, namely: he thinks the proposition he proposed for collective belief is true.

The foregoing example makes it clear that *we* can have views about what you, on the one hand, and I, on the other, think, and so on. In other words, some collective beliefs are about the thoughts or opinions of one or more of the participants.

In some special contexts, indeed, most likely those that are not paradigmatic conversations, it may be understood that the interlocutors are only really interested in the subjective stance of one party. This may be the case, for instance, in certain situations involving a psychotherapist and client. As the client says such things as "I think that...", "I'm uncomfortable when..." "I'm worried that....", and the therapist responds with words indicative of acceptance of the subjective proposition in question such as "I see", a series of collective beliefs about what the client thinks, feels, worries about, and so on may be established.[26]

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[26] Cf. Gilbert (1989: 297).

3.5 A Dual Role for Certain Sentences

Even outside special contexts such as that of a psychotherapy session, people often seem to propose for collective belief a proposition that concerns a propositional attitude of their own. Thus Kerry may say: "I like our chances in the upcoming basketball game". Another way of saying roughly the same thing would be "I think our chances of winning the upcoming basketball game are good". The role of such sentences in the production of collective beliefs in conversation is of some interest and, we make some tentative remarks on that score here.

For the sake of a label we shall refer to these sentences as speaker propositional attitude sentences or, for short, *SPA sentences*. They are tailored to ascribe a propositional attitude to the speaker. As we shall put it, they are tailored to express *SPA propositions*. In many if not most cases the proposition to which the speaker's propositional attitude is directed—what we shall call its *target*— is not itself an SPA proposition.[27] Rather, its truth or falsity is independent of the speaker's propositional attitudes. We shall refer to such propositions as, simply, non-SPA propositions, and the sentences tailored to express them, non-SPA sentences.

We shall focus our discussion on SPA sentences expressing SPA propositions with non-SPA target propositions, such as: the sentence, said by Tom, "I think it's a beautiful day". This is a SPA sentence expressing a SPA proposition; *I, Tom, think* it is a beautiful day. The target of this proposition is a non-SPA target proposition—the proposition that *it is* a beautiful day.

Consider now the following conversation:

Kerry: "I like our chances in the upcoming basketball game"
Jack: "No way, our team has no depth this year"
Phyllis: "That's wrong! With Mark Smith as our go to guy, we have a shot."
Kerry: "He's the one!"
Jack: "So...maybe we do have a shot".

Kerry begins by uttering an SPA sentence. In responding as he does, however, Jack does not address the corresponding SPA proposition, but focuses on the question of their team's chances in the upcoming game: are they good—or not? In other terms, he focuses on the non-SPA proposition that is the target of the relevant SPA proposition. Phyllis continues along the same lines, as do the others in what follows. Kerry, for her part, may well not take Jack's response as a change of subject, but rather as a challenge to what she said.

[27] It seems that the target of a SPA proposition could be another a SPA proposition. Thus consider such cases as: "I think I believe him", or "I'm not sure I really do think that".

Things could have gone differently. In particular, Jack might have focused on the relevant SPA proposition, responding to Kerry with, for instance: "I know you do. I don't though."

It seems, then, that not only can SPA sentences be used as vehicles for proposing SPA propositions for collective belief. They can be—and often are—used as vehicles for proposing non-SPA propositions. Indeed, it may be that with SPA sentences of the kind under discussion the default interpretation of what is going on when one of them is uttered is that both the pertinent SPA and its target non-SPA proposition is being proposed. Thus it may be that these SPA sentences are "Janus-sentences".[28]

A respondent, then, has a variety of options: focus on the pertinent SPA proposition, the target non-SPA proposition, or both. In the following dialogue Kate focuses on both and adds something of her own:

Bill: I really hate the fact that the philosophy department is moving to another building.
Kate: I know, so do I. It really is a shame.

Kate's response to Bill indicates a willingness jointly to commit them to at least the following collective beliefs:

1. Bill hates the fact that the philosophy department is moving... [The SPA proposition expressed by the SPA sentence Bill uttered; affirmed by "I know".]
2. The philosophy department moving to a new building is a bad thing. [The non-SPA target proposition associated with Bill's propositional attitude, affirmed by "It really is a shame"].[29]
3. Kate feels as Bill does. [A new SPA proposition; indicated by "so do I".]

