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Real Team Reasoning

Margaret Gilbert *

Abstract: »Echtes Team Reasoning«. This paper focuses on a kind of reasoning in which the members of a group with a goal of its own may engage, herein referred to as “real team reasoning.” Starting with four challenging observations on what is, and is not, involved in acting together towards a group or collective goal, an account of a collective goal that accords with these observations is offered. This account appeals to a *joint commitment* of the parties, understood as is explained. Several virtues of the account are noted, and it is defended against a methodological objection privileging theoretical parsimony by reference in part to the need to invoke joint commitment in other contexts.

Keywords: Acting together, collective goals, joint commitment, team reasoning.

1. Introduction

I start by saying something about the title of this paper. The term “team” is sometimes used in much the way I would use “social group” (in a relatively narrow sense of the latter term). Thus, in a list of examples of teams the economist Michael Bacharach included “couples, families, workgroups, platoons, sports teams and street gangs; nations in time of war, international military alliances, terrorist cells” (Bacharach 2005, xxi). I adopt this interpretation of “team” here.

Moving now to the phrase “team reasoning,” this has been used in the literature of economics to suggest something that may be going on in a particular range of situations of which the “Hi-Lo” game is the canonical example (see, e.g., Colman and Gold 2018).

In this game each of two players has to decide, without input from the other, which of two actions – call them “A” and “B” – to perform.¹ If both choose A, each will do relatively well, if both choose B, each will do less well, and if one chooses A and one chooses B, each will do even less well. Each player is out

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¹ For simplicity’s sake, I give each party’s options the same label. What is important is each player’s ranking of the different possible combination of actions of the two players.

to do as well as possible personally, neither has any further information relevant to their choice, and all this is common knowledge between A and B.² In this situation it seems that players who are rational in the game-theorists sense can only reach the following practical conclusion: choose A *if* the other player does, but choose B *if* the other player does – leaving that player at a loss as to what to do. In an experimental setting intended to replicate this situation, however, individual subjects tend to choose A, each then getting the best possible personal outcome.

Given the experimental results, some theorists have conjectured that a particular type of reasoning – “team reasoning” – is at work in such situations. This label is not intended to imply that the parties constitute a team in the sense with which I am concerned. On the contrary, the assumption is that the parties are not part of any relevant team in that sense.

My use of the phrase “real team reasoning” in the title of this paper is intended to mark the fact that I am not talking about team reasoning in the sense indicated above. Rather, I am talking about a type of reasoning available to the members of a team in the sense indicated earlier and, in particular, in a team with a goal of its own.³ Before turning to the type of reasoning I have in mind, I need to explain and justify my account of a collective goal.

2. Some Questions About Collective Goals

Suppose that a member of a particular sports team says: “Our goal is to win the Super Bowl.” What are the conditions under which this statement is true? And what are this statement’s implications, if any, for the individual team members?

Some more specific questions are: what is the logical relation, if any, between the individual team members’ goals, and the team’s goal? In particular, can the team’s goal be inferred – logically – from the individual members’ goals? Or is there no way to infer the team’s goal from the individual members’ goals? And – if there is not – on what other basis can one properly ascribe a particular goal to the team? These questions relate not only to sports teams but to any team in the broad sense indicated earlier that may appropriately be said to have a goal of its own.

² For present purposes one can think of some fact being common knowledge between two or more persons as its being entirely out in the open between them that that fact obtains. For a variety of different approaches to common knowledge, see Vandershraaf and Sillari (2022).

³ I do not assume here that all teams in the broad sense in question need have goals. I doubt this is true. A family, for instance, may not have a persistent goal as opposed to a set of beliefs, values, rules of conduct, and so on. Nonetheless, it will likely develop and pursue a number of short-term goals.

The discussion that follows addresses the questions just posed. It starts by focusing on a closely related question: what is it for people to do something together?⁴

3. Acting Together

In common parlance we regularly refer to ourselves as *doing things together*. We speak of painting a room together, writing a book together, marching against the enemy together, and so on. To what do people refer when they speak in this way? In other terms: what idea of acting together animates their speech? This is how I shall interpret the question: what is it to act together?

