

Prospectus Draft

Collective Commitment and Action

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§1 Statement of Thesis

This thesis will defend the view that *collective action* involves *collective intention*, which is a *collective commitment* to act. It has four steps. First, I claim, *contra* some views from psychology and game theory, that collective action is distinct from individual action, and that it involves collective intentions rather than individual intentions plus common knowledge, subpersonal cognitive mechanisms, and strategic reasoning. In this step, I specify three desiderata for an account of collective action. Second, using original empirical research, I establish the presence of a normative dimension of our everyday understanding of collective action. Third, I show how existing accounts of collective action fail at least one of the desiderata. Finally, I develop a novel account of collective commitment that meets the desiderata and explains the psychological, rational, and normative properties of collective intention.

The intuitive idea to which the concept of collective action corresponds is *acting together*. We can get a grasp on this idea using contrast cases.¹ Consider the contrast between the normal determination of prices and price fixing in a basic market model with individual consumers and producers. At least according to standard economic theory, the price of any given commodity in a market is determined by consumers and producers buying and selling that commodity for their own purposes. The price is simply the outcome of these individual decisions and actions where these are based partly on strategic reasoning about what others are likely to do. Now imagine a case in which that same price is the result of a prior agreement amongst producers to keep the price at that level. If we are only privy to the behavior after the agreement, there may be no outward difference and there may be no difference in the summation of individual behavior. The patterns of buying and selling may remain the same. Observing what

¹ The label, in this area, comes from Bratman (2013, pp. 9-10). Contrast cases are prevalent in the literature on collective action, involving various examples of acting together including riding a bike (Gilbert 1990, 2013), dancers in a park (Searle 1990), painting a house (Bratman 1992, 2013), or going to the zoo (Schmid and Schweikard 2013).

each individual is doing at each moment would make it appear as if the cases are identical. Yet in the price-fixing case, the producers are doing something *together*, whereas in the standard case they are not.

These cases illustrate a difference between parallel individual action and collective action. Parallel individual action may involve many interactive features, such as a common effect, coordination, and mutual responsiveness between the participants. For example, the price is a common effect that none of the individuals could produce on their own. This rules out a purely distributive reading of the normal case; it is not true of each that they determine the price. As a result, there is one sense in which it seems appropriate to say that the participants in the market determine the price together, namely the price is the result of all their actions taken together. Further, market interaction requires some coordination, mutual belief or common knowledge, strategic reasoning about the behavior of others, and a degree of responsiveness to others. But the essential feature that distinguishes the price-fixing case is that the price is somehow aimed at by the producers, they do it in partnership or collaboration, while nothing of the sort is true in the standard case. Elaborating the sense of togetherness in partnership or collaboration is the purpose of this thesis.

This distinction matters to us, in cases with legal and moral dimensions like price-fixing and in innocuous cases like walking together. Much of human life takes place within the context of actions in which agents work together to bring about a change in the world. Further, collective action is often involved in the creation of conventions, social groups, institutions, and social structures. Collective activity is therefore not only required to achieve certain goals or perform certain kinds of actions, it plays a large role in a wide range of individual action and social organization. As a result, answering the question of what makes something a collective action is fundamental to our understanding of the social world and of ourselves as social beings.

The fact that, in the price-fixing case, the price is somehow aimed at by the producers suggests that collective action may be explained in terms of collective intention, in much the same way that individual action, as opposed to simple behavior, may be explained in terms of individual intention.² Currently, philosophers largely agree that acting together cannot be

² Seminal discussions of the relation between intentions and intentional actions in the individual case may be found in Anscombe (2000), Bratman (1987, 1999), Davidson (1980), Frankfurt (1988, 1999), Hornsby (1980, 1997), Korsgaard (1996), Velleman (1989, 2000), Watson (2004), and Wilson (1989).

explained in terms of individual intentions with individual contents and mutual belief or common knowledge.³ They therefore appeal to collective intentions. The danger faced by those who make this appeal is that intentions are, for many,⁴ mental states, which leads to concerns that accepting collective intentions will lead to accepting collective minds.

There are three major kinds of theories of collective intention that aim to explain the collectivity involved in collective action without invoking any metaphysically suspect entities. The first aims to analyze collective intention in terms of individual intentions with special contents and interrelations between these individual intentions.⁵ On ‘content’ views, each of the participants has an intention that takes an individual form and is held by an individual but is about something that we do, for example “I intend that we X”. These intentions are supplemented with relations between the participants such that they are aware of the intentions of the others, have their own intentions in part because the others do, and form plans about the completion of the action that are not inconsistent. The second approach is to analyze collective intention as a mode of having an intention.⁶ Thus, each of the participants has an intention of the form “We intend to X”, where this is simply a primitive cognitive capacity of individuals, who think as members of a collective rather than as private individuals. When agents are engaged in individual actions, they have ‘I-intentions’; when agents are engaged in collective actions, they have ‘we-intentions’. Crucially, ‘we-intentions’ are not reducible to ‘I-intentions’. These ‘mode’ views thereby introduce a new kind of mental state or method of reasoning, a move which may not be required by content views. The third kind of analysis holds that the collective itself is capable of being the subject of a collective intention.⁷ On ‘subject’ views, what makes an action collective is that a collective does it. These views come closest to accepting something

³ People who hold this view include Bratman (1992, 2014), Gilbert (1989, 2014), Miller and Tuomela (1988), Searle (1990, 2010), Tuomela (1995, 2013), and Velleman (1997). For opposing views, see Chant (2007) and Ludwig (2007).

⁴ See for example, Davidson’s discussion of “pure intending” (1980), and much of the work that followed, including Bratman (1987, 1999) and Velleman (1989, 2000). For some accounts of intention as something other than a mental state, see Anscombe (2000), Thompson (2008), Wilson (1989).

⁵ This most prominent version of this view is due to Bratman (1993, 1999, 2009, 2014, 2015), but see also Pettit and Schweikard (2006), List and Pettit (2011).

⁶ The two major versions of this kind of theory are Searle (1990, 1995, 2010) and Tuomela (1995, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2013).