In light of the foregoing we now consider a case based on a real-life conversation, where the first speaker felt that something had gone wrong. The pertinent part of this conversation went as follows:

Tabitha: "I prefer strawberry ice-cream to any other."
Elmo: "No, no...I prefer chocolate."[30]

Why did Elmo's response seem odd to Tabitha? This is not something one can be sure of, but suppose that, as we believe, she intended to put forward a SPA proposition—something along the lines of "I think strawberry ice-cream is the best". Then his "No, no..." would have seemed inappropriate, assuming that he had both understood her intention and that he himself intended to express a SPA

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[28] Cf. Nowell-Smith (1954): "*a given word* can not only do two or more jobs at once but also *is often in the absence of counter-evidence or express withdrawal presumed to be doing two or more jobs at once*" (emphasis added). He refers to this as *the Janus principle* (p. 100).

[29] Note that the objective proposition in question here is not the proposition that the department is moving but the proposition that its moving is something bad—apt to be hated.

[30] See Gilbert (1989: ch. 5).

proposition with his next words, that is: "I prefer chocolate". After all, *his* preferring chocolate ice-cream does not show that *she* does not prefer strawberry.

Where might Elmo have been coming from? One possibility is this: he was taking Tabitha to be intent on proposing that they collectively believe the non-SPA target proposition of the SPA proposition associated with her utterance, namely: *strawberry ice-cream is preferable to any other.* Wanting their collective belief about what was objectively preferable to reflect his personal preference, he therefore objected, indicating his willingness to participate in one collective belief but not another. Though it might have been more natural from the point of view of English conversational style to speak more along the lines of Jack and Phyllis in their responses to Kerry, omitting any reference to his own perspective, he couched his objection to the pertinent non-SPA proposition using a SPA sentence—perhaps because Tabitha herself had used such a sentence.[31]

3.6 Implicit Collective Beliefs

To what extent, if at all, can the parties to a paradigmatic conversation fail to establish one or more collective beliefs in the course of that conversation? In discussing this question we focus, as before, on the explicit collective belief proposals made in the course of a given paradigmatic conversation, the way these are handled by the protagonists, and the consequences of this handling.

Suppose that every collective belief proposal put forward by one party is rejected by the other party or parties. Here is a simple case:

Tom: "Sure is a beautiful day, isn't it?"
Jennie: "No it isn't. It's far too hot!"

At this point in this conversation there seems to be a stalemate. It seems wrong to say either that Tom and Jennie collectively believe that it's a beautiful day or that they collectively believe that it isn't.

Note that even if it were true that there is *nothing* that Tom and Jennie collectively believe as a result of this conversation, that would not refute the NCB thesis. Tom's contribution can still be viewed as a move in the negotiation of a collective belief, as can Jennie's. He proposes the collective belief that it is undoubtedly a beautiful day, and Jennie rejects his proposal. The negotiation stalls, but it is still a negotiation.

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[31] An alternative way of interpreting this case is offered in Gilbert (1989: 296). This too was developed in accordance with the NCB thesis and accords with it. We shall not attempt to adjudicate between these two options here.

In this example, it may seem that, indeed, the parties have failed to establish any collective beliefs between them. It can be argued, however, that this is not so.[32]

We have so far considered only what we are referring to as *explicit collective beliefs*, that is, beliefs established on the basis of a verbal expression of the proposition in question. It can be argued that these are not the only kind of collective beliefs that may be established in the course of a conversation. Non-explicit or *implicit collective beliefs* may also be established *whether or not an explicit collective belief is established.* Indeed, the establishment of implicit collective beliefs is quite hard to avoid.

To see this let us go back to the last example. Consider, first, the following variant of it:

Tom: "Sure is a beautiful day, isn't it?"
Jennie: "Are you crazy? It's the middle of the night!"

Tom might really be crazy, or there may be some other explanation for his saying what he said. Be that as it may, Jenny does not bother to consider the details of the proposition he puts forward—we shall assume—as a candidate collective belief. She attacks another proposition, something she takes to be false: that they are speaking during the day, making it clear that she is not ready collectively to believe *this* with Tom. In doing so she also makes it clear that, *a fortiori*, she is not ready collectively to believe the proposition he verbally expressed.

