

# **Intentions and Cooperative Activity: Explaining Cooperation in Light of Bratman's Notion of Shared Intention**

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## ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on one of the major controversies about the explanation of collective action. The discussion revolves around the possibility of ascribing intentions to groups, understanding these intentions as distinct from the mere sum of group members' individual intentions. In the literature on this subject we can identify two main lines of explanation of collective intentions: one that reduces group intentions to the sum of individual intentions and another that appeals, through a variety of strategies, to some kind of plural subject or collective consciousness. Based on the notion of shared intention, Michael Bratman has offered an interesting and successful alternative to both views. My goal is to present and analyse that notion of shared intention, explaining why it is interesting to consider Bratman's proposal.

## KEYWORDS

Bratman, shared intention, cooperation, practical reasoning.

In discussions on collective intentionality there are two opposite ways of explaining the intention present in joint actions. On the one hand, the aggregative or summative accounts, as they are usually called, understand the intentions of joint action as the mere sum of coincident individual intentions (Tollefsen, 2004). At the opposite extreme are the explanations that appeal, following different strategies, to a kind of plural or collective mind, attributing intentional states to such collective entities.

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The idea of shared intention proposed by Bratman (1999), as well as the notion of collective intention offered by Searle (1990), is an alternative to both types of explanations. Shared intention defines the type of interaction between individuals involved in what Michael Bratman calls a shared activity. But that intention is not the result of adding the individual intentions of the participants nor can it be attributed to a sort of collective mind resulting from the merger of participants' minds. So on the one hand, it overcomes the difficulties of the aggregative view to explain the relations among participants in joint actions, but on the other hand, it arouses suspicions among methodological individualists for appealing to something like a sort of collective consciousness.

Considering Bratman's proposal to address the issue of collective intentions it is essential to the extent that he is the author who has devoted more efforts to explain the role of intentions in practical reasoning, overcoming the traditional view of intentions in terms of desires and beliefs. The most important feature of Bratman's account is the relation he establishes between intention and planning. And planning, as Bratman points out, is a central feature in human action.

I want to present and analyse the notion of shared intention and explain why it is interesting to consider Bratman's proposal. First, I will present Bratman's conception of intention and how he applies it to the cases of shared agency. Second, I will refer to the main features of Bratman's account of shared intention. Then, I will explain the role and structure of shared intention. Finally, I will point out why Bratman's approach is relevant, referring briefly to the relation between shared intention and cooperation.

#### INTENTION AND ITS ROLE IN PRACTICAL REASONING

Intention is, according to Bratman (1987), the minimum unit of planning, namely, the smallest element of partial plans that are subject to rational pressures of consistency and coherence. As desire, intention is a motivational intentional state in the action. But, understood in relation to planning, intention is subject to rational pressures, which is not the case of desire. According to those rational pressures, intention has a controlling function of the action (1987, 15-17):

First, intention involves a special commitment to the execution of the action. Second, intention plays an important role in coordinating our various intentional states. So, once we form an intention, it constrains the rest of the intentions we can form afterward. And third, the two previous points are possible in part because of the tendency to stability that characterises intention, which shows resistance to be reconsidered. This allows Bratman to affirm that intention unifies our individual agency so that it remains coherent and

consistent over time. Intention coordinates what I am going to do now with what I plan to do later.

#### INTENTION IN SHARED AGENCY

In *Faces of Intention* (1999) Bratman tries to develop and expand his planning theory of intention (Bratman, 1987), designed for the case of individual action, to cases in which we act together, and he does so exploring the notion of shared intention.

A central idea in Bratman's works is that human agency is characterised by two facts. On the one hand, it is a temporally extended agency as our actions spread over time. On the other, we are social agents and our actions are related to other agents' behaviour. Taking into account these two aspects, intrapersonal and interpersonal coordination are presented as key elements in practical reasoning. In fact, the characteristic feature of Bratman's explanation of shared intentions is the analogy he draws between intrapersonal coordination and interpersonal coordination. He presents a close parallel between his theory of intention in the case of individual action and its view of intentions in joint action. If individual intentions control and coordinate our agency insofar as it develops in time, a shared intention does the same when we act with other agents. That is to say, shared intention encourages coordination not only between my own actions along different points in time, but also between actions of different agents involved in a shared activity.

Bratman explains and develops his conception of shared intention focusing on the simplest cases of shared agency, that is, what he understands as instances of modest or moderate sociality (2009, 150). These are small-scale cases of intentional shared agency characterised by the absence of asymmetric authority relations. It should be noted before proceeding that the author distinguishes between shared intentional activity and shared cooperative agency. The first involves a shared intention along with associated forms of mutual responsiveness. In contrast, shared cooperative activity also requires the absence of certain types of coercion and the commitment to mutual support in the execution of the joint action (1999, 9). But in both cases the interaction and the coordination necessary for successful execution of the action are possible due to a shared intention and its role in practical reasoning.