⁷ The primary example of this kind of view is Gilbert (1989, 1990, 1996, 2000, 2009, 2013), but for related views of group intention see Rovane (1998), (Tollefsen 2002a, 2002b), Pettit (2003), List and Pettit (2011).

metaphysically suspect, but proponents point out that being the subject of a collective state does not require consciousness or a distinct form of subjectivity.⁸

The relations between the various views conceptualized in this way are well-understood.⁹ In order to develop a novel contribution to the literature, in this thesis, I consider the views divided up along a different axis. I employ a distinction between *normativists* and *non-normativists* (Schmid 2009). Normativists argue that collective action is primarily a normative phenomenon.¹⁰ A genuine case of acting together requires interpersonal commitments that generate obligations, rights, and entitlements among the participants. Margaret Gilbert, for example, states that “obligations and entitlements – not necessarily moral obligations and rights – are inherent in acting together”.¹¹ In contrast, non-normativists argue that collective action essentially involves only some structure of psychological attitudes.¹² It is therefore possible for there to be a collective intention to act without any genuine commitments, obligations, or entitlements. Michael Bratman’s view on “modest sociality”, which are cases of collective action that involve short time frames and limited interaction, but are nonetheless intentional, is representative: “Now, I agree that mutual obligations and entitlements are extremely common in cases of modest sociality, though I think that these will normally be familiar kinds of moral obligation...But...I am not convinced that such obligations are essential to modest sociality”.¹³ This distinction cuts across the standard categorization of collective action theories, giving us six possible kinds of views, all of which are represented in the literature.¹⁴

I propose approaching the issues surrounding collective action from this perspective because it brings into focus the fundamental nature and requirements of collective action. The purpose of investigating this issue is not to pin down a particular wording of the form of the intention, but rather to be precise about what is required of people acting together, in part

⁸ See Gilbert (2006, p. 134) and Rovane (1998, p. 217).

⁹ See Roth (2017) and Schmid and Schweikard (2013)

¹⁰ See Margaret Gilbert (1989, 2013), Abraham Roth (2004, 2014, 2016) and Anthonie Meijers (2003).

¹¹ Gilbert (2013, p.53)

¹² Views of this kind include Searle (1990), Michael Bratman (2013) and Raimo Tuomela (2013).

¹³ Bratman (2009, p. 151-152)

¹⁴ For a non-normativist content view, see Bratman (2013); for mode, see Searle (1990) and Tuomela’s view of “I-mode” groups (2013); and for subject, at least for group intention, see List and Pettit (2011). For a normativist content view, see Alonso (2009); for mode, see Tuomela’s view of “we-mode” groups (2013), and for a normativist subject view, see Gilbert (2013).

because it is a familiar everyday experience and in part to help solve fundamental issues in the humanities and social sciences.

In this thesis, I put forward a normativist, subject view, according to which collective commitment, as the mechanism that binds a collection of individuals to an act, is essential to collective action. I argue that the sense of collaboration or partnership involved in acting together, which I investigate using experimental methods, is not adequately captured by non-normativist views, because it fails to account for our sense that exiting a collective action involves an obligation to make that exit “public” and that there may be participants in a collective action who lack the relevant shared or participatory intentions. Therefore, collective commitment to an action is the only way to capture the idea of thinking and acting as a unit. I then reject the other normativist views on offer because they fail to adequately respond to our understanding of the voluntariness of collective action. In their place, I present an original account of the nature of commitments, individual and collective, how they are generated and rescinded, and how they interact with rational norms and psychological facts. Finally, I look forward to applications of this view to broader social and political issues.

§2 Project Proposal

My thesis has two major aims. The first is to show that, with respect to the metaphysical and conceptual questions, the philosophical literature is on the right track; there is a difference between individual and collective action that is important to us and that is not capturable in strictly individualist terms. The second is to show that collective action is normative in nature, and what that nature is. There are therefore two parts, each of which attempts to satisfy the respective aim.

The first part consists of three chapters and answers the question: is there a genuine distinction between individual action and collective action? I present answers to this question from philosophy, psychology, and game theory, compare and contrast these approaches, and argue for several desiderata for a theory of collective action. First, such a theory must account for our intuitive, everyday concept of acting together. Second, it must account for cases of “spontaneous” collective action, which challenge the concept of collective intention as a purely prospective or deliberative notion. Third, it must be able to explain our ability to rationally justify our contributions to collective action. The guiding idea is that rigorously articulating our

familiar understanding of collective action provides social theory with a vital conceptual resource, collective intention, whose importance should not be downplayed because it doesn't fit into existing research frameworks.

The first chapter examines the philosophical approach. I begin by cataloguing examples of contrast cases in order to relate the current state of the philosophical literature and highlight the reliance of this literature on the analysis of intuitions about these cases. Margaret Gilbert, for example, is explicit about her methodology of examining our intuitions about quotidian cases of acting together. She claims that her “warrant for the description [of our common understanding of collective action] is informal observation including self-observation”.¹⁵ Most philosophers are content to leave their observations at this level. My central purpose in this chapter is to formalize these observations about the correct description of contrast cases using the methodology of experimental philosophy. I present some empirical research, which addresses the following questions: Can people systematically pick out the “contrast” in contrast cases? Do ordinary intuitions support the idea that doing something together involves more than parallel action? Is there a primitive concept of “togetherness” that matches the sense of partnership or collaboration in the price-fixing case? And, if there is such a primitive concept, what are the cues that allow people to identify it? Investigating intuitions in this way has at least two benefits. First, subjecting the foundational premises in these arguments to experimental testing strengthens the evidentiary value of the thought experiments that motivate philosophical interest in the phenomenon in question. Second, strengthening this evidentiary basis allows for a more satisfying response to skeptical challenges about the distinction in other disciplines, which are discussed in the next two chapters.