Without attempting a definition, and intending to invoke a broad intuitive notion of implication, we shall say that in the previous dialogue, Tom *implies* that they are speaking during the day. We allow that what one implies may or may not be matter of what is logically entailed by the proposition expressed by the sentence one utters. It is not, however, simply a matter of the speakers intentions with respect to his utterance. In the last example, Jenny attacks a proposition implied by Tom though not verbally expressed by him. In the example of which this was a variant, she attacks the proposition he verbally expresses. We return now to this example, namely:

Tom: "Sure is a beautiful day, isn't it?"
Jennie: "No it isn't. It's far too hot!"

Here, too, Tom implies that he and Jennie are conversing during the day. In this case Jennie does *not* question the implied proposition, but implicitly accepts it.

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[32] With respect to the discussion that follows in this section, the literature on conversation contains familiar, related ideas that do not bring collective beliefs into the picture. Relevant classic texts include Stalnaker (1973, 1974, and elsewhere) and Lewis (1979). In this section we do not try to align what we say with this literature. We briefly compare and contrast the perspective of Lewis and Stalnaker with that of the NCB thesis in the third section of this article. To briefly anticipate here: the fact that the NCB fits as well with their ideas as it does lends support to the NCB, which we take to be a plausible way of elaborating their perspective.

It seems fair to say that she and Tom now have at least the following implicit collective belief: they are conversing during the day. At the same time, they have reached a stalemate as far as the collective belief that was explicitly proposed is concerned. They may be said not to know what to think, collectively, as far as it is concerned.

Clearly, it is harder than might be thought for the parties to a paradigmatic conversation to fail to establish one or more collective beliefs in the course of their conversation. Consider the last example once again: though Tom and Jennie's conversation is a stalemate in terms of the collective belief explicitly proposed, it establishes at least one collective belief, the implicit collective belief that they are conversing during the day. We take most paradigmatic conversations to be analogous: during negotiation, interlocutors may or may not form a number of explicit collective beliefs. Even if they form no explicit collective beliefs, many implicit collective beliefs are likely to be established as their conversation continues. When this happens, the parties establish a joint commitment to believe as a body the propositions in question, propositions they may not consciously have entertained.

Let us return now to the example in which Jennie makes it clear that she is neither prepared to form the explicitly proposed collective belief nor the implied proposition that the two of them are speaking during the day. Indeed, she rejects the former by rejecting the latter.[33] Here we make two points. First, we echo something said earlier: if there is nothing even in the way of implied propositions that the parties come collectively to believe in such scenarios, that does not refute the NCB thesis. We would have a stalled negotiation, but it would be a negotiation nonetheless. Second, such brief interchanges will often be only a segment in a longer conversation.

In the case at issue here, suppose Tom responds "You're right". In that case Jennie's counter-proposal wins and a new collective belief is formed. This helps to confirm the point that it is difficult, though not necessarily impossible, for a conversation to occur without the establishment of one or more collective beliefs following an explicit collective belief proposal.

3.7 Some Principles of Conversational Collective Belief Formation

Something like the following principle of conversational collective belief formation suggests itself:

[33] Something similar seems to occur when people respond to a collective belief proposal with such a retort as "Rubbish!" Here it is clear that the explicitly proposed collective belief is rejected. Though it is not clear why it is rejected, it is hard to say that any of the implied propositions are accepted.

> When in the course of a conversation someone explicitly proposes a particular collective belief for the parties, *he simultaneously if implicitly proposes that all of the propositions he implies in saying what he says be collectively believed as well.*

Let us call this the implication principle.[34]

The following related principles also suggest themselves. For the sake of simplicity we assume that only two persons are involved in the conversation. These principles can be generalized to cover larger conversational groups.

First, there is *the whole shebang principle*:

> If the hearer responds by accepting a proposed explicit collective belief without questioning any of the implied propositions, the conversationalists now collectively believe both the explicitly proposed belief and all of the implied propositions.[35]

Second, there is *the selection principle*:

> when a speaker proposes a particular explicit collective belief for the parties, his hearer may explicitly reject that belief but still explicitly or implicitly accept one or more of the implied propositions for collective belief.

Thus Jennie might have responded to Tom's "Sure is a beautiful day, isn't it?" thus:

"Well, it's a day...but not a beautiful one!"