Thus interpreted, it reflects Max Weber's idea that the scientific study of human social life requires us to adopt a distinctive stance towards the participants in that life, a stance he labeled *Verstehen*. I take its aim to be, roughly, to understand how the people studied envisage their situation. In search of such understanding, we may need to invoke something for which everyday language lacks a referring expression. That is to be expected insofar as we seek what we might refer to as the *deep structure* of our thought about acting together.

4. Four Observations on Acting Together

I propose that an acceptable account of what it is to act together should respect at least the following four observations. I refer to them as, for short, *directed obligation*, *concurrence*, *disjunction*, and *motivational sufficiency*. In what follows I introduce them relatively briefly, spending most time on the first and second in order to clarify precisely what is at issue.

4.1 Directed Obligation

Suppose that, as Felix understands, he is walking to the café with Emma. I take it that – absent any special background understanding between them – he will understand the following, as will Emma.

If Felix suddenly stops in his tracks before they get to the café, Emma is in a position to *call him to account*, *demanding an explanation* of his stopping. Indeed, she is in a position to *demand* that he start walking. She is also in a position to *rebuke* Felix for stopping, saying with asperity “What are you doing! We are nowhere near the café!”

⁴ My previous publications on this topic started with Gilbert (1989, ch. 4) and include Gilbert (2006, chs. 6–7). The discussion here is intended to introduce my approach to those unfamiliar with it, while carrying the discussion forward in various ways.

She may, of course, do none of these things. The point is that she is *in a position* to do them, something that is not obviously the case with a bystander who may witness the scene. Felix, of course, would be in the same position vis-à-vis Emma, should she stop abruptly.

Note that to be *in a position* to do something is *not* equivalent to being *justified, all things considered*, in doing it. Perhaps there are gentler, equally efficacious means of getting Felix to go on walking than resorting to an outright demand. In that case, Emma should probably try those first, all things considered. Perhaps she should start by gently asking Felix if anything is wrong, and, if there is, doing something to help him stay the course. The same goes for Felix, should the situation be reversed.

In addition to saying that Emma is *in a position* to make relevant demands of Felix one can appropriately say that she has the *standing* to do so, where standing is a matter of *authority*. Similarly, one can appropriately say that Emma has the standing to rebuke Felix in relevant contexts. Though in some institutional contexts the standing to demand some action of someone and the standing to rebuke that person for non-performance may come apart, I take it that they generally go together.

I assume that the language of *rights* is also appropriate here, as is the language of *obligations* or, more precisely, *directed* obligations. That is, one can say that Emma has a *right against Felix* that he keeps walking, and vice versa. Given Emma's right, Felix will have a correlative and equivalent *obligation to Emma* to keep walking, and vice versa.⁵

Now, talk of rights has aptly been described by Shelly Kagan as “horrendously ambiguous.”⁶ One can say the same of talk of obligations *to* a person or, to use a standard label, *directed* obligations, or, in other terms, *directed* duties.⁷ For present purposes, my procedure in relation to these otherwise ambiguous terms will be as follows.

I shall understand each of the following statements as *equivalent* in the Hohfeldian sense: they all refer to *the same relation* between Emma and Felix.

- 1) Emma has the *standing to demand* that Felix keep walking.
- 2) Emma has the *standing to rebuke* Felix for not continuing to walk.
- 3) Emma has a *right against* Felix to his continuing to walk.⁸
- 4) Felix has an *obligation to* Emma not to stop walking.

Given the equivalence of statements (1) through (4), I take it that an adequate account of acting together will imply that those who are acting together *stand*

⁵ The phrase “correlative and equivalent” echoes Hohfeld (1964, 38).

⁶ Kagan (1998, 170). Kagan gives a long list of senses of “right” that have been invoked in moral theory, which is his primary concern. Gilbert (2018, ch. 12, sec. 8) invokes this list.