#### TWO INITIAL CONSTRAINTS

Bratman considers two constraints in his explanation of shared intention, placing his approach midway between aggregative views and those appealing to collective entities. As Bratman himself acknowledges, his account of

shared intention “is individualistic in spirit” (1999, 129). Accordingly, the first constraint is that shared intention is not an attitude that may be assigned to any sort of super agent. Thus, intention in shared actions cannot be characterised in terms of its subject. In the case of shared activity intentions remain individual, as in the case of individual action. Despite this and according to the second constraint, Bratman considers that aggregative views of shared or collective intentions are not enough to understand shared actions. He rejects from the beginning that a shared intention is the sum of coincident individual intentions. Such criticism of aggregative views relies on the observation that the fact that two agents intend to do  $p$  does not guarantee in any way that they intend to do  $p$  together. This requires a certain interrelationship between intentions of the various agents involved. This failure can be seen more clearly by the following example. Suppose that two co-workers, A and B, are taking the bus together to go to their office. At the same time, another employee, C, is also taking the bus to the same place. From a merely aggregative view we cannot explain what distinguishes the relationship between the actions of A and B from the relationship between the actions of A and C. Just everyone has a coincident intention: to go by bus to the office. However, there is no doubt that both relationships are not equal. We say that A and B are doing something together. Instead, we can only say that there is a coincidence between what A and C are doing.

Given this, Bratman tries to provide an account of intentions in shared activity, which does not attribute intentions to any collective entity and that addresses the interrelationships between the agents involved.

#### THE NOTION OF SHARED INTENTION

Bratman proposes to understand the meaning of shared intention as a set of individual intentions that meets the following features:

1. Individual intentions that make up the whole are interrelated in a specific way.
2. Individual intentions forming the shared intention have a special content, which includes a reference to an action that is performed not only by the intention’s subject, but also by other agents.
3. None of the intentions of the individuals involved is in itself a shared intention.

The first feature undoubtedly reflects the attempt to overcome the shortcomings of purely aggregative visions and thereby explains the difference between shared intention and coincident intentions. The second feature is pre-

cisely what makes possible the interrelationship between participants' intentions to which the first one makes reference. According to this second feature, the content of individual intentions must refer to an action performed by all participants, not just by the intention's subject. This can present certain problems. It contradicts a principle that Bratman calls the own-action condition, and that is widely accepted in the philosophy of mind and philosophy of action (2008, 2). Under this condition, the content of an intention can only refer to an action whose realization depends on the proper subject of the intention. That is, in the content of my intentions I can only include my own actions. Finally, according to the third feature, none of the individual intentions that make up the shared intention constitutes by itself a shared intention. This can explain the very fact that Bratman uses "shared intention" in the singular and not "shared intentions".<sup>2</sup> In a shared intentional activity there is one shared intention, not several shared intentions of the different individual agents. A shared intention is not a special kind of intention that is entirely repeated in each of the participating agents. No individual alone can have a shared intention. Considering the very meaning of the term "share", the presence of two agents who share the intention it is at least necessary.

#### THE ROLE OF SHARED INTENTION

Bratman's central argument to defend his notion of shared intention is that, as he defines it, shared intention plays in practical reasoning of shared agency a similar role to that which individual intention plays in the practical reasoning of individual agency. According to the coordinating role attributed to individual intention, Bratman breaks down the role of shared intention into the following three points. If you and I intend to do  $x$ , our shared intention exert control over our behaviour:

1. By helping to coordinate our actions in this way targeting the goal of our cooperative action.
2. This is made, to a great extent, ensuring that our sub-plans on how to do  $x$  are coordinated and compatible.
3. By providing, thanks to its stability feature, a relatively fixed background framework that structures our negotiation about how to do  $x$ .

Established the analogy between individual intention and shared intention, Bratman tries to explain two things. First, what is the structure of shared

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<sup>2</sup> It contrast with expressions such as "we-intentions" used by R. Tuomela and K. Miller (1988) or with "collective intentions" in Searle (1990).

intention, namely, what kind of relationship and what kind of content should characterise a set of individual intentions identifiable as a shared intention. And secondly, he explains how a network of individual intentions like that can fulfil the functions attributed to shared intention.

## TWO POTENTIAL DIFFICULTIES

But before explaining these points, the author proposes to attend to two preliminary considerations. The first indicates a potential risk of circularity if our account of shared intention appeals to a kind of joint action involving in itself the presence of a shared intention (1999, 114). Bratman tries to avoid it by limiting its analysis to neutral types of joint action concerning shared intention. For example, there is a clear sense in which we can travel together by train without a shared intention.