Doubtless more such principles can be articulated, and those stated here can be made more fine-grained. If they or principles much like them are correct, however, it is indeed quite hard to avoid establishing a collective belief or two as one's conversation progresses. That is in large part because of the possibility of implicit collective beliefs.

3.8 The Normative Force of Implicit Collective Beliefs

As indicated above, implicit collective beliefs as we understand them are structured similarly to explicit collective beliefs. Through the constitutive joint commitment, once the implicit belief is in place, the group members obligated to one another to act as if they were "of one mind" with respect to its truth.

Thus suppose that Xavier and Yorick have established the implicit collective belief that Bill Clinton was once the President of the United States. In what follows in their conversation they are committed and obligated to one another not explicitly to gainsay this belief or to say anything that implies its falsity. If one of them happens somehow to come up with something that says or implies that the

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[34] In referring to this as a "principle" we mean only that it (or something like it) is a true generalization about conversational collective belief formation. It is not a normative principle, i.e. it is not a principle requiring or recommending certain conduct. Note added in response to a comment by Antonella Carassa and Marco Colombetti, personal communication 2011.

[35] This implies that the individual conversationalists may not be consciously aware of the content of some of the collective beliefs of the group, in particular the implicit collective beliefs.

implicit belief is not true, the other has the standing to take him to task for this, as in: "What do you mean?" said in a tone of rebuke.

In contrast with this, suppose that the conversation is just beginning, and Yorick starts with "Bill Clinton was never president". This could well *surprise* Xavier, given that the contrary is so well known. He might then raise his eyebrows and ask "What do you mean?" Failing his having some special authority relation to Yorick, however, he would not be in a position to respond in the way described above—with a rebuke.

4 The NCB Thesis Compared with Some Other Approaches to Conversation

The NCB thesis can be fruitfully aligned, contrasted, and compared with a number of existing discussions of conversation in the literature. In this section we make a beginning in this direction, without attempting anything like a complete discussion either with respect to those contributions we do discuss, or with respect to the pertinent contributions that exist.

4.1 Conversation and Obligation

The NCB thesis implies that as conversations proceed the participants are highly likely to accrue a set of joint commitments along with associated obligations towards one another to act as is appropriate to these commitments. Along with these obligations come authority relations consisting of the standing to demand fulfillment of the obligations, the standing to rebuke for non-fulfillment, and so on. Intuitively, obligations of joint commitment "trump" personal inclinations, at least, as far as the issue of what one ought to do is concerned. Thus, the creation of a conversational collective belief, implicit or explicit, has important normative consequences for the parties.

Though we cannot attempt this here, an extended comparison of the perspective of the literature on what have been called "discourse obligations" with that of the NCB thesis would be of considerable interest. Clearly these perspectives share the contention that obligations of some kind are part and parcel of the situation of those engaged in conversation. That said, so-called obligations are of very different kinds.

In at least some of the discourse obligations literature the type of obligation at issue is not, or not clearly, the one at issue here. In particular, it is not a matter of obligations of the kind correlated with claim-rights and the associated standings to make related demands and rebukes—such as are the obligations of joint commitment.

Related to this point is the following. Some discourse obligation theorists have emphasized the role of "penalties" in keeping people on the track of their obligations, as in the following quotation.

> The concept of *penalty* is employed here because of the analogy with everyday situations in which a person is threatened with concrete sanctions if he or she fails to fulfill a particular obligation (e.g. the obligation to return a library book by a certain date). In the context of dialogue, the negative consequences of failing to fulfill a discourse obligation are of course much less tangible and measurable; they include consequences such as irritation and negative judgments on the part of the dialog partner... (Jamieson and Weis 1995).

It is worth observing that what the NCB thesis predicts with respect to violation of the obligations associated with the collective beliefs established in conversation is that the "penalty" in question may well take the form of something genuinely punitive—an authoritative rebuke. Such rebukes lie in the province of claim-rights and their correlative obligations. In contrast, "irritation" on the part of one's co-conversationalists or their "negative judgments", as such, may not rise to the level of a punitive move.[36]

4.2 Lewis on Conversational Score and Presuppositions

The NCB thesis can be brought to bear on the central theme of David Lewis's classic article "Score-Keeping in a Language Game".[37] Lewis himself thought that his discussion in that paper and in earlier papers by Robert Stalnaker might plausibly be further elaborated in terms of Margaret Gilbert's account of collective belief.[38] This and the next sub-section briefly show how such an elaboration might go.