⁷ I make no distinction here between “obligations” and “duties” (whether or not these terms are prefixed by “to”).

⁸ In Gilbert (2018), I labeled rights of the kind in question demand-rights so as to distinguish them from rights in other senses of the term. Here I refer to them simply as rights.

in the relevant relation to one another with respect to actions of each that are (in)appropriate to the action they are engaged in together.

With respect to *what that relation is*, I propose to privilege statement (1). Thus I shall understand P1's having a *right* to P2's doing A as a matter of P1's a matter of P1's having the standing to demand of P2 that P2 do A, and as no more than that; and I shall understand P2's being *obligated* to P1 to do A as a matter of P1's having the standing to demand of P2 that P2 do A, and as no more than that. As for P1's standing to rebuke P2 for not doing A, that can be understood as P1's having the standing to issue an after-the-fact demand to P2. It is, if you like, the best P1 can do given that P2 has not yet done A but is no longer in a position to do A.

Let me clarify an important point relating to directed *obligations* as understood here. People often engage in wrongful acts together. To say that they are in the relevant sense *obligated to one another* to do their parts in these acts is to be distinguished from saying that they are *morally* permitted, let alone *morally* required or, in other terms, *morally obligated*, to do so. It is equivalent to saying that they have the *standing to make related demands of one another*.⁹ Evidently, in the case envisaged these demands are such that the people in question will neither make nor accede to, if they are to act in a morally acceptable manner.

That said, not everyone will recognize the dictates of morality in such a situation, and some may confuse what they are obligated to their fellows to do with what they are morally required to do. Even those who are not so confused, and who recognize that morality requires them not to fulfill their directed obligations, may still decide to fulfill them. Selfishly, they may want to avoid the demands and rebukes of their fellows. Altruistically, they may prefer not to let their fellows down. *Groupishly*, they may prefer not to let down the team.¹⁰ Thus even directed obligations to do immoral actions can be of great practical significance.

4.2 Concurrence

Suppose now that Felix does not simply stop in his tracks on his way to the café, but tells Emma, bluntly, "I'm going back home." Emma may well feel that he should have obtained her concurrence before giving up on their joint project, and say something expressive of that feeling such as "What do you mean, you're going back home? We are supposed to be going to the café!"

Let me generalize the point, using the phrase "joint action" to refer to a case of acting together. Failing special background understandings, in order to give up on a given joint action *without fault*, one party must obtain the others'

⁹ See sec. 6.1 below for discussion of how directed obligations as envisaged here can come about.

¹⁰ I introduced the term "groupism" in this connection in Gilbert (1994).

concurrence with their doing so. I call this point *concurrence on exit* or, more briefly, *concurrence*. I now make some clarificatory remarks.

I do not mean to claim that no one is ever *justified*, all things considered, in giving up on a given joint action without the concurrence of the other party or parties. Suppose that while they have been walking towards the café, Emma has been assailing Felix with unwarranted complaints. He has repeatedly asked her to desist, but she has paid no attention to his requests. Presumably, in some such context, Felix will be fully justified in stopping in his tracks, and saying, with determination, “I’m going back home!” without any suggestion that Emma’s concurrence is needed. Even if this is so, however, I take it that both Emma and Felix will understand that in acting as he has, Felix has done something that can be faulted. Namely, he has, in effect, abandoned an ongoing project of theirs without her concurrence. To say this is not to deny that in the circumstances Felix might understandably view this particular delict with satisfaction, seeing it as a matter of Emma receiving her just deserts.

In discussing this case I have referred only to Felix’s being, potentially, *fully justified* in abandoning their joint project without Emma’s concurrence. It may helpful, now, to put the point just made in explicitly moral terms.

One can allow that according to *the logic of acting together*, each party needs to obtain each other party’s concurrence on that party’s exit from the action in question, while allowing that there can be cases in which morality permits or, indeed, *requires* one or more participants to stop participating, even without the concurrence of the rest. The other parties will still have the standing to rebuke that party for, in effect, abandoning the joint project without their concurrence, though it may be unreasonable of them to exercise that standing in the circumstances.