The second chapter addresses psychological views of collective action, particularly with respect to lower-level cognitive mechanisms that underlie collective actions. Deborah Tollefsen and Rick Dale have applied important work on lower-level coupling, synchronization, entrainment, and perception-action matching in social psychology and cognitive science, which they collect under the label “alignment system”, to the philosophical work on collective action.¹⁶ They further claim that alignment may serve as a sufficient characterization of collective action. In contrast, I argue that while alignment may play several important roles in a full understanding

¹⁵ Gilbert (2013, p.24)

¹⁶ See Tollefsen and Dale (2012) and Tollefsen et al. (2013).

of collective action, it does not account for our everyday understanding of acting together. However, the concept of an alignment system allows us to sharpen the conceptual distinctions between coordination and collective action and to explain several aspects of the initiation, execution, and maintenance of collective action that are underdeveloped in the philosophical literature. It is therefore vital for an account of collective action, especially in what I label “spontaneous” cases. Spontaneous cases involve collective actions that arise from simple coordinated or parallel action, as opposed to requiring explicit planning in their causal history. In much collective activity, there is a realization of the possibility of a collective action rather than a prior plan. We may “fall into” collective action, and yet it still involves our having settled on a particular course in a full sense. From this observation, I derive a desideratum for a theory of collective action: it must be able to account for spontaneous collective action. While these cases seem to call into question a sharp distinction between collective action and simpler forms of collective behavior, I argue that such a distinction exists and is a valuable framing mechanism for empirical research. Although alignment systems are only one way of explaining the origin of spontaneous cases, they are a significant one, and they point to the importance of discussing the relevant psychological features of collective action. Doing justice to collective action involves carving out a role for lower-level psychological mechanisms, while maintaining the conceptual connection between collective intention and action.

The third chapter addresses game-theoretic views. There is a large literature in game theory, which stretches across several disciplines including economics, political science, and philosophy, surrounding “coordination” and “collective action” problems.¹⁷ Famously, such analyses present counterintuitive results concerning the rationality of behaving in a way that satisfies the “common interest”, both in competitive and cooperative contexts.¹⁸ Taking a broad approach, as I do in this chapter, abstracts from many important differences in these games; however, collective action is not captured by one game type. While classic games like Prisoner’s Dilemma, Stag Hunt, and Hi-Lo deserve fine-grained attention on their own, they fail to reflect the breadth of collective action. Nonetheless, they reveal some important features of collective action. First, they remind us that we are the kinds of agents who are capable of aiming at the

¹⁷ Some seminal examples from the disciplines mentioned include Bicchieri (2006), Binmore (1994, 1998, 2005), Gauthier (1986), Hardin (1982, 1995), Harsanyi and Selten (1988), Hollis (1998), Hurley (1991), Lewis (1969), Olson (1965), Schelling (1960), Skyrms (1996, 2004) and Sugden (1986).

¹⁸ Camerer (2003).

“common interest”. We frequently pick the “cooperative” outcomes, even when it does not maximize our individual expected utility.¹⁹ Second, we are able to justify choosing to contribute to a collective action as rational. Third, recent work in game theory based on ‘team reasoning’ aimed at solving these issues is instructive for understanding the broader nature of collective action.²⁰ After defining each of the terms used in this quick sketch, highlighting the issues that move some game theorists away from traditional conceptions of instrumental, individual rationality, and outlining the concept of team reasoning, I argue two things. First, I claim that understanding collective action requires a conception of rationality that goes beyond the framework of game theory. Second, I claim that team reasoning theories are implausible because they require that team reasoners share a team preference function. Thus, each participant must have the same representation of the team’s preferences. In place of this condition, I argue that appealing to collective intentions allows us to account for the gap between any participants’ representation of the collective intention and the collective intention itself. From this discussion, I develop the third desiderata for a theory of collective action that employs collective intention, namely that it account for the way that we can rationally justify our own contribution to the collective action by way of the collective intention.

Chapter three closes out the first part. Based on the conclusions drawn, for the next section, I treat the difference between individual and collective action as genuine, thereby necessitating a theory of collective action that appeals to collective intentions. I also treat the three desiderata as legitimate criteria for evaluating such a theory.

The second part answers the questions: Is collective intention normative? And, if so, in what sense? The answer is based on the concept of collective commitment, and so part two explains what collective commitment is, and why it is necessary for collective action. I begin by further explicating the difference between normativists and non-normativists, and specifying what is at stake in the debate between them. I then present original empirical research about the normative dimensions of our common understanding of collective action. This research shows that our common understanding involves an obligation to notify when leaving a collective action. Explaining this fact requires a view of collective intentions that shows how they generate these interpersonal commitments, in addition to any requirements of rationality. After considering

¹⁹ Rand and Nowak (2013).

²⁰ See for example Bacharach (2006), Gold and Sugden (2007), Hakli et al. (2010), and Sugden (1993, 2000).

some prominent normativist accounts in the literature, I argue that they each face difficult problems satisfying the desiderata developed in the first part. Finally, I present my own theory of collective intention as collective commitment to act, and show how it accounts for the psychological, rational, and normative properties of collective action.

Chapter four deals with the distinction between normativists and non-normativists. This aspect of the debate about the nature of collective action has come to a stalemate, in part because of a dependence on descriptive and intuitional methods. I therefore present research that investigates people's ability to detect the presence of normative relations as a function of increasing evidence of collective action, or, in the converse case, their ability to infer the pre-existence of a collective action from some normative interaction. The results show that judgements regarding the existence of normative relations track perceived collective actions, and vice versa. Further, individuals recognize obligations between actors engaging in behavior that they take to be immoral. In other words, even in cases in which the participants in the study judged the overall collective action to be immoral, they recognized obligations between the actors generated by the collective action. Based on this, I conclude that our everyday concept of collective action has the following feature: when an individual leaves a collective action we recognize an obligation to notify the other participants, and this obligation is not moral. I then consider the ability of Bratman's non-normative view to account for this fact, and assess the prospects of developing a non-normativist view in line with the everyday conception of collective action revealed by the empirical results. I conclude that, if this condition is genuinely an inherent feature of collective action, only a theory of collective action that involves a concept of commitment is able to account for it. While the support for the idea that this condition is an inherent part of collective action is not categorical, based on the current balance of evidence we have good reason to pursue a normativist view: the non-normativist view fails the first desiderata of matching our everyday conception of collective action.

Chapter five focuses on normative views. I consider and reject the two most prominent accounts of the normative dimension of collective action. The first is put forward by Margaret Gilbert. According to Gilbert, collective action involves *joint commitment* which creates a special standing to make demands based on a nexus of non-moral, directed obligations,

entitlements and rights, all of which are functions of the joint activity.²¹ Joint commitments create plural subjects, which are the proper agents of the collective action. They also have several counterintuitive properties. First, unlike personal commitments, joint commitments cannot be rescinded unilaterally, which means that a joint commitment can only be terminated jointly. Gilbert argues that because of this an individual attempting to exit a joint commitment must *seek the permission* of the other parties.²² Second, Gilbert argues that joint commitments can be created under conditions of manipulation and coercion.²³ After clarifying the nature of directed, non-moral obligations on Gilbert's view, I argue that Gilbert's view of the normativity involved in collective action fails to satisfy the first desideratum because it entails normative claims that do not match our everyday conception. Again, I present some empirical research to support this argument.