Discussing Lewis here, we are interested in the broad outlines of his ideas about conversation rather than any particular details. In particular we focus on his idea of a "conversational score".[39]

Consider first the following quotation, whose points are intended to apply to any "well-run conversation" (339). This is in the opening section of Lewis's paper, which focuses on presuppositions:

> Presuppositions can be created or destroyed in the course of a conversation. This change is rule-governed, up to a point....If at time t something is said that requires presupposition P

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[36] Thanks to Frederick Schmitt for emphasizing this point, personal communication October 24 2011.

[37] Lewis (1979).

[38] In the late 1980s: personal communication with Margaret Gilbert, after reading Gilbert (1987) around the time of its publication. Lewis acknowledges his debt to Stalnaker's work on presupposition in footnote 1 of his paper.

[39] Lewis (1979 esp. p. 347).

> to be acceptable, and if P is not presupposed just before t, then—*ceteris paribus* and within certain limits—presupposition P comes into existence at t. (339-340).

Later in the same paper he recapitulates with an important addition:

> Say something that requires a missing presupposition, and straightaway that presupposition springs into existence...*Or at least, that is what happens if your conversational partners tacitly acquiesce—if no one says "But France has three kings!" or "Whadda ya mean?"* (339; emphasis added).

See also, later:

> Presupposition evolves according to a rule of accommodation specifying that any presuppositions that are required by what is said straightway come into existence, provided that nobody objects. (347).

In saying that presupposition P "springs into existence" at t, Lewis is talking in terms of an idea of a "conversational score" such that "the components of a conversational score at a given stage are *abstract entities*" (345, emphasis added). Among these components are the presuppositions required by the said rule of accommodation.

What, one may ask, is going on between the material interlocutors as this score, abstractly conceived, develops? Here is a role for the NCB thesis. Focusing here on those presuppositions that come into existence as part of the conversational score, when this is considered in the abstract, the NCB suggests that this score *tracks the accrual of a particular type of implicit collective belief.*

Perhaps, though, we should stick to Lewis's language and speak now of *collective presuppositions*. Prior to fixing on a definition of this particular propositional attitude, in general, and without insisting that it is a form of belief,[40] the following account of collective presupposition recommends itself.

A and B *collectively presuppose* that p if and only if A and B are jointly committed to presuppose that p as a body.

Collective presupposition is understood here along the lines of collective belief. In that case, it has no implications for the personal propositional attitudes of the participants, nor are any facts about their personal propositional attitudes sufficient for collective presupposition—even given common knowledge of those personal propositional attitudes. It has the same commitments, obligations, and standings associated with any phenomenon constituted by a joint commitment.

Lewis's rule of accommodation for presuppositions—and a range of possible versions of it—can plausibly be rewritten in terms of collective presupposition as just defined, and incorporated within the NCB thesis. Thus consider this interchange:

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[40] Stalnaker (1973: 448) refers to presupposition as a propositional attitude, which he does not equate with belief.

Joe: "The economy is so bad that Mitt Romney actually has a chance at becoming president."
Peter: "You're right—it's that bad!"

According to the version of the NCB thesis now envisaged, Joe is in effect making the following proposal to Peter: "Collectively believe with me that the economy is so bad that Mitt Romney actually has a chance at becoming president, and, in so doing, collectively presuppose with me whatever propositions are required in order that that belief be true." Then, at least by the time Peter has finished his sentence, making clear that he accepts Joe's proposal, Joe and Peter jointly presuppose that Mitt Romney would not ordinarily be a viable candidate. In other words they are now jointly committed to presupposing as a body that Mitt Romney, etc.

More generally, the suggestion is that in making a particular collective belief proposal one concomitantly implicitly proposes all of its presuppositions for collective presupposition. We shall henceforth assume that the NCB thesis includes this point.

Evidently, things do not always go as smoothly as in the brief interchange between Joe and Peter. Implicitly proposed presuppositions may be challenged. Thus Peter might have said to Joe, referring to Mitt Romney: "What do you mean he *actually has a chance*?" He is rejecting or at least stalling with respect to Joe's implicit proposal that they collectively presuppose that Mitt Romney would not ordinarily be a viable candidate.