Whether and how the point about concurrence shows up “on the ground” will depend in part on the parties’ understanding of precisely what they are doing together. Compare Emma and Felix’s incipient walk to the café with the following case.

Patty runs into Mark as he is walking up Fifth Avenue, and they fall into conversation, walking along together as they talk.¹¹ They are, as they understand, walking along together *as long as that suits them both*. Suppose Patty suddenly stops, and says, “I’m stopping here.” Mark is unlikely to react in the way Emma reacted to Felix’s announcement, *given his understanding of what*

¹¹ It is perhaps worth emphasizing that I take “walking along together” to be a different joint activity to “going for a walk together,” where the latter is conventionally understood as a matter of beginning and ending one’s walking along together at the same pace, whether or not a particular endpoint has been specified in advance. People can fall into walking along together (or agree to walk along together for while) without any understanding that they are going for a walk together.

he and Patty are doing together. He may, rather, reply in a way that acknowledges what she has just said, such as “It was great to see you!”

I now turn to the “special background understandings” mentioned in my characterization of the concurrence condition. Such understandings are liable to affect how things proceed in particular cases. They may involve side-agreements between the participants, as when one person says to another “We’ll stop as soon as you say the word.” They may also involve established rules of the group to which the participants belong, rules relating to particular kinds of case – or, in principle, to all cases – of joint action. So, for instance, it may be the established rule of a particular group that if either party does not want a particular sexual encounter to continue, their say-so is enough to mandate its being brought to a close.

The fact that such agreements and rules tend to arise at the interpersonal or societal level – and to vary from one group to another – supports the idea that a concurrence condition is built into the very idea of joint action and needs, therefore, to be addressed in such ways in particular contexts.

A final note on the concurrence condition. Several authors have objected to the idea that there is such a condition, without at the same time objecting to the obligation condition. Yet *the concurrence condition can be thought of as a corollary of the obligation condition*, albeit a particularly significant one. Let me explain.

According to the obligation criterion, when people are acting together, each is obligated to act in ways that, given the other agents’ actions, tend to promote the relevant collective goal – reaching the café in one another’s company, for instance.¹² The other parties’ concurrence with one’s leaving would, in effect, be permission not to fulfill this general obligation or any further obligations that flowed from it. In effect, it is a matter of having the others waive (all of) their rights to one’s contributing to the action in question. Without such concurrence, one might stalk off from that action, but one’s obligations would remain, unfulfilled.

4.3 Disjunction

Suppose, once more, that Emma and Felix are walking to the café together. Perhaps this is what they agreed to do, and it is what each understands them, collectively, to be doing. In other words, their collective goal is to walk to the café. It seems that this could be true, though their getting to the café is neither Emma’s nor Felix’s *personal* goal.

It seems possible, for instance, that having established what we may call their *collective* goal – getting to the café – each has become disenchanted with

¹² My use of small-scale examples here is not supposed to imply that all examples are small-scale. I say more about the question of scale later.

the other's presence and has privately established a *contrary* personal goal: their abandonment of the collective goal.

It seems possible, indeed, that neither Felix nor Emma ever had their walking to the café together as a personal goal. Perhaps Felix had for some reason felt obliged to propose that they do this, and Emma had been reluctant to reject his proposal. Each was planning, meanwhile, to prevent their actually getting to the café.

In sum, the collective goal of those who are acting together *need not correspond to personal goals of the participants*. I call this point *disjunction*.

Of course, if one or more of the parties have contrary personal goals, their collective goal is less likely to be reached. That does not mean that they have no collective goal. Nor does it mean that this goal will not win out in the end. A given party is free unilaterally to change his or her personal goal at some point along the way, aligning that goal with the collective one, or may simply drop that particular personal goal.