The second is put forward by Abraham Roth. Roth adopts the idea of non-moral, directed commitments between participants in a collective action, but labels them *contralateral commitments* and gives them a different interpretation. For Roth, the commitments involved do not create a plural subject. Instead, they allow the participating agents to act directly on the mental states of other agents by creating *practical intimacy* between the agents.²⁴ Practical intimacy also fails to satisfy the first desideratum. It requires that one agent has authority over another agent, and this authority bypasses the deliberative faculties of the second agent. Further, I show how this authority is also found in cases of coercion and manipulation, and is therefore subject to the same issues as Gilbert's view. I conclude that there is a need for a view of the normative dimension of collective action that is not subject to these concerns, and that meets the desiderata from part one. I attempt to provide such a view in the next chapter.

Chapter six presents my view of collective intention and action. Building on the work of Velleman (1997), my aim is to show that a single collective action involves a single token of a collective intention, which is a single collective commitment to an action. The guiding idea is that collective intention requires a causal story rather than a constitutive one. Instead of claiming that collective intention is a state that persists throughout the action by being realized in the

²¹ (2006, p. 104).

²² (2013, p. 32).

²³ (2006, p. 78-80). Gilbert argues here that there may be coerced agreements. Since, for her, agreements always involve joint commitments, it follows that there may be coerced joint commitments.

²⁴ See Roth (2004, p. 383).

minds of the participants, I claim that it is a public state that is triggered and then persists simply by being fulfilled or by not being rescinded. This claim requires elaboration. First, I clarify the concept of commitment. I define collective commitment as a relation between a collection of individuals and an action. I then introduce the idea of *intersubjective commitment*, which relates the members of the collection to the collective commitment and to each other. I also distinguish collective commitment from individual commitment, specify how individual commitments relate to collective and intersubjective commitments, and argue that this kind of commitment is not moral. Second, I address the idea of intention. I show that a commitment to a goal is not sufficient to create a single system of practical activity because it does not address the fundamental task of intention, which is settling the issue in question.²⁵ Hence the claim that collective intention is collective commitment to act, rather than to a goal. I then adopt the idea that what is essential to intention is not that it is mental but rather that it is a representation with a particular content and causal role, namely that it causes behaviour by representing itself as causing it.²⁶ This idea is captured by using the language of commitments, for it is quite common to speak of commitments as oral or written.²⁷ Third, I consider how collective commitment arises. Since collective commitment already includes the collective as a term in the relation, it is not itself the initial mechanism that binds the individuals in the collection together. In order to explain how this happens, I introduce and define the notion of *collective identification*. I then claim that a collective intention is created by representational acts (like gestures or assertions) rather than by representational states (like mental images or beliefs). Individuals representational acts signalling a conditional willingness to participate in a collective activity combine to form a single collective intention that persists until it is rescinded or satisfied. Fourth, I point out some consequences of this view, one of which is that collective commitments act *indirectly* on the individuals, because they are mediated by the individual's beliefs or memories as well as the intersubjective commitments between the individuals. I argue that collective commitment to act nonetheless satisfies the action-guiding roles of collective intention. Another consequence is that leaving a collective commitment is more difficult than rescinding an individual commitment because it also involves a representational act, which expresses an individual's *disidentification*

²⁵ The difference between intentions and goal is pointed out by both Velleman (1997) and Bratman (2013).

²⁶ This idea is found in both Velleman (1997) and Searle (1983).

²⁷ The view that the intentions are essentially commitments is familiar from Bratman (1987).

from the collective. I then specify these *exit conditions*. Fifth, I argue that the normative nature of collective intention is based on the idea of settling the issue at hand. Individual intentions settle what *I* am going to do, collective intentions settle what *we* are going to do. There is thus a joint control of each member's behavior, but this is granted by the act that makes one a participant in a collective commitment. Further, this act creates the normative standing present in cases of collective action. Because they must settle matters jointly, participants in the collective action may remind one another of the collective commitment, appeal to it in the deliberation and negotiation, and criticize other participants for failure to respond appropriately to the reasons created by it.

In the conclusion, I argue that this account of collective actions meets the desiderata. First, it explains contrast cases and the normative dimension in them. The issue of standing is explained by our joint settling of the means to executing the collective intention, and more specifically, we have an obligation to notify because exiting the collective commitment equally requires a public representational act. Second, using the notion of a public representational act, I explain how generating a collective commitment is possible in spontaneous cases and how appeal to the collective commitment maintains the collective action. Finally, under a familiar conception of rationality as responsiveness to reasons, I show how contributing to a collective action is *prima facie* rational based on the role that the collective intention plays in our reasoning, discuss overriding reasons, consider a “bootstrapping” objection and clarify the relation between collective action and “collective action problems”.

§3 Excerpt (Chapter 2)

This chapter concerns the role of low-level cognitive and bodily alignment in the production and maintenance of collective action and the relation between this alignment and higher-level states such as collective intention. The first goal of the chapter is to spell out how the empirical research on alignment may be integrated into the philosophical theories of collective action. The second goal is then to develop a desideratum for a successful characterization of collective action, which spells out the difference between genuine collective action and simpler forms of coordination based on alignment. More specifically, I emphasize that while alignment may play several important roles in a full understanding of collective action, it is insufficient as a characterization because it fails to capture the distinctive features of acting together.

Work on lower-level coupling, synchronization, entrainment, and perception-action matching in social psychology and cognitive science has been applied to the philosophical work on collective action by Deborah Tollefsen and Rick Dale.²⁸ I introduce the research they report, discuss two conceptions of collective action, and relate how they conceive of the philosophical importance of alignment. I then claim that their attempt to interpret this research in terms of Searle's account of collective intentionality fails because of Searle's adherence to forms of individualism and internalism. Finally, I return to the question of the proper characterization of collective action and attempt to distinguish between alignment, coordination, and collective action.

The notion of an alignment system is valuable to a theory of collective action because it allows us to sharpen the conceptual distinctions between coordination and collective action and to explain several aspects of the initiation, execution, and maintenance of collective action that are underdeveloped in the philosophical literature. Nonetheless, we need to add some significant theoretical sophistication in order to capture various degrees of coordination and the "sharedness" or "togetherness" present in collective action, sophistication that carries us beyond what is capturable by the concept of alignment.