4.3 Stalnaker on Presupposing and Common Ground

In Robert Stalnaker's classic discussions *presupposing* is something done by an individual participant in a conversation. Thus Stalnaker's analysandum in an important article is "A speaker presupposes that P at a given moment in a conversation...." (1973: 448). As far as we can tell Stalnaker does not consider the possibility of conversationalists collectively presupposing that such-and-such, where this is distinct from each of them personally presupposing it.

According to the NCB this leaves out a crucial dimension of conversation. In this section we briefly relate the notion of collective presupposition just outlined in our discussion of Lewis to the passage from which the above partial quotation from Stalnaker comes.

Stalnaker writes, more fully, that "a rough definition might go something like this:"

> A speaker presupposes that P at a given moment in conversation just in case he is disposed to act, in his linguistic behavior, as if he takes the truth of P for granted, and as if he assumes that his audience recognizes that he is doing so. (Emphasis in the original).[41]

[41] Stalnaker (1973).

What we would like to note in relation to this is the following.

Suppose that speaker S is a member of conversational group G, and the members of G, as such, collectively presuppose that P. Then, roughly, while this collective presupposition remains in effect, and in this conversational setting, it will be incumbent upon S (and the other members of G) *to act, in his linguistic behavior, as if he takes the truth of P for granted.* Note that the italicized words are also to be found in the quotation from Stalnaker.

We say this because *acting in his linguistic behavior as if he takes the truth of P for granted* is, roughly, what a joint commitment to presuppose that P as a body dictates.[42] More precisely, with the provisos noted, he is to do his part along with the others in emulating a single body that believes that P. Further, this will be common knowledge among the parties who jointly committed themselves to presuppose that P in the first place. It seems just possible, then, that the conversational phenomenon to which Stalnaker is responding in his discussion is in fact the collective phenomenon of collective presupposition.

That said, his discussion of conversation overall does not give that impression, though some of the pertinent phrases—such as "shared beliefs" "common beliefs" and "common ground"—can in principle be given a collective interpretation. A proponent of the NCB thesis need not doubt, of course, that in the background of many conversations there are beliefs of the individual parties with the same content, beliefs about these beliefs, and so on, which constitute a species of "common ground", and that these have an important role to play in what transpires. The NCB thesis contends that beyond this there develops an increasingly rich cognitive profile of *collective* beliefs and presuppositions with associated expressive obligations of the parties that act as constraints on their future linguistic behavior. This is if you like the *collective* ground beyond the *common* ground.

4.4 A Suggestion Derived from Lewis

Drawing on some remarks in Lewis's "Scorekeeping" article, we note that in negotiating their collective beliefs conversationalists in a broad sense may be constrained by certain collectively accepted parameters, something that a full development of the NCB thesis will take into account.[43] Here is the pertinent quotation from Lewis with material inserted in square parentheses so that it makes our point:

> The conversationalists may conform to [collective] directives, or may simply [collectively] desire, that they [individually] strive to steer certain components of the

[42] "Roughly": Stalnaker's discussion of the "as if" in his account is pertinent here. See also Gilbert (1989: ch. 5), also 1987, on the behavioral requirements of a collective belief.

[43] We would interpret "collectively accepted" here in terms of a joint commitment to accept as a body.

> conversational score [i.e. of the set of conversational collective beliefs] in certain directions. Their efforts may be cooperative, as when all participants in a discussion try to increase the amount that [they collectively] presuppose.[44] Or there may be conflict, as when each of two debaters tries to get his opponent to grant him—*to join with him in presupposing*—parts of his case, and to give away parts of the contrary case (345; emphasis added).

Note the words we have emphasized in the quotation. They suggest that Lewis may have been somewhat predisposed to the NCB thesis. To envisage one person's *joining with another in presupposing that such-and-such* may only be to envisage that each of them will presuppose. This language fits well, however, with a reading in terms of collective presupposition as that is understood here.

4.5 *Why Converse? Charles Taylor on Rising Above Common Knowledge*

According to the NCB thesis, everyday conversation is structured around collective belief formation. This holds off from saying anything about the purpose or function of conversation, and it has not been our intent to pursue that question. Indeed, given that different people and groups of people seek out conversation from different motives, it may be hard to fix on "the" function of conversation. We shall not pursue this issue in any detail here, but before concluding we note some related points.