4.4 Motivational Sufficiency

An important, related point is this. Intuitively, once a collective goal is established, that suffices to rationalize the individual parties' directing their actions towards its achievement. For example, "We are storming the Bastille" suffices to explain why *I* am rushing forward.¹³ In other terms, that *G is our goal* appears to be inherently motivating for me, *even absent a corresponding personal goal*. I call this point *motivational sufficiency*.

5. A Challenge

I have proposed that an adequate account of acting together will explain at least the points I have labeled *directed obligation*, *concurrence*, *disjunction*, and *motivational sufficiency*.

These points pose a formidable challenge to the theorist of acting together. The account I have developed meets this challenge.

5.1 The Deep Structure of Acting Together

The core of my account of acting together is an account of a collective goal. After presenting this account, which uses some technical language, I explain its elements. I focus on a two-person case, appropriate to the foregoing examples of acting together. The account runs as follows.

¹³ For some concordant discussions on this score, see Gilbert (1989, 493n6).

For goal G to be the *collective goal* of A and B is for A and B to be jointly committed to endorse goal G as a body.

It is important to note that this account can be generalized in various ways. For instance, it can accommodate cases in which there are many parties, and cases in which the parties do not know each other personally or even know of each other as individuals (Gilbert 2006, 173-81).

I need now to explain the key elements in this account: (i) the nature of joint commitments generally, and (ii) what it is to endorse a particular goal as a body.

i. Joint Commitment

I have written about joint commitment at length elsewhere. I now briefly review its central features.

First, any joint commitment in my sense involves both a particular process and a particular product. The process is broadly speaking psychological, the product is normative.

As to the *product*: when they are jointly committed in some way, the parties are subject, *as one*, to a *normative constraint*. More precisely, there is something that, *collectively*, they *ought* to do, all else being equal. Two things need to be said about this “ought.” First, it is *exclusionary*: in considering what to do, in face of it, the parties’ personal inclinations and desires, as such, are excluded from consideration. Second, it is *not* the moral “ought,” though it may be morally required, all else being equal, to conform to one’s joint commitments. It is, if you like, a more general *practical* “ought.”¹⁴

I turn now to the *process* of joint commitment. Here two importantly different kinds of case must be distinguished.

In order to form a particular joint commitment of the *basic* sort, it is both necessary and sufficient for the would-be parties openly to express their personal readiness for that particular joint commitment to be in place, in conditions of common knowledge. These expressions may be verbal, but they need not be. The process in question may be fast, as with a face-to-face agreement between two people, or slow, as when the relevant expressions involve the members of a large population and take some time to be made and interpreted correctly.¹⁵

In a *non-basic* case, the parties must have openly expressed, in conditions of common knowledge, their readiness to be jointly committed with one

¹⁴ I take these things to be true of the “ought” associated with an individual’s decision. I take it also that in both cases the applicability of the “ought” in question does not depend on there being reasons, let alone good reasons, for performing the action(s) in question. For further discussion, see, e.g., Gilbert (2018, 43-5).

¹⁵ See, e.g., Gilbert (2006, ch. 8) for discussion of large-scale joint commitments. Important here is the possibility of what I have called “population common knowledge,” which is such that the parties need neither know each other personally, nor know of each other as individuals. See, e.g., Gilbert (2006, 176f.).

another in certain broadly specified ways *by means of a particular process*, such as the decisions of a particular person or body of persons when deliberating under certain conditions.

A significant aspect of the distinction between basic and non-basic cases is that in the latter, but not the former, certain people may be jointly committed in a certain way without any knowledge of that fact. They may not even have the capacity to understand the content of the non-basic commitment in question. Here as elsewhere in this discussion I focus on the basic case.

