

Perspectives on Joint Action

Why is engaging in joint action valuable?
Which things could we not do, which problems could we not solve, and which capacities could we not acquire if we did not engage in joint action?

Different answers to this question are suggested by cognitive psychologists, philosophers, developmental psychologists and economists. They also differ on what is constitutive of joint action, on which examples are paradigm cases, and on the cognitive requirements for joint action.

One view in **cognitive psychology** is that joint action enables the achievement of goals requiring coordinated action by more than one agent. Engaging in joint action is made possible by capacities for the immediate, non-inferential apprehension of others' activities, emotions and goals (Sebanz, Bekkering and Knoblich 2006). This low-level perspective on joint action contrasts with that of the **philosopher** Michael Bratman (1993; 1997). He suggests that joint action is action done with a shared intention where shared intention is whatever enables us to coordinate our activities and subplans and to structure bargaining. If this is the function of joint action, engaging in it requires the capacity to form intentions about the efficacy of the subplans of other's intentions (1993).

Challenges to Bratman's high-level perspective arise in developmental psychology and decision theory. Some **developmental psychologists** suggest that engaging in joint action facilitates the development of socio-cognitive understanding (Moll and Tomasello 2007; Gräfenhain, Behne, *et al.* m.s.). This is incompatible with making intentions about sub-plans of intentions a condition for acting jointly, as having such intentions already requires the socio-cognitive capacities to be explained. Accordingly weaker conditions for joint action which do not require intentions

about intentions have been proposed. Coming from a different perspective, the **economist** Robert Sugden (2000) could be read as holding that joint action is what enables humans to justifiably solve decision theoretic problems including Hi-lo (see further Gold and Sugden forthcoming). On this view joint action is action produced by a collective kind of practical reasoning, team reasoning. Engaging in team reasoning requires the capacity to consider and predict how other members of the team will reason.

Which of these several claims about joint action, its nature, value and cognitive requirements conflict and which are compatible? The issue of the value of joint action is fundamental because some apparent conflicts between the positions mentioned may be due to there being several notions of joint action. Substantive debate requires constraints on what joint action could be. Claims about the value of joint action are one source of constraints: an adequate theory must explain how anything meeting postulated criteria for joint action has certain values.

Apart from widespread awareness of the main philosophical research there is little cross-talk in the published literature. A full understanding of joint action and its value may require greater interaction between disciplines. We therefore propose a two-day workshop involving four disciplines with extended discussion and responses to each paper from an expert in another discipline.

Questions for discussion may include:

What is the value of joint action?

What other than intuition determines whether claims about the nature of joint action are correct?

Is there more than one kind of joint action, and if so how are they related?

[continued ...]

If there are different kinds of joint action, can they be ordered by the complexity of cognitive abilities they require? Is engaging in one kind of joint action ever required for engaging in another?

What is the role of joint action in development?

Should joint action be characterised in terms of a characteristic combination of intentions, a distinctive mode of reasoning, or something else?

What are the cognitive and neural underpinnings of joint action?

How if at all does research on its cognitive and neural underpinnings bear on philosophical accounts of joint action?

How is the joint-ness of joint action related to the joint-ness of joint attention?

What is it to share an intention? Are there states other than intentions that can be shared?

References

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