

# What is Joint Action?

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## 1. History

Ask a *psychologist* ‘joint action [is] any form of social interaction whereby two or more individuals coordinate their actions in space and time to bring about a change in the environment.’<sup>13</sup>

Ask a *philosopher* ‘I take a collective action to involve a collective intention.’<sup>7</sup> ‘The sine qua non of collaborative action is a joint goal [shared intention] and a joint commitment.’<sup>14</sup> ‘The key property of joint action lies in its internal component ... in the participants’ having a “collective” or “shared” intention.’<sup>1</sup> ‘Shared intentionality is the foundation upon which joint action is built.’<sup>5</sup> ‘It is precisely the meshing and sharing of psychological states ... that holds the key to understanding how humans have achieved their sophisticated and numerous forms of joint activity.’<sup>4</sup>

## 2. The Challenge

Show that a notion of joint action is already contained in a notion of action.

## 3. The Constraint

Any notion of joint action is

- central to a tangle of philosophical and scientific questions commonly taken to be ques-

tions about joint action, and

- such that an implicit conception of it is available through reflection on many or all of the cases commonly taken to be paradigmatic.

## 4. Towards a Solution

### 4.1. First attempt

A joint action is an action with two or more agents<sup>10</sup>

*Objection* ‘our primitive actions, the ones we do not by doing something else, ... these are all the actions there are.’<sup>6</sup>

### 4.2. Second attempt

A joint action is an action event with two or more agents<sup>10</sup>

Two or more events *overlap* just if any (perhaps improper) part of one of these events is a (perhaps improper) part of any of the other events.

**singular grounding** Event  $D$  grounds  $E$ , if:  $D$  and  $E$  occur;  $D$  is a (perhaps improper) part of  $E$ ; and  $D$  causes every event that is a proper part of  $E$  but does not overlap  $D$ .

To be the *agent of an event* is to be the agent of the action which grounds it.<sup>12</sup>

**plural grounding** Events  $D_1, \dots, D_n$  ground  $E$ , if:  $D_1, \dots, D_n$  and  $E$  occur;  $D_1, \dots, D_n$  are each (perhaps improper) parts of  $E$ ; and every event that is a proper part of  $E$  but does not overlap  $D_1, \dots, D_n$  is caused by some or all of  $D_1, \dots, D_n$ .

For an individual to be *among the agents of an event* is for there to be actions  $a_1, \dots, a_n$  which ground this event where the individual is an agent of some (one or more) of these actions.

## 4.3. Goal-directed joint action (third attempt)

A goal-directed joint action is an event grounded by two or more agents’ actions where these actions have a collective goal.

A *goal* is an outcome to which actions are, or might be, directed. A *goal-state* is an intention or other state of an agent linking an action to a goal to which it is directed.

A *goal-directed joint action* is a joint action which, taken as a whole, is directed to a goal.

**Distributive goal.** The *distributive goal* of two or more agents’ activities is  $G$ : each agent’s activities are individually directed to  $G$ .

**Collective goal.** The *collective goal* of a joint action is  $G$ : (a) each agent’s activities are individually directed to  $G$  (i.e.  $G$  is a distributive goal); (b) the agents’ activities are coordinated; and (c) coordination of this type would normally facilitate occurrences of outcomes of  $G$ ’s type

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