Returning to the product side of joint commitment, I take it that by virtue of their joint commitment each party is, *individually*, committed to act in such a way that, in conjunction with the acts of the other parties, the joint commitment is fulfilled. This leaves a lot open: in practice things may be filled in along one of several lines. Evidently the *individual* commitments of the parties stand or fall together with the joint commitment from which they derive. In an important sense, then, they are *interdependent*. More fully, they are both *existence-* and *persistence-interdependent*.¹⁶

Before turning to the content of a joint commitment, I say a few words about the ways in which a joint commitment may come to an end. Importantly, absent any special background understandings, no one party is in a position unilaterally to rescind a joint commitment. Rather, each must be involved in its rescission. The words “rescission” suggests something relatively deliberate, as when two parties agree to abandon an earlier agreement they have made. I take it that there are less explicit ways of ending a joint commitment, as when people gradually stop objecting to episodes of non-conformity and eventually stop conforming, indicating by non-verbal means that they are all done with it.¹⁷

ii. The Content of a Joint Commitment

In any case of joint commitment, the people in question are jointly committed to do something as a body, in a broad sense of *do*. Thus, in the case in question here – that of a collective goal – the parties are jointly committed *to endorse a particular goal* as a body. This can be spelled out roughly as follows: by virtue of their several actions and utterances they are to emulate – in relevant ways – a single endorser of the goal in question. The best way to spell it out further is by means of examples.

Suppose that our goal is for the spare room to be painted by virtue of our several actions using a single coat of paint. Then, if you have just painted this wall, it would not be appropriate for me to paint it again, and so on. In other

¹⁶ I take the term persistence-interdependence from Michael Bratman, who includes in his most developed account of “shared intention” a clause stipulating the “persistence-interdependence” of the personal intentions he takes to be constitutive of shared intention. See, for instance, Bratman (2013, 65). For criticism of Bratman’s invocation of personal intentions as the starting point for an account of shared intention, see, e.g., Gilbert (2023, ch. 1).

¹⁷ For more on the ending of a joint commitment, see Gilbert (2006, 141-2).

words, our several actions must *mesh* in an appropriate way, a way that is geared to the achievement of our goal. This being so, our joint commitment provides us with a *framework for negotiation*, as necessary, about the way in which the joint commitment is to be fulfilled.¹⁸

5.2 Acting Together

I have now explained the technical terms in my account of a collective goal. To repeat that account:

For goal G to be the *collective goal* of A and B is for A and B to be jointly committed to endorse G as a body.

Taking this on board the following account of acting together suggests itself:

Acting together. Two or more people are acting together if and only if each is acting in light of their joint commitment to endorse, as a body, a particular goal, G, in order to promote the fulfillment of G.

As I now argue, given the joint commitment at its core, an account along these lines is able to explain the four observations on acting together noted earlier.

6. Explaining the Observations

1. Directed Obligation

Consider first *directed obligation*. Note that to say that the parties to a joint commitment are *normatively constrained* in the way I have noted is not yet to say that they are *obligated to* one another. These are two separate claims.

That said, I take it that the parties to any joint commitment *are* obligated to one another to conform to the commitment – and that this is so on account of a *crucial feature of the normative constraint* in question. Let me explain.

Recall, first, that for me to be obligated to someone to do something is for that person to have the standing to demand that I do it. I take it that, intuitively, any one party to a joint commitment *has* the standing to demand of any other party conformity to the commitment.

In order to explain this intuitive judgment, one can turn to an idea suggested by remarks of Joel Feinberg: to demand an action of another, with standing, is to demand that action as in a particular sense *one's own* (Feinberg 1970, 251). By itself, this is not very helpful. In the case of joint commitment, however, one can develop it in a plausible way, roughly as follows.

I am a co-author of the joint commitment in question. As such *I have determined – in conjunction with the other parties – how the parties ought to behave, all*

¹⁸ Cf. Michael Bratman's observation that a shared intention, as yet undefined, provides a framework for relevant bargaining among the parties, and requires "meshing sub-plans" (Bratman 1993).

else being equal. This puts me in a position to call one or more of the other parties to order, should they propose not to conform. In other terms, I have the standing to demand that they conform.¹⁹

Like directed obligations generally, those deriving from a joint commitment are not appropriately thought of as moral obligations. People can indeed be jointly committed to endorse as a body morally suspect goals, and hence obligated to one another to act in such a way that their combined actions and utterances promote those goals, issuing as needed appropriate demands and rebukes. Most likely, they *should not* make these demands and rebukes, just as they should not make the relevant joint commitments or comply with them. That, however, does not imply that the directed obligations in question do not exist. Evidently, the parties to the joint commitment *retain the status of co-determiners of what each one ought to do, all else being equal*. As such, they retain the related standings, whether or not they ought to take advantage of them.