The second consideration is whether *I* may intend that *we* do *p*. That is, how the content of my intention can refer to some activity that is not entirely under my control or that does not depend only on me? As explained above, including such a thing in the content of an intention violates the so-called principle of self-own action (2008, 2), but Bratman rejects this condition. First, he underscores the difference in English between attempt and intent, which do not have the same constraints in their content (1999, 97). If intention is not identified with attempt, but with the minimum element of a plan, we can be more permissive about their contents. The planning conception of intention allows us to understand that my conception of our doing *p* plays the same role in my plans than my conception of my own doing *p* in the case of individual action. In both cases we are faced with problems and rational demands of consistency and coherence. Furthermore, regarding the objection that if “I have the intention that we do *x*” the content of the intention is not under my control, Bratman says that his proposal is compatible with the construction of a condition of influence accordingly: to be the case I intend that we *p*, I need to see your execution of *p* in some way under my influence (1999, 116).

## THE STRUCTURE OF SHARED INTENTION

To sum up, Bratman wants to show that a set of individual attitudes with certain contents and interrelated in a special way can support the coordination aimed at a common goal –the coordination that characterizes a shared intentional activity. This set does it in part by ensuring the coordination of sub-plans and providing a framework for negotiation. Fulfilling that role, this truss can be identified with a shared intention. But what is the relationship between individual intentions that make the shared action possible? To answer this

question Bratman analyses four possible visions of shared intention, and their respective counter-examples. Considering these four views, he starts from the simplest model, which coincides with a merely aggregative view, to get to the most complex which, according to Bratman, will best explain the features of shared intention.

The proposed initial condition is as follows. Two agents A and B have a shared intention to do  $x$  if and only if:

- 1) A intends that A and B do  $x$ , B intends that A and B do  $x$ . These intentions matching the content of A and B, while necessary, are insufficient to ensure a cooperative action. For example, both can have intended to go together from the airport to downtown, not knowing that the other also has that intention. Hence it is impossible that it produces a joint action.

Therefore Bratman adds another condition:

- 1) A intends that A and B do  $x$ , and B intends that A and B do  $x$ .
- 2) 1 is mutually known.

But there is a counter-example that shows that these two conditions do not ensure the presence of a shared intention and coordination that makes it possible. A and B may intend to go together to downtown, but it is possible that each of them can intend to kidnap the other. Even if it is mutually known, it does not guarantee cooperation because they do not want to coordinate their own actions with the successful execution of the other's intention to direct them to a common goal. Rather they want to hinder the ability of the other to act intentionally. In response to this counter-example, Bratman adds a new condition:

- 1) *I.a)* A intends that A and B do  $x$ , *I.b)* B intends that A and B do  $x$ .
- 2) A intends that A and B do  $x$  according to *I.a* and *I.b*; B intends that A and B do  $x$  according to *I.a* and *I.b*.
- 3) 1 and 2 are mutually known.

But so far, these conditions only ensure that every participant has an individual plan in which the intention of each participant to do together  $x$  is effective. But it does not ensure that each participant has the intention that the various sub-plans on how to do  $x$  are jointly coordinated and consistent. Of course, there is a shared conception of  $x$ . However, there is no doubt that differences about how to make  $x$  could prevent the necessary

coordination for cooperative action. Therefore Bratman introduces a final requirement:

- 1) *I.a*) A intends that A and B do *x*, *I.b*) B intends that A and B do *x*.
- 2) A intends that A and B do *x* according to *I.a* and *I.b* and the subplans 1a and 1b are coordinated; B intends that A and B do *x* according to *I.a* and *I.b* and the subplans of coordinated 1a and 1b.
- 3) 1 and 2 are mutually known.

Bratman makes two observations about the necessary coordination of the relevant sub-plans for cooperative action:

First, it is not necessary that the sub-plans are completely overlapping, only that they are embedded or coordinated. This simply means that one can find a way to do *x* that does not violate the sub-plans of any participants, but involves rather the successful execution of them.

Second, it is not necessary to A and B come to have a shared intention that they have already their subplans fully coordinated in the manner just described. Part of this will happen after having a shared intention. In fact, we can be involved in negotiations on how to do *x* as we begin to do *x*. It is in this latter case, when we continue negotiating and having already the shared intention, the situation in which is clearly shown how the shared intention provides a relatively fixed frame structure for negotiation. Thus, the network of individual attitudes characterised by conditions 1, 2 and 3 makes it possible to coordinate actions and subplans and allows negotiation about how to pursue a shared goal. Therefore, performing the same function in cooperative action as the shared intention, this network can be identified with it.