1. Alignment Systems Introduced

Tollefsen and Dale introduce the concept of an 'alignment system' based primarily on linguistic and psychological research on conversation and interpersonal interaction.²⁹ An alignment system is a loosely connected set of cognitive processes that facilitate social interactions. 'Alignment' refers to the dynamic matching or coordination of the behavior or cognitive states of two or more people over time, for example, in their gestures, gaze, attention, word choice or posture. The basic idea is that individuals engaged in collective activity may become subpersonally aligned across a variety of bodily and cognitive levels, the three main ones being perceptuomotor, attentional, and psycholinguistic. In other words, their bodily movements may become synchronized, their eye movements coordinated, and their speech patterns more similar.³⁰

²⁸ See Tollefsen and Dale (2012) and Tollefsen et al. (2013).

²⁹ (2012, p.391).

³⁰ Tollefsen and Dale (2012, pp. 391- 393) and Tollefsen et al. (2013, pp. 50-53).

‘Alignment’ is best thought of as a general term for a variety of psychological phenomena including entrainment, synchrony, mutual adaptation, and perception-action matching. The study of these phenomena encompasses a wide range of methodological and theoretical approaches in social psychology and cognitive science.³¹ Tollefsen and Dale abstract from many of these differences, and I follow them in this respect. The empirical research they report includes, for example, studies in which the eye movements of people looking at a painting dynamically couple if the participants share a certain level of mutual understanding, the phases of people swinging their legs or rocking together in rocking chairs synchronize, or the pattern of tapping on a table becomes aligned.³²

This research suggests that alignment has two features which are important for our purposes. First, it is responsive to higher-level cognitive states such as shared beliefs and intentions, but it can also give rise to cognitive states via bottom-up processing. This multi-level interaction also occurs within an alignment system itself, so that behavioral alignment gives rise to attentional and linguistic alignment, and vice versa. As Tollefsen et al. state, “Behavioral alignment seems to give rise to alignment in conversation, which, in turn, gives rise to a mutual understanding and deeper understanding of one another, which amounts to an alignment of overall interactive comprehension”.³³ Second, the degree of alignment influences the success of many interpersonal processes, such as learning, information exchange and communication. According to this research, interaction between individuals over time can be greatly facilitated by low-level cognitive processes as well as higher-level cognitive plans.

Aligning with others in synchronized movements such as dancing and marching both improves perceptual and motor ability during cooperative tasks and enhances the general rapport and pro-social behavior of the participants.³⁴ It is important to emphasize that this also holds for cases in which the behaviour is *complementary* rather than matching.³⁵ One study found that when two people perform a precision task activity involving different roles, they form a complementary perception-action system that lowers the complexity of their task performance.³⁶

³¹ For detailed introductory surveys see Sebanz et al. (2006) and Knoblich et al. (2011).

³² Richardson and Dale (2005), Richardson et al. (2007), and Oullier et al. (2008).

³³ (2013, p. 52).

³⁴ Tollefsen et al. (2013).

³⁵ See Richardson et al. (2007), Fusaroli et al. (2012), Ramenzoni et al. (2012).

³⁶ Ramenzoni et al. (2012).

Combining these features makes it clear that alignment processes contribute to the successful completion of collaborative tasks, and perhaps collective actions. Building on this research, Tollefsen and Dale aim to show that “alignment is crucial to understanding collective actions and should be integrated with philosophical approaches”.³⁷ They claim that philosophical theories of collective action have several shortcomings that limit their ability to explain the initiation, execution, and maintenance of collective actions. By attending to the role alignment systems play in coordination, we can integrate this empirical research with the philosophical theories to overcome these shortcomings. I agree with Tollefsen and Dale that alignment has an important role in the explanation of several aspects of collective action. Nonetheless, after discussing the proper definition of collective action in the next section, I show how Tollefsen and Dale’s proposed integration fails and suggest an alternative.

2. Alignment Systems and Intention

The difficulty with applying this research to collective action is that alignment based on lower-level processes can occur unintentionally. The participants in these studies are often not aware that they are bodily or linguistically entwined, and they become aligned without aiming to do so. In fact, in many studies, alignment occurs even when the participants are told to ignore each other’s actions.³⁸ This research conflicts with the distinction between the summation of individual acts and genuine collective action, because alignment can be brought about purely by subpersonal processes and is present in both simple matching and coordination, and in genuine intentional behavior. As we have seen in the previous chapter, this distinction tracks our commonsense notions of collective action, and as such, a rejection of it must be strongly supported in order to be justified.

It is unsurprising that the research Tollefsen and Dale report does not fully observe this distinction since the psychological literature they build on often employs a potentially broader conception of collective action. In a review article of that literature, Sebanz et al. offer the following definition: “Joint action can be regarded as any form of social interaction whereby two or more individuals coordinate their actions in space and time to bring about a change in the

³⁷ (2012, p.385).

³⁸ Knoblich et al. (2011, p. 67).

environment”.³⁹ As Godman points out, while this definition can be understood as involving collectively intentional notions, depending on how we read the phrase “to bring about a change”, it may or may not require them.⁴⁰ Further, according to the minimalist reading, which does not require collectively intentional notions, the focus of this definition is on *coordination*, rather than any particular psychological attitude or normative state.⁴¹

We are then left with two potential understandings of collective action, the (collectively)⁴² intentional one preferred by those aiming to explain the difference in the contrast cases and the minimalist one suggested by Godman.⁴³ The significant difference between these two readings is that on the minimalist reading, the distinction between parallel and collective action in contrast cases disappears. The non-collective action instance in contrast cases are purposefully described so that they involve coordination, social interaction, and a common effect.

The differences between these two conceptions of collective action raise two questions. These two questions correspond to the two aims referred to in the introduction and frame the rest of the chapter. First, how do these differing views of collective action shape the project of combining the empirical research on alignment with philosophical theories? Second, is there a way to characterize collective action that distinguishes in a principled way between alignment, coordination, and collective action, and allows us to account for the difference in contrast cases?

3. Tollefsen, Dale, and Searle on Collective Action

Tollefsen and Dale do not explicitly offer a definition of collective action, and at times, equivocate between definitions. On one hand, when they are discussing the importance of alignment for collective action, they are sympathetic to a minimalist definition. On the other hand, when they are discussing the philosophical theories, they work with the intentionalist definition. In this section, I highlight this ambiguity by discussing both the role that Tollefsen and Dale spell out for alignment systems in collective action, and the way that Tollefsen and Dale attempt to integrate alignment into Searle’s theory of collective intentionality. I also argue

³⁹ (2006, p. 75).