2. Concurrence

It is possible to deal more quickly with the observation that, absent special background understandings, those who are acting together need to obtain the concurrence of the other parties in order to give up on their joint project without fault.

Given its constitutive joint commitment, the parties cannot unilaterally rid themselves of their collective goal. So, without the concurrence of the other parties, they cannot cease to act in pursuit of that goal without failing to fulfill their obligations to them.

This point allows for a variety of background understandings relating to a given joint commitment. For instance, before they start hiking up a hill, Jack may say to Jill “Feel free to stop whenever you want” making it clear that his concurrence with Jill’s stopping when she wants to has already been given.

3 and 4. Disjunction and Motivational Sufficiency

According to *disjunction*, our collective goal in acting together need not correspond to our personal goals. This is clearly the case given the joint commitment account of acting together.

Suppose that Emma and Felix are jointly committed to accept as a body a certain goal. That, then, is their collective goal. It is not constructed, in whole or in part, by the personal goals of either, or by anything that requires conformity with their personal goals. In short, it is compatible with their *lacking the corresponding personal goals*, or even having *contrary* personal goals.

According to *motivational sufficiency*, a collective goal is sufficient to rationalize the parties’ acting in accordance with it, absent the corresponding personal goals. This is true on the joint commitment account of a collective goal.

¹⁹ For further discussion, see Gilbert (2018, ch. 8).

Given that account, each party understands that they are subject to the relevant exclusionary normative constraint – one, moreover, that they are powerless to cancel unilaterally. One who is rational in the sense that they are disposed to act as they ought to act, will therefore be motivated to conform to their joint commitments, all else – and, in particular, moral considerations – being equal.

In addition, each party understands that should they fail to conform to the joint commitment, or seem to be about to do so, they may well be faced by related rebukes and demands from the other parties, something they may well wish to avoid.

7. Some Virtues of a Joint Commitment Account of Acting Together

7.1 It Accommodates Each of the Four Observations

I have argued that the joint commitment account of acting together can accommodate the four pre-theoretical observations noted. That is something I take to be required of any adequate account of acting together.

I have argued elsewhere that joint commitment may well be the only ground of directed obligations understood as these are here. If that is correct, then any account that accommodates all four observations must have a joint commitment at its core (see Gilbert 2018, chs. 8, 11, 12).

7.2 It Is a Simple Theory

A further virtue of the account is its simplicity. It has taken a while to explain. Nonetheless, rather than a multiplicity of clauses, it has a single clause.²⁰ I take it that, all else being equal, a simple theory is preferable to a complex one.

7.3 It Explains the Transformative Nature of Acting Together

The invocation of joint commitment in an account of acting together takes us beyond the terms of which we think about individual humans with their personal goals, decisions, and intentions. I take that to be a virtue of the account for the following reason.

Acting together is *transformative*. It is natural to associate it with such positively valenced ideas as *togetherness*, *solidarity*, and *unity*. It produces such hackneyed but telling lines as “There is no *I* in *team*.”

²⁰ Here I have in mind in particular the contrast with the most recent version of Michael Bratman’s account of shared intention. See Bratman (2018).

The joint commitment account of acting together, then, is not only simple, and apt to explain all four of the observations with which I started. It is also apt to explain why we value acting together *for its own sake* as well as for its often very useful consequences.

8. On a Possible Problem of Theoretical Bloat

One may resist the introduction of joint commitment into an account of acting together on the grounds of theoretical parsimony: would it not be better not to go beyond the concepts needed for understanding what it is for an individual to act? In short, would it be better not to invoke the concept of joint commitment?