#### THE RELEVANCE OF BRATMAN'S PROPOSAL

Bratman's proposal should be considered as an essential contribution to the explanation of collective intentionality and agency for at least three reasons. First, his account recognizes our attributions of intentionality to a group of individuals acting together, giving meaning to those attributions. So he does not reduce them to a mere rhetorical use of language, nor takes them for a wrong use. And it does not contradict the basic principles of methodological individualism that, as noted by Noguera (2003), functions as a kind of anti-metaphysical corrective in the social sciences. However, Bratman's account does not present the problems commonly attributed to individualistic explanations of collective phenomena, ignoring for example the interrelationships between the various individual intentional states that are part components of these phenomena.

Second, Bratman's proposal is an excellent opportunity to examine the relationship between normativity and practical rationality in the case of joint action, taking into account the rational pressures present in intention, both individual and shared. A major criticism of Bratman's approach is that he does not explain the normative relations present in shared or cooperative action (Gilbert, 2000, 156). For example, he does not enter into the description of the shared action itself any promise or obligation according to which, if I do not fulfil my part of the joint action, the other has a right to complain. Bratman holds that unconditional promises and obligations are not necessary conditions to be included in the explanation.

Certainly, in the formation of a shared intention, or in the negotiation about the subplans, we may make promises expressing obligations to others. As a consequence, breaching these promises confers on others the right to complain. But all this is not an essential feature of shared intention or shared activity.

However, even without any promises, we can say that, if A and B have a shared intention to go together to downtown, A must do his part. But for that judgment it is not necessary to have a promise linked to a shared intention. That A must do his part of joint action is definitely a normative judgment, but whose normativity does not derive from any moral norm. That normativity is derived from a rational commitment, a commitment with the execution of our own intentions, as in the case of individual intentions. Therefore, Bratman's approach reminds us that the scope of normativity is broader than the realm of morality, and moral norms are not the only source of normative judgments about our behaviour, in this case about our interaction with others to act together.

Finally, Bratman's proposal presents an overview of the joint action less idealised than usual. It permits differences in the reasons why we intend to do *x*, and accordingly with this, it also permits differences of bargaining power between agents. In addition, sub-plans on how to do *x* do not have to be completely consistent; they only have to be coordinated. Supporting the other's execution of its part of *x* is a matter of rationality, not necessarily a matter of meeting a moral standard according to which we must keep our promises. With this less idealised view of joint action, Bratman makes an interesting contribution to the explanation of collective action.

Despite such advantages, Bratman's proposal presents some difficulties concerning how to understand the relationship between shared intention and cooperation. When we refer to activities carried out by more than one individual we think almost directly about cooperation. But in Bratman's work on shared intention and shared activity, it is not easy to find a clear relationship between shared intention and cooperation. On the one hand, when he de-

scribes the interaction characterising what he calls shared cooperative activity, the definition of that interaction is nearly coincident with his definition of shared intention. On the other hand, at the beginning of his book *Faces of Intention* (1999, 9) the author points out the difference between two kinds of shared activity: shared intentional activity and shared cooperative activity. This distinction seems to be at least problematic because it is not clear how an action carried out by several individuals can be possible without cooperation. Even competitive interrelations may require often some degree of cooperation.

But it should be noticed that this problem, the lack of precision regarding the notion of cooperation, can be found in different works on collective intentionality, as in the case of Searle (1990).<sup>3</sup> Although not a matter to be discussed here, at least I want to point out that the concept of cooperation should not be taken for granted. Instead, it would be interesting and fruitful to examine and clarify how cooperation is understood in the discussions on collective intentionality and agency.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

Bratman explains intentions present in the joint action establishing an analogy between the functions of individual intention and the functions of what he calls shared intention. The last one is identified with a set of individual intentions related in a specific way and having special contents. Accordingly, this set of individual intentions plays a crucial role in interpersonal coordination, typically attributed by Bratman to shared intentions.

As noted in the last section, the notion of shared intention proposed by Bratman is a significant contribution to the debates about collective intentionality. First, it provides a promising alternative to aggregative approaches and social holistic views. It overcomes deficiencies of the former while avoiding the suspicions aroused by the latter. Second, the debate about the relationship between shared intention and promises is an interesting starting point to discuss how normativity and practical reasoning are related to each other. And finally, Bratman's approach offers a less idealised view of joint action. While making some distinctions that may seem problematic, Bratman's work on shared intention and joint action leads us to consider more carefully what we mean by cooperation.

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3 See also Philip Cohen, Jerry Morgan and Martha E. Polack (1990), and Peter French and Howard Wettstein (2006).

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