

Mutual Reinforcement and the Stability of Shared Intention

Abstract

When we act together we manage to coordinate our thought and action in fascinating ways. We also manage to engage in different forms of bargaining and negotiation about how we will perform the joint activity. These forms of coordination and bargaining exist in joint action because joint action involves an underlying shared intention and shared intention supports those forms of coordination and bargaining.

Many philosophers have acknowledged that shared intention plays these coordinating and bargaining roles. However, some of them have challenged the idea that the cited roles can be played by shared intention when this latter phenomenon is conceived of *merely* as a web of interconnected intentions. In particular, Margaret Gilbert has claimed that a socio-psychological structure based on intentions of individual participants is not *stable* or *robust* enough to play the roles characteristic of shared intention. To be robust enough to play those roles, Gilbert claims, shared intention must provide each participant with a *guarantee* that each will do his part in the joint activity. These guarantees can only be provided when each participant is obligated to the others to so act. So it is not until we acknowledge that shared intention involves interpersonal obligations that we can see that shared intention has the required stability to play its characteristic roles. Or so Gilbert argues.

In this paper, I address the question of the stability necessary for shared intention to play its characteristic roles. I contend, in contrast to Gilbert, that obligation-based guarantees –of the kind Gilbert has in mind or other- are not necessary for shared

intention to be able to play its characteristic roles. In particular, I argue that shared intention involves a complex socio-psychological structure including relevant relations of mutual *reliance* and that this structure provides each participant with good grounds for thinking that the others have the appropriate attitudes and thus that they will normally perform their parts when the time comes. The idea is that this structure sets in motion an elaborate *virtuous circle of mutual reinforcement* of the participants' attitudes. This circle works as a *stability-generating mechanism*, thus normally providing shared intention with the required stability. Finally, I show that this allows us to give a rich story about the stability of shared intention which is conceptually prior to interpersonal obligations.