A thought sometimes advanced is that the point of paradigmatic conversation is the exchange of information. This suggests that conversations are primarily about the beliefs of *one individual* being "transferred" to *another individual.* If the NCB thesis is correct, however, the personal beliefs of the pertinent individuals do not play a central role in conversation as a general practice. What centrally happens in conversation is that *what may or may not have been a belief of an individual conversationalist* becomes *the belief of a group*—that group constituted by the conversationalists in question.

Of course, people may come away from a given conversation with personal knowledge or beliefs that they did not have before. If in the context of our conversation Jack, who is known to be a sensible, well-informed person, remarks to me that "Seana is going to France", and I say "Uh-huh", thus sealing our collective belief, I am likely also to come away with the personal belief that Seana is going to France. Possibly, too, Jack's primary personal purpose in saying what he said was to produce this belief in me.

That said, my coming away from a situation with new personal beliefs—and, indeed, with new knowledge—is something that happens in many other instances.

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[44] Here we replaced "all of them willingly" with "they collectively". The rest of the material in square brackets in the quotation is inserted into the text without replacing anything.

People come away with new personal knowledge when reading a book or newspaper, when observing the world around them, or when reflecting on their own ideas. Conversation, then, is just one source of new personal knowledge—when it does amount to that. Whereas what happens in conversations *between* individuals—in particular the formation of a new collective belief—is not something which can happen to an individual *alone*.

Indeed, the formation of a new collective belief brings both belief and related propositional attitudes *to the collective level*, a possibility which has rarely been considered in contemporary philosophy at least until recently. As the plausibility of the NCB thesis suggests, however, if this possibility is neglected an important dimension of human life has been ignored.

Much work in philosophical discussions of human interactions generally has proceeded in terms of individual human beings' beliefs, desires, intentions, and so on. David Lewis famously and importantly added "common knowledge" to the mix. Not only can we both believe something, there can be common knowledge between us that we do. There have been many attempts to define "common knowledge" along the lines of Lewis. As far as we know, none see common knowledge as a plural subject phenomenon. It has to do, roughly, with individuals' knowledge of individuals' knowledge, or individuals' beliefs about individuals' beliefs. It certainly adds an important dimension to a situation, but there can be common knowledge without matters rising to the collective level.

Charles Taylor has offered examples that make very vivid the transition from a situation where there is common knowledge between two persons that p to a situation in which, in the terms of this paper, there is a collective belief that p.[45] The following represents the gist of these examples.

Two people are sitting next to each other on the subway. It is very hot there. Both are aware that it is hot, and it is common knowledge between them that it is hot. Thus each knows that the other does not need to be told about this for the sake of his being better informed. Let us suppose also that it is common knowledge between them that each is feeling the heat: each is visibly perspiring and so on. Yet one may turn to the other and say: "Whew, it is it hot here, isn't it?" the other then offering an accepting response. In spite of the fact that no one has new information about the current temperature, or how the other feels, something important happened when they exchanged these words.

The fact that it is hot there and that each is feeling the heat is now "out in the open", "in public space", or *entre nous*—to use Taylor's terms. He does not, to our knowledge, define these closely related terms. That said, it is clear that in the terms of this paper: it is a matter of collective belief.

Previously each individual had held a number of *personal beliefs* including the belief that it is hot where he is. With the exchange of words something comes into existence which is not reducible to facts about what each personally believes or the common knowledge between them. They are now in a position to talk about what

[45] Taylor (1985).

we (collectively) believe, as they were not before. As we have explained, this has consequences. Both are now jointly committed to act, at least for the time being, as though it is hot there. Perhaps they would have done this regardless. Nonetheless, each now is obligated to the other to do this, and each has the standing to rebuke the other if he does not so act. This standing did not exist prior to their conversation.

The conversation of Taylor's protagonists may seem trivial and far from a central case. Yet it has the virtue of making it clear that conversation can be for something other than the exchange of information. Furthermore, along the lines of the NCB thesis, it suggests that *whatever other purposes a given conversation serves, it is apt to bring the parties together precisely in the way of collective belief.* This is a very substantial effect, as we have argued. It is at least somewhat plausible then to suggest that it is this effect that paradigmatic conversations are all about. That is, *conversations are places where two individuals may express their willingness to be jointly committed to believe propositions as a body and thus effect such a joint commitment.* Among other things, any information exchanged is accidental, not essential, to the conversation *qua* conversation.[46]