⁴⁰ (2013, p. 590, 601 fn.1).

⁴¹ It is not clear that this is the interpretation Sebanz et al. would accept, see Knoblich et al. (2011).

⁴² From here on I use ‘intentional’ for ‘collectively intentional’.

⁴³ For further discussion of minimalist accounts of collective action see (Pacherie 2011).

that if we temporarily resolve this tension by working with the intentionalist interpretation, their integration fails for another reason, namely there is a conflict between the concept of an alignment system and the philosophical framework they choose.

In the positive view of the relationship between collective intentions and alignment systems Tollefsen and Dale put forward, they argue that alignment necessarily underwrites all collective action. They state “the alignment system provides a necessary structure in which we-intentions can be formed and maintained”.⁴⁴ As a result, while collective intentions⁴⁵ have an important role in collective action, they are not alone sufficient. They make this explicit by stating both that “We-intentions may be necessary for collective action, but as we have argued, they are not sufficient”⁴⁶ and that “Deep commitments are clearly not sufficient for joint agency”.⁴⁷ They are willing to extend this thesis, in a limited fashion, to the claim that collective intention may not be necessary for collective action. They discuss cases of the collective behaviour of animals in which “surface synchrony may be all there is to animal joint action”.⁴⁸ These doubts about the necessity of intentions/commitments are strengthened by their discussion of an “illusion of the we-will”, which highlights their concern that if collective intentions are generated through alignment induced by laboratory settings, they cannot be genuine intentions since “the we-will is an effect rather than a cause of the activity”.⁴⁹ From this it is possible to argue that more complex collective behaviours may be brought about by preintentional processes, making recourse to higher-order cognitive processes explanatorily superfluous and possibly epiphenomenal. This suggests that directly referring to intentional concepts in our account of collective action is mistaken since collective intentions are potentially neither necessary nor sufficient for collective action.

On the other hand, Tollefsen and Dale also consider the relation between this view of alignment and specific accounts of collective action. They suggest that incorporating the empirical research on alignment as a mechanism of cohesion between individuals serves several purposes for the literature on collective action. First, collective action theories informed by this

⁴⁴ (2012, p. 398).

⁴⁵ Tollefsen and Dale treat we-intentions, shared intentions, and shared/deep commitments as interchangeable terms for what I am calling collective intention.

⁴⁶ (2012, p. 398).

⁴⁷ (2012, p. 400).

⁴⁸ (2012, p. 401).

⁴⁹ (2012, pp. 402-403).

research are better equipped to deal with how collective actions are initiated, implemented, and executed, and second, if we assess the compatibility of the empirical research with the various theories of collective action, the scientific research may help to adjudicate between philosophical theories.

For this project to be coherent, we must here adopt the intentionalist interpretation of collective action. This follows because philosophical theories of collective action are aimed at explaining the difference between contrast cases, which, as we have seen, are designed to require collectively intentional notions. This is not itself an objection to Tollefsen and Dale. They introduce the concept of collective action using a contrast case presented by Searle, and, at times, they are quite explicit about adopting the intentionalist definition. They state, for example, that “we agree that a theory of collective action needs to appeal to mental states like intentions, and we are persuaded by the arguments that these intentions should be ‘shared’ in some manner”.⁵⁰

In order to reconcile these claims about the necessity of alignment for collective action with the philosophical literature and make good on their claims about the potential benefits of incorporating the concept of an alignment system into an account of collective action, Tollefsen and Dale attempt to apply their research to Searle’s theory of collective intentionality. Searle puts forward a non-normative, mode view under which what separates the two scenarios in contrast cases is that in the second case each individual has an intention of the form “We intend to run to X”, and that any personal intention an individual may have derives from and is dependent upon this collective intention. Further, the capacity to have we-intentions is a simple biological primitive that is shared by humans and several other animal species.⁵¹

Tollefsen and Dale propose that lower-level alignment can work in tandem with these we-intentions, and that lower-level cognitive processing fills out Searle’s concept of the Background. On Searle’s account, the Background is a technical term that refers to a set of non-intentional capacities that enable intentional states to function and is presupposed for seeing the other as a candidate for cooperative agency. Tollefsen and Dale argue that “One way to conceive of this set of capacities, however, is to understand them as structures or features of an alignment system”.⁵² Their central point is that an alignment system provides the necessary structure for the

⁵⁰ (2012, p. 388).

⁵¹ See Searle (1990) for the original view, and Searle (2010) for a slightly updated version.

⁵² (2012, p. 398).

formation and continuation of Searlean we-intentions. In relation to Searle's example of the dance troupe, they see the relationship as follows:

The ballet troupe's higher-order we-intentions will inform their lower level processes and explains how their perceptual and motor systems can function together to achieve their goal. Similarly, the presence of an alignment system explains how we-intentions can be formed on the fly, so to speak, without prior planning or agreements.⁵³

Further, lower-level alignment explains the way in which we-intentions in individual minds lead to unified agency. The coordination of minds and bodies over time is facilitated by the alignment system, and therefore the we-intentions themselves do not need to be interdependent. According to Tollefsen and Dale, this allows Searle's account to avoid the criticism that Searle fails to account for the interpersonal relations that make shared activity *shared*.⁵⁴ Because Searle's account does not require we-intentions to be interrelated, it allows for the possibility that the we-intentions are simply coincidental. Further, without an individual having a complex set of attitudes about the other participants and their attitudes, it seems unclear how we-intentions will result in successful coordination towards shared goals. Tollefsen and Dale argue that alignment processes fill this gap, and they do so without requiring an explicit structure of interdependent intentional attitudes.

The problem for Tollefsen and Dale is that Searle places the following two conditions on his account of collective intentionality:

1. all the relevant cognitive states and processes are had entirely by individuals
2. the structure of any individual's intentionality depends completely on facts about that individual's mind, independent of any feature of the world.⁵⁵

The first condition represents Searle's adherence to one form of individualism because it denies that groups themselves can be the subject of intentional states. The second condition represents Searle's adherence to a kind of internalism, as it holds that collective intentions do not depend on any aspect of the environment.

