

## JOINT ACTION AND ITS RELATION TO GROUP AGENCY

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### Abstract

*The paper attempts to trace the relationship between joint action and group agency. Though both the concepts are employed in philosophy to understand dynamics of a social phenomenon that involves more than one agent, they are rarely seen in the light of the connections and differences between them. To that end, the paper is structured into four sections. The first section introduces the concepts. The second section makes an attempt to delve into the concept of Joint action. The primary questions sought to be clarified in this section are: what constitutes Joint action? What is the difference between a Joint action and Collective action? The Third Section delves into the concept of Group agency. The primary questions sought to be clarified in this section are: what constitutes Group Agency? What is the distinctness of Group agency in contrast to Joint Action? The Fourth section attempts to compare and contrast both the concepts to bring about the conceptual difference between the two. The paper is based on the works of Philip Petit and David Schweikard.*

**Keywords:** Joint action, agency, moral responsibility, collective action.

### Introduction:

The concepts of Joint action and Group agency are employed in philosophy to understand the dynamics of a social phenomenon that involves more than one agent. However, they are rarely seen in the light of the connections and differences between them. While joint action as can be discerned in everyday life where people independently do some action which produces one aggregate effect. Whether they are aware of the emerging of the collective effects of their individual actions or not, whether they are strategic or act out of everyday impulse, they inevitably produce as an effect a collectively done result. For example, various large fishing companies fish on the most populated fishing grounds of the world. With their industrial scale of fishing capabilities, each of them contribute to the overall depletion of the fishes in those fertile waters which are natural nursery to breed fishes. Here, the fishing agencies may not necessarily want the depletion of the population of the fishes by hunting on the breeding grounds. But, such an effect is indeed produced collectively by each of their acts, even though each acted independently. Such a phenomenon may be called as joint action. Here, the aggregate result is gets produced as a byproduct of their individual actions.

Group agency on the other hand, is a group of individuals constituting together as an agent of the groups action. A group may have individuals with their own 'intentional psychology, still may come together to construct agents that have a distinct intentional profile from the profiles of their members'<sup>1</sup>. A group of individuals to safely qualify as an agent need to meet certain criteria such as: First, he individuals acts jointly to set up certain common goals and sets up procedure for identifying further goals if need be. Second, the members set up a body of judgments to guide them to the end of the first condition, and a procedure for rationally developing those judgments further as occasion demands. And third, they act jointly to identify those who shall act on any occasion in pursuit of the goals, whether they be the group as a whole, the members of the group individually, certain designated

members, or certain agents that the group hires<sup>2</sup>. Group agency requires people to act together to achieve on particular goal. It exists based on goal directedness, while joint action refers to people acting together to achieve any sort of result. In Joint action, the collective goal may not be necessarily stipulated or pre meditated. While the concept of Group agency conceptually invokes a particular goal, plans to achieve it and strategic decisions for foreseeable problems and course of actions to take in case any new situations that may arise.

## Section II

In our everyday life we do come across many instances of Joint action. Most commonly we see Joint Action committees for/of so and so. We can observe in the society people coming together for a common purpose many a time through negotiations for the safe guarding of the individual interests while collectively seeking one larger goal that is in the interest of all. It is a requirement of joint action that different people produce an effect together. There may be individual interests of the people or there could be no self interest in the production of an aggregate effect, however, such interests are not primarily important to form a joint action. The actions of the individuals' give rise to an effect that that arises in one grand scale transcending but including the individual actions. In the production of a joint action, the effect is something the people own in common by virtue of their combining together to that end. There is also action that people own in common as something they combine to perform<sup>3</sup>. Individuals contribute to the joint action and are individually and causally responsible for the collective effect. In every case of Joint action, apart from individual actions there is action that people together perform.

Joint action requires its members to be individually focussed on the joint performance and each must act with intention towards that effect. But, the paradox is, how can I intend on something where settlement condition<sup>4</sup> is not solely within my ambit? How can I intend to do something that requires not only me but others too, for the accomplishment of the task? I cannot intend *to* go for a picnic because going for a picnic is a matter of joint performance thus intending here involves intending of behalf of others? How can I intend on behalf of others? I can only intend *that* we go for picnic together. The point here is to differentiate between intention -to and intention -that<sup>5</sup>. Intention -that holds ground when we speak of a situation of joint action where the settlement condition is beyond my own intention. Intention -that involves someone else as the subject of action. Thus, Petit and Schweikard propose that the first requirement of joint action is that we each have the appropriate intention -that. Thus, each of us intent that we together enact the performance in question. Those who do not have intention -that fall outside the factors that produce the aggregate effect of joint action.