4.6 *Summary and Concluding Remarks: Collectivizing Conversation*

This paper presented and to some extent developed a thesis connecting paradigmatic conversations with collective beliefs. This was labeled the negotiation of collective belief thesis or NCB thesis. The paper began by arguing for a particular account of the phenomenon to which everyday collective belief ascriptions refer. Such ascriptions are naturally made in the context of conversations and related exchanges. That is, after or in the course of a conversation people say such things as "We think that would be great." Many attempts to explain statements of this sort have been *summative.* They have reduced the belief of a group to the beliefs of all or most individual members of the group, perhaps with additional conditions such as common knowledge of these beliefs. Such reductions do not accurately describe the phenomenon at issue. We proposed that, in the basic case, a collective belief that p is formed, roughly, when in conditions of common knowledge group members express their readiness to be jointly committed *to believe that p as a body.* This can be done even if no individual group member personally believes that p. The group members are then *jointly committed* to believe p as a body, and thereby constitute a *plural subject* that believes p.

According to the NCB thesis, paradigmatic conversation is to be understood as at least in part a negotiation between the parties over propositions put forward for

[46] On this point see also Gilbert (1989: 295).

collective belief. So negotiating is hard to avoid in the context of a paradigmatic conversation. Absent special background understandings, when one interlocutor explicitly expresses a given proposition, he simultaneously makes a proposal that this proposition be collectively believed. The other interlocutor may refuse to negotiate; otherwise he must accept or reject the proposal. If he rejects it, the explicitly proposed belief does not become a collective one. However, even with this rejection, it is likely that other collective beliefs and collective propositional attitudes of the conversationalists come into being. These include collective presuppositions understood as joint commitment phenomena.

The move to understanding conversation in terms of joint commitment in the sense at issue here is a move away from the individualism of much of the existing literature on conversation, including both the classic work of Stalnaker and Lewis discussed in section III, and important later work, such as that of Clark, who emphasizes that conversation is a "joint activity".[47] In referring to "individualism" we have in mind that, for one thing, insofar as *commitments* are referred to by these authors these are the personal commitments of the individuals involved, albeit in combination with or in some other way related to other personal commitments.[48] Otherwise their discussions proceed in terms of the personal beliefs, goals, and so on, of the participants, including their personal beliefs about the personal beliefs of others. In our view, without recourse to the notion of joint commitment invoked in this paper, we cannot properly articulate what is going on in conversation.

Let us speak of a collective *activity* as one that involves two or more persons who act in light of a joint commitment to pursue as a body a certain goal.[49] Without specifying the details, it is natural enough to see conversation as a form of collective activity. As was once tartly observed "conversation is not a monologue".[50] It takes at least two, and like the tango, it is something those two—or more—do *together*.[51] Allowing for this important point, the NCB thesis proposes

[47] See Clark (1996). In emphasizing that conversation is a "joint activity" is Clark not showing himself to take a non-individualistic approach to conversation? Given his carefully expounded account of what he takes joint action and joint activity to be, and our construal of "individualism" (see the text immediately below), it seems not. The work of Carassa and Colombetti, cited earlier, is an exception here.

[48] Clark (1996: ch. 10) invokes a notion of "joint commitment". This appears to be an individualistic notion in the sense noted in the text, above, and not therefore to be the sense delineated here. Cf. Carassa and Colombetti (2009a: 1841) on Clark.

[49] See Gilbert (1989: ch. 4); (1990).

[50] Gilbert [Martin] (1971: 384, also 477).

[51] On acting together generally, see e.g. Gilbert (1989: ch. 4), (1990), (2006: ch. 6 and 7). This is there argued to have a joint commitment at its core—in this case a joint commitment to espouse as a body a certain goal.

that conversation consists in large part of the development of a *collective cognitive profile*. It is collective as opposed to "shared" in the sense of being attributable to each of the participants as individuals, and so on.[52]

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[52] In this paper we often refer to what we (Gilbert and Priest) believe, and so on. These references should be understood in accordance with the theory of collective belief adumbrated here, and therefore not logically to entail anything about what either Gilbert or Priest personally believes. Similarly, when we maintain, in the first footnote, that responsibility for the points made here is ours alone, neither one of us means to ascribe responsibility for any or all of the points made to her personally. Collective responsibility, however, is a topic for another occasion.

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