We now have a view of collective intentionality on which individuals can have collective intentions in complete isolation. Searle explicitly argues that genuine collective intentionality

⁵³ (2012, p. 398).

⁵⁴ For versions of this criticism see Meijers (2003) and Schmid (2009).

⁵⁵ (1990, p. 406-407).

could just as well be had by a brain in a vat.⁵⁶ It also entails that Searle accept atomism, although of a modified form.⁵⁷ While Searle may hold that our human capacities may require, in the actual world, that we exist in a social world, this is not logically necessary. This follows from his exposition because according to the second condition, all intentionality, be it individual or collective, is independent of what the real world is like. These conditions apply equally to the Background. Searle states “*That I have a certain set of Intentional states and that I have a Background do not logically require that I be in fact in certain relations to the world around me*”.⁵⁸

The issue is that the concept of an alignment system, as Tollefsen and Dale employ it, violates these conditions. In order to align in the way that Tollefsen and Dale describe, which involves dynamic change over time based on mutual adaptation, individuals must stand in particular concrete relations to one another. Alignment is something that essentially involves multiple agents, the relations between them, and particular environmental factors. A set of brains in vats cannot form an alignment system.⁵⁹ Therefore, alignment is not a viable way of filling out the concept of the Background.

Further, as we saw at the beginning of this section, according to Tollefsen and Dale, this interrelation is structurally necessary for the formation of a we-intention. This contradicts Searle’s categorical exclusion of the necessity of any external relation. Searle is committed to the view that it is not just a logical possibility but also a natural possibility that one could have a we-intention and yet be mistaken about the presence of any other agent.⁶⁰ In contrast, Tollefsen and Dale are committed to the view that there is a necessary connection between alignment and we-intentions. Thus, the story that Tollefsen and Dale tell about how we-intentions arise conflicts with Searle’s individualism and internalism about we-intentions. It is important to note that this may not affect an account of *successful* collective action, since for Searle that would require that

⁵⁶ (1990, p. 407)

⁵⁷ For a standard definition of atomism see Pettit (1993). For a discussion of the kind of atomism that applies to Searle, see (Meijers 2003, p. 173). What they have in common is the claim that a solitary individual, an individual that is and always has been isolated from other human beings, may display all normal human characteristics and capacities.

⁵⁸ (1981, p. 154).

⁵⁹ While it may be possible to understand alignment without this requirement, perhaps simply as a set of individual capacities, this is not the understanding with which Tollefsen and Dale work. They state, for example, that alignment systems are “multi-component” systems that essentially involve “continual mutual adaptation” and the “coupling of cognitive agents” (Tollefsen et. al 2013, p. 50-51).

⁶⁰ See, for example, Searle (1990, p. 407).

the individuals are not mistaken about the presence of other participants and their intentional states. Nonetheless, if alignment presupposes two or more agents, and is necessary for the formation of a we-intention, Tollefsen and Dale's account conflicts with Searle's on the issue of the formation of we-intentions.

4. Alignment Systems in an Account of Collective Action

Despite this conflict with Searle's theory, Tollefsen and Dale present a novel addition to the literature on collective action, and it may be consistent with another theory. Further, they are correct to suggest that the concept of an alignment system may serve several purposes in such a theory. They emphasize that collective action is sometimes a dynamic, self-organizing process that involves various sub-processes that contribute to its initiation, maintenance and success. They also spell out how this dynamic development works in great detail, elaborate on the types of lower-level cognitive processes that lead to alignment between individuals, introduce potentially important concepts such as shared motor intentions, and clarify their relation to higher-level cognitive states. It appears that they have developed a consequential area of overlap between lower-level cognitive processes and collective intentionality, and they suggest several potent areas where the use of empirical research on the coupling of lower-level cognitive processes could be highly valuable for theories of collective action.

The central insight that guides much of Tollefsen and Dale's critique of the existing literature is that some collective actions may be traceable to a subpersonal level; sometimes we simply "fall into" them. It is not always clear that the moment at which collective behaviour becomes collective action is present in the conscious awareness of the participants. Consider, for example, the case of a group forming to help a crash victim. Imagine that a bystander sees that the crash victim is trapped under the car, begins running beside the other bystanders towards the victim, and exclaims, "I'm going to try to lift the car off of him". She looks around at the other bystanders, who return the look and look at one another, and then they all reach down to grab a part of the car to lift. In this case, each bystander, by responding to the look and initiating action, indicates that they will help the victim by lifting the car. At some point in this story, their running besides each towards the car becomes the collective action of lifting the car, but it is implausible to describe the lifting of the car as the result of a prior plan or an explicit agreement.

We may label these cases of collective action that do not involve explicit agreement or a prior plan ‘spontaneous collective actions’. They form a familiar and important class of collective actions. Think of the way that many conversations arise, not from any plan, previous deliberation, or familiarity with each other but from features of the circumstance in which the participants find themselves, or the way in which the participants subconsciously react to those features and each other. Further, this kind of collective action highlights a general feature that all accounts of collective action must have; an account of collective action must explain the transition from a random collection to collective agency, however that is construed. In cases with prior plans or explicit agreement this task is not as difficult. But the most difficult cases lie at the lower bound where the behaviour is collective but the presence of a collective intention is in question.

Here we see the value of alignment. Features of relevant expressive behaviour that lead to collective action may be partially explained by the subpersonal bodily, linguistic and attentional alignment. For example, Tollefsen and Dale consider studies that show that many of the processes that support conversation are sub-personal alignment processes, such as bodily posture, verbal cues, and various other levels of linguistic organization, from diction to sentence structure.⁶¹ They also discuss the role of priming in alignment, which predicts that the cognitive accessibility of many behaviors, such as a chosen sentence structure, is induced by hearing another person use it, and thereby increasing the probability of producing a similar behavior oneself.

This account of the role of gaze, posture, and other such processes in alignment provides detailed mechanisms that (subconsciously) introduce a collection of people to each other as possible participants in a collective action. By increasing cognitive accessibility, pro-social tendencies, and feelings of rapport and familiarity, alignment processes provide a background on which the initiation becomes more likely. Further, as Michael and Pacherie have argued,⁶² alignment reduces uncertainty about the representations and behavior of others and thereby increases predictability, which helps establish a minimal form of social orientation that may in certain cases induce a process that leads to collective action.

⁶¹ Tollefsen et al. (2013, p. 51).