Petite and Schweikard argue, to be able to legitimately claim 'I intend that X happens' two conditions must be met. First, I must indeed want it to happen. Second, I must be in a position to do something about it. As it is obvious that I cannot intend that something happens without me actually wanting it to happen and also that I cannot intend that something happens when I am in not in any position to do anything about it. In other words, I cannot intend that this presentation does not happen when I actually want it to happen. Neither can I intend that I be part of the national football team when I have never ever played football. I cannot do anything about it. While, I can want anything to happen, wanting is easy, I may want to play even when I have no footballing skills at all.

Thus, each of us will have something to contribute for any action that qualifies as a joint action. I can intend that the action comes about only when I am disposed to do all I can from my side to make it happen. Similarly, each of us is disposed to do her/his bit, recognizing that it is his/her bit towards the joint action. For a joint action to come about the individuals should be free and not coerced as intention to do one's bit is crucial to pull off a joint action together. The members of plurality in this respect must be at par with all others, so involved in the joint action on a level playing ground.

Petite and Schweikard formulate five clauses which are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for any action becoming a joint action. Those are: 1. they each intend that they enact the performance. 2. they intend to do their bit in this performance. 3. they each believe that others intend to do their bit. 4. they each intend to do their bit because of believing this. 5. they each believe in common that the other clauses hold. Since our actions are inevitable based on intentions, Petit and Schweikard chalk out three families of problems that naturally arise in joint actions as follows:

The *I-to-we issue*: can I as a separate agent be rationally moved to think in we-terms and act as the member of a plurality? Or is the shift to we-thinking essentially subrational?

The *we-as-acting issue*: is the primary intention in joint action an intention that we do something together, acting as one? Or is it an intention on the part of each to do his or her bit?

The *we-as-intending issue*: is the primary intention a single state of ours, intending as one? Or is each of us moved only by a separate, individual intention?<sup>6</sup>

In cases of joint action the questions framed are of the nature of 'What can we do?' This is different from asking 'What can I do?' The decision and game theories grants that the agents may be altruistic and so there may be possibilities for individuals to behave for the benefit of the group at some cost to themselves. However, this arrangement doesn't allow the control centre to shift from themselves to the plurality of agent. Thus the problem is compounded.

However, Petite and Schweikard drawing from behavioral economics, hold that this is not a very troubling one. We can discern in everyday activities that individuals are ready to go for co-operative solutions to many problems. Being a social species human beings are naturally equipped and sensitive to possibilities and advantages of cooperation thus arising of a joint action.

Since joint action involves plurality of individuals, it may be generally hard to sustain with emergence of various complexities in time. But if the joint action can bring about what an individual cannot by him or herself, then it is only rational to assume that individuals are rational enough not to be driven by self interest alone. Thus adopt the path of joint action. If each individual seeks solely his/her interest alone then the joint action may not happen in the first place, but as is evident and intuitively discernable that individuals may not have any benefit at all if the joint action doesn't happen, thus making them not look solely through the prism of self benefit until there is a reasonable doubt that joint action may not produce desired result. Thus, rational interest only acts as virtual form of control and may not have active influence at every step that the joint action takes. Thus, I to we transition is not that problematic.

To the question if joint action is an intention that we do something together, acting as one or is it intention on part of each to do his bit? This is a question regarding the primacy of we intention over the I intention. This question is answered by Petite and Schweikard based on the earlier mentioned

formulation of the clauses. To intend that we do X requires two things: Wanting to do X, And to be in a position to do something to make it a case of doing X. For me to play football I must want to play football and be in a position to do something that playing football comes about. ‘The reason why we will each intend to do our bit in that performance is that we will each want that we together enact the performance. Thus the intention that we do so and so, considered just as a desire-like state, will be primary. It will help to explain why we each intend to do our bit, not the other way around’<sup>7</sup>

To the question if the primary intention is a single state of ours, intending as one or each is moved by separate, individual intentions? Petite and Schweikard hold that a single plural state of intending need not be necessarily involved in the structure of joint action. In any instance of we acting together, we might all have intentions of acting together but this does not anyhow lead to say that there is an intention over and above the intentions of the constituent members in a way that becomes a single state of intending. Petit and Schweikard see no metaphysical reason why a joint intentional action has to be of a single agent or single state of intending, it is possible for number of agents to construct a single agent, where that agent is characterised by particular states of intending. But Petite and Schweikard argue that such possibility emerges only when group agents make an appearance, which then becomes a case of group agency and not joint action.

### SECTION III

The concept of group agency involves an aspect which shows that there is subject proper that is characterized by group agents making an appearance. While in joint action, different agents come together to perform a joint action and pursue a joint effect. While doing that, the individuals transcend the case where a number of different agents perform different actions and bring one joint effect. Joint action doesn’t involve constitution that can be called a novel plural subject, with its own distinctive states of intention. Joint action is just the joint and intentional production of some effect. While group agency involves the joint construction of a novel centre of intentional attitude and action. That is because, if joint action involves emergence of a novel subject then the agent have to be capable of satisfying the limitations of possessing of such attitudes. One among many other possible limitations is the ability to respond to the demand of consistency in the judgements it forms. Judgments such as the ends to be sought in action, the relative order and priority of those ends, the opportunities available for their realization, the most effective means for realizing them etc.<sup>8</sup>.

