

Joint requirements

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It seems to me that I sometimes think about what we should do. A naïve view takes that appearance at face value. It claims that this thinking of mine addresses the question of which several acts should be performed by several of us persons.

Say that the practical requirement

(1) We should do (I do x, you do y)

is a *joint requirement* if there are no individual requirements of the form

(2) I should do x in circumstance C

(3) You should do y in circumstance D

such that (1) consists in or holds in virtue of (2) and (3). The naïve view claims that there are some joint requirements. And it claims that these form the content of at least some of the thoughts that I express by saying that we should do something.

I

Here's some evidence for the existence of joint requirements.

You have an oar. I have an oar. If we both row, we'll cross the river to where the party is. If neither rows, we're stuck here on the boring side. If only one rows, we spin out toward the hazardous falls. Each has the same interest—survival—in crossing the river or staying on this side rather than going over the falls and the same interest—party—in crossing rather than staying on this side or going over the falls.

Consider

(4) A person should row if and only if she should believe that the other will row.

You and I each satisfy (4) if each decides not to row while giving the other reason to doubt that she intends to row. But I think that, when we satisfy (4) in this way, someone has done other than what should be done. To explain this judgment, I suppose that, beyond (4), we also face in virtue of the reasons of your and my survival and partying

(5) You and I should do (you row, I row)

When each fails to row because she expects the other to fail, each has done as she should but *we* have done other than as we should.

This evidence is not overwhelming. Does the individual rower have some way of communicating with the other by means of which she might focus both rowers' expectations and intentions on the "good equilibrium" in which each intends and believes that the other intends to row? If she does, then the judgment of practical failure—of someone's doing other than what should be done—might well condemn only our individual failures to realize that coordination by sending the relevant signals. And if not—if you're clear that there was nothing the individual rower could say, nothing else that she could do, to bring the good equilibrium about—then you might find it comfortable after all to deny that anyone has done

other than what should be done. Maybe our dismay about a failure to row in that case amounts only to our judgment that being stuck on the wrong bank is sad or bad—a bad, sad outcome. Maybe it’s not the judgment that someone’s made a mistake in action.

I don’t insist that the latter judgment is obviously correct. The example is a foot in the door.

II

A

I’m alone in the boat now. To get it across the river takes first a stroke with the left oar and then a stroke with the right. I expect I’ll be too lazy to make the right stroke when its time comes. So I don’t make the left. My action satisfies

(6) I should row left if and only if I will later row right.

I should row right if and only if I’ve already rowed left.

But it seems not to be OK, and this appearance is explained by its violating an extended requirement

(7) I should (row left and then row right).

B

What explains the fact that an extended requirement has force here? What distinguishes my rowing predicament from, say, an afternoon of occasional chores on which I should return some DVDs to the library, and on which I should pick up some ice at the liquor store, but on which I’m not extendedly required to (drop off the DVDs and pick up the ice)?

I imagine that, for ordinary versions of these errands, the total normative case for a library run—the obtaining of reasons for and against it, and their possession of the weights they have—is independent of any facts about whether I’ve gotten or will get to the liquor store for ice. The total normative case for an ice stop seems to me in the same sense independent of facts about my making it to the library. Consider

(8) The acts *x* and *y* are subject to a compound requirement of the performance of (*x* and *y*) only if, for at least one of these acts, the existence or weight of at least one reason for or against that act is not independent of facts as to whether the other act will be done.

That rowing left will help me across the river counts in favor of rowing left—it counts as fact—only if I will row right. So (8) signs off on (7)’s being a genuine compound requirement. The case for rowing does not decompose.

C

The principle (8) should be checked against other examples. Beyond examples it would help to have some general explanation of how the deliberative indecomposability of several objects subjects them to a compound requirement. I don’t have an explanation like that; I’m not sure that one exists. But we can find some systematic support for (8) by considering the deliberative difference that compound requirements make to some of the indecomposable practical problems which (8) singles out for government by them.

Suppose that (7) were not in force, so that (6) stands as the whole practical truth about rowing. Then the to-be-doneness of rowing left depends by (6) on the will-be-doneness of rowing right. I should, in thinking about whether to row left, take as determined either my having or my lacking an intention to row right or some other attitude thanks to which I am or am not disposed to do it. When my having that attitude gives me reason to believe I won't row right, (6) prompts me to conclude, on grounds of my having it, that I shouldn't row left.

I think that with this recommendation (6) recommends a mistake. Whether I should have my anti-right-rowing attitude depends on whether getting across the river counts in favor of acts that help to accomplish this. That issue is also a determinant of whether I should row left. I shouldn't think both that left-rowing's contribution to river crossing counts in favor of rowing left and that my attitude against rowing right after rowing left is OK. I should regard the appropriateness of that attitude as an open matter—to be settled in my further deliberation about rowing. I've argued in a different context for

(9) If the appropriateness of holding an attitude A at t depends on matters that you should be attempting to settle in your thinking, at t and beyond, about whether to x at t + 1, then the fact that have A at t can't help to make it the case at t that you should x at t + 1.

If it's right, the conditional single-shot principles in (6) can't be the principles that require me to row. Yet I think that I am, somehow, required to row. Until some other maxim to that effect appears, I should accept the intertemporal (7).

D

A parallel argument for the two of us. I assume that, if (4) is true of any situation, it's true of a day on which I share the boat with a rower who makes no practical or epistemic mistakes. According to (4) I should row only if you will row. Since you make no mistakes in the application of (4) to your own situation, you are not now disposed to row unless you should believe that I will row. And you should believe that I will row only if and because the current state of my beliefs and intentions is such that, in the course of any further deliberation starting from that state, I will come or continue to intend to row. It thus follows from (4) that my having attitudes in favor of or against rowing makes it respectively the case or not