Theoretical parsimony of the relevant sort is a good thing if the concepts in question can do the necessary work. For several reasons, however, it is not clear that any account of acting together that does not appeal to a joint commitment of the parties can do this. Among these reasons are the need to explain how it is that those who act together are obligated to one another to act in ways supportive of the relevant goal, where the relevant relation of directed obligation is as has been explicated here.

Michael Bratman is probably the most prominent theorist of shared agency who has attempted to eschew any concepts going beyond those needed to explain individual action, where his examples of shared agency include painting a house together, and so on. He has suggested that any obligations involved in acting together can be explained in terms of the application of moral principles such as Thomas Scanlon's complex Principle of Fidelity. As I have argued at length elsewhere, however, such a move is problematic on several fronts with respect to the directed obligations involved in acting together and, indeed, with respect to promissory obligation, the target of Scanlon's principle (Gilbert 2004).

The nub of the problem, to put it cautiously, is as follows. It is quite unclear how one's failing to act according to any moral principle of the form "morally speaking one must do A in circumstances C" amounts to failing to give someone what one owes them in the sense that the one who is owed has, *ipso facto*, the standing to demand conformity to that principle.²¹

There is reason to think, then, that the theorist of shared agency needs not only to go beyond the concepts required to explain *individual agency*, such as the concept of a person's intention, but also the concepts required to describe the realm of *morality*, assuming this realm is constituted moral requirements on individual persons, and perhaps also on two or more persons considered together. This is in part because of the difficulty of seeing how anyone's

²¹ For discussion, see Gilbert (2018, chs. 11 and 12).

standing to make demands comes out of the existence of a given moral requirement, and in part because the directed obligations in acting together may be obligations to do morally repugnant things, obligations that stand irrespective of their content.

Meanwhile, it may reassure the champion of parsimony to note that *there are many social phenomena other than acting together* for which an explanation in terms of joint commitment is compelling. These phenomena include agreements, which often, though not always, precede joint actions, and collective beliefs, which often accompany them. They also include many other central social phenomena such as social rules and conventions, collective values, and collective preferences, understood as preferences appropriately thought of as “ours” as opposed to “all or most of ours.”²²

Given that this is so, it is not a big plus from the point of view of social theory generally to avoid joint commitment in the explanation of acting together. In particular, if we eschew a reference to joint commitment in our explanation of acting together, we are likely to need to invoke it in relation to other central aspects of human life.²³

9. Real Team Reasoning

I now return to the questions about collective goals with which I started. I have already given an account of a collective goal. What then of these more specific questions?

What is the logical relation, if any, between the individual team members’ personal goals, and the team’s goal? In particular, can the team’s goal be inferred – logically – from the individual members’ goals? Or is that possible in some but not all cases, for instance, when the individual members’ goals align in some way? Or is there no way to infer the group’s goal from the individual members’ goals?

Clearly, given the joint commitment account of a collective goal, nothing can be inferred from the existence of a given collective goal about the individual members’ personal goals: they may all intend to sabotage the collective goal – though, all else being equal, they should not. Alternatively, some, or all, may be on board with the collective goal in the sense that their own personal goals reflect it. Alternatively, they may have no relevant personal goals at all. They are, if you like, “team players” in a radical sense.

²² For accounts of a wide range of social phenomena in terms of joint commitment, see, e.g., the essays in Gilbert (2013), also Gilbert (2023). For emphasis on the case of agreements, see Smith (2015).

²³ Going further, some primatologists have recently argued for the existence of joint commitments in the life of some non-human primates. See, e.g., Heesen et al. (2021).

What about the relevance of these points to such questions as: how is it that people who are not part of any relevant real team tend to choose “Hi” when faced with a “Hi-Lo”? Perhaps, as has been suggested, some relevant kind of reasoning – call it “team reasoning” – is at play.

Suffice it to say, here, that whatever is going on when otherwise unrelated people choose “Hi” when all that they know is the matrix of individual preferences, we do not have, in that situation a case of *real team reasoning* in the sense of reasoning from the premise that such-and-such is *our goal*, where that is understood along the lines explained here.

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