⁶² (2015, p. 103-105).

The claim is not that alignment is all there is to the initiation of collective action, nor that alignment alone is sufficient for such an initiation. Initiating a collective action involves some act on the part of a person that she is ready to participate in the collective action, while alignment is unintentional. Alignment may often feature in the causal story about the production of collective action, but it is not the initiation of collective action itself.

Understanding the lower-level processes in this way specifies a different role for alignment and collective intention in collective action from the one preferred by Tollefsen and Dale in their minimalist discussion. Under the view sketched here, according to which a full account of collective action must be able to explain our everyday concept of acting together, alignment is neither necessary nor sufficient for collective action. Many collective actions do not require the spatial proximity necessary for bodily coupling or the regularity of interaction necessary for linguistic alignment. For example, we can imagine cases where collective actions are initiated, and perhaps even carried out, by a few texts or an exchange of emails. Therefore, alignment systems are not necessary for collective actions. They are not sufficient for collective action because they cannot differentiate between individual coordinated behavior and genuine collective action. Tollefsen and Dale discuss cases such as ‘collective following’, in which subtle directional cues cause two or more people to wander in a direction that neither intended, simply by “following” each other. This case involves many surface-level coupling processes and leads to an apparently collective outcome, but it is not a case of collective action, because it is not a case of doing something *together* with someone else in the sense elaborated in the previous chapter. The collective following mechanism is simply an explanation of their individual coordinated behavior. Because the story of subpersonal processes leading to an alignment system does not adequately differentiate between collective action and individual coordinated behavior, we need something more than a concept of alignment derived from preintentional processes to delineate genuine collective action. In other words, alignment systems are incapable of adequately accounting for our familiar conception of collective action and are therefore not suitable as a characterization of collective action.

In order to make this differentiation, we cannot simply appeal to the degree of complexity of coordination. Some intentional collective actions involve very simple forms of coordination, such as two people arm wrestling, while some very complex forms of coordinated behaviour are not collectively intentional actions, such as strangers avoiding each other while walking down 5th

Avenue on Christmas Eve. We therefore still need to appeal to a marker of collective action, and the best prospect currently on offer is collective intention. We may then say that basic types of shared behaviour in the form of an alignment system often precede collective action, but that behavior is not a collective action until there is a collective intention.

Tollefsen and Dale consider a version of this argument, and reject it on the basis that it injudiciously restricts the concept of collective action and limits the potential for empirical research to inform philosophical accounts. They state that:

one might argue that unless or until a collective intention (or shared intention) is in place, there is no joint action and so the mechanisms which initiate joint action and give rise to shared intention are not, themselves, important for a theory of joint action.⁶³

Arguing this way is a potential problem, for Tollefsen and Dale, because it suggests the following reasoning process: “provided high-level conditions are met (appropriate shared intentions, etc.), it is irrelevant what specific cognitive processing phenomena give way to them”.⁶⁴ This reasoning process in turn makes empirical research into the initiation, implementation, and execution of collective action unimportant for a philosophical theory of collective action. More generally, Tollefsen and Dale claim that “Philosophical accounts tend to focus on collective actions that come about by a conscious and planned manner, and many of them attempt to provide necessary and sufficient conditions for collective action (or shared intention) and hence rule out the possibility of collective action arising in different and less cognitively complex ways”.⁶⁵

These are certainly worthwhile concerns. There is a large spectrum of coordination, cooperation, and complexity in the collective behavior of individuals. Allowing collective action to arise from less complex coordinated behavior, as opposed to requiring explicit planning, seems to blur the lines between collective action and simpler forms of collective behavior. Further, collective action does appear to be able to arise spontaneously, and be initiated in several different ways, as in the car crash case. If we are to respect this aspect of collective action, we cannot go so far as to require explicit representation of the collective itself, the collective goal, aim, or plan, and each individual role, by each participant as a precursor to the

⁶³ (2012, p. 390).

⁶⁴ (2012, p. 389).

⁶⁵ (2012, p. 390).

initiation of that action. We must allow for the fact that at times there is a realization of the possibility of a collective action rather than a prior plan.

Tollefsen and Dale are correct that a philosophical theory that ruled out the usefulness of empirical research into the generation, implementation, and execution of collective action would be incomplete and mistaken. However, as I show later, looking for the conditions that delineate collective action does not entail ignoring the ways in which empirical research can inform an account of collective action. These projects can and should proceed in tandem. Empirical research is especially relevant for finding the mechanisms that explain how collective actions are initiated and how they are executed. Including a clear explanation of the relationship between these mechanisms and collective intention is necessary for a full account of collective action. It must provide space for the psychological precursors of collective action.

Building on the importance of empirical research in explaining initiation and execution, we may introduce a second desideratum for a theory of collective action: it must account for cases of “spontaneous” collective action and explain how the behavior of a random collection transitions into a collective action. Such an account must generate an explanation of the initiation of a collective action from more basic forms of shared behavior.

5. Conclusion

What we are searching for is a distinguishing feature of collective action that acknowledges and accounts for the features of multiple and emergent initiation, and leaves room for the exploration of further mechanisms that aid in execution, implementation, and maintenance. Alignment systems are too weak to play this role because they are present in cases of simple coordination. Explicit representation by each individual of the collective goal or plan and their roles in achieving the collective end is too strong, as it rules out implicit spontaneous cases such as the car crash responders. Collective intentions, supplemented by an account of how they may arise from more simple forms of coordination, are the best candidate because they account for the fact that some collective actions may be spontaneously initiated from behavioral regularity and subtle behavioral cues.

The task for the second part of this dissertation is to show that giving an account of the necessary and sufficient conditions for collective action does not rule out the gradual development of a collective action from less cognitively complex processes. I claim that the

account of collective action I present here is consistent with the idea that the subpersonal interactions between participants detailed by research on alignment systems are an important component of a full explanation of how collective actions are initiated and how they generate sustained coordination between individuals over time without constant explicit communication or reinforcement. Finally, I argue that distinguishing genuine collective action from highly coordinated individual action benefits empirical research by allowing us to study the *planned coordination* that follows from explicitly initiated collective actions in isolation from *emergent coordination* that arises prior to any plans or intentions.

I therefore maintain an intentionalist view of collective action on the grounds that explaining contrast cases is an important desideratum of collective action theories and that delineating collective action from coordination provides a richer conceptual framework for empirical research.

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