But, Petite and Schweikard hold people converge in joint action without giving rise to a subject that is capable to address such constraint. The discursive dilemma shows that it is difficult for a plurality of people to give rise to a common, consistent body of judgments that helps to navigate to action through the cacophony of opinions. It also shows that the result of majority voting on issues can be very different from the result of conclusion based procedure. While individually the agents may come to a conclusion that may be starkly different from aggregation in the conclusion. No account of joint action thus, involves individuals to be prepared for such inconsistencies. Petit and Schweikard hold that, even when individual agents are guided by their own intentional psychology, yet they may come together to construct novel agents. Such novel agents have a distinct intentional profile from the profiles of their members.<sup>9</sup>

For a group of individuals to constitute an agent, it has to meet certain conditions, such as: First, the individuals acts jointly to set up certain common goals and sets up procedure for identifying further goals if need be. Second, the members set up a body of judgments to guide them to the end of the first condition, and a procedure for rationally developing those judgments further as occasion demands. And third, they act jointly to identify those who shall act on any occasion in pursuit of the goals, whether they be the group as a whole, the members of the group individually, certain designated members, or certain agents that the group hires<sup>10</sup>.

If the members come together in the way described, then they would be in a position to replicate in ditto the performance of an Individual. The set of goals and actions of a group would be identical to those of the individuals. 'Just as rational individuals act so as to satisfy their desires according to their beliefs, so this group would be able to act rationally so as to achieve its ends according to its judgments'.<sup>11</sup> There are many instances of individuals coming together to form group agents such as, partnerships, coauthorship, etc. But Pettit and Schweikard argue that 'not only can such group agents exist; they can also exist as agents in their own right, distinct in a significant way from the agents who are their members'<sup>12</sup>.

The discursive dilemma teaches us that, if a group uses majority voting to make judgments on several interconnected issues, then inconsistencies may arise in its resulting body of judgments. And if the group intends to be consistent, then it will have to forsake its majority judgment on some issues and form a judgment on those issues that most of its members do not individually endorse. It will have to develop a mind of its own (Pettit 2003).

Group agency may involve accepting a body of judgements that may be different on occasions from the majority judgements and it may also go against the unanimity of the individuals consisting the group agent. This implies that a group agent is distinct from the aggregation individual members of the very group. Such an agent has an intentional profile that is different from both majority, minority or even one individual in the group. It will have to evolve a mind that is not of the constituent members not any sort of classification among them.

### **Conclusion:**

While joint action does not in itself necessitate the appearance of a novel subject, joint action of a specific sort can do so. If individuals come together in a particular way it is certainly possible for distinct group agents to emerge. If they act jointly so as to set up suitable ends, a suitable body of judgments for guiding the pursuit of those ends, and a structure of agency for promoting those ends according to those judgments, and they will give rise to a group agent of that kind. Much had been discussed to establish the possibility that certain patterns of joint action can lead to the formation of group agents that are distinct as agents from their own members. Group agency is a theory about a certain domain of joint action. It presupposes whatever truths hold of joint action in general but it is not derivable from those truths alone; it represents an independent body of knowledge<sup>13</sup>. The structure of group agency includes what the structure of joint action includes but is not exhausted by the contents of joint action and thus has body of its own that is over and above than that of concept of joint action.

Endnotes:

- <sup>1</sup> Petit P, Schweikard, (2006) Joint Actions and Group actions.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid. Pp.15
- <sup>3</sup> Petit P, Schweikard, (2006) Joint Actions and Group actions. *Philosophy of Social Sciences*. Vol 3, No 1. Pp.2
- <sup>4</sup> Villeman, D. How to share an Intention. *Philosophy and Phenomenological research*, Vol LVII, No.1, March 1997
- <sup>5</sup> Bratmans distinction of intention to and intention that in Bratman, M. Shared Intention, *Ethics*.
- <sup>6</sup> Petit P, Schweikard, (2006) Joint Actions and Group actions. *Philosophy of Social Sciences*. Vol 3, No 1,p.3.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid, Pp.10
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid.Pp 12
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid Pp15
- <sup>10</sup> Petit P, Schweikard, (2006) Joint Actions and Group actions. *Philosophy of Social Sciences*. Vol 3, No 1,p.3.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid Pp.16
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid Pp.16
- <sup>13</sup> Petit P, Schweikard, (2006) Joint Actions and Group actions. *Philosophy of Social Sciences*. Vol 3, No 1,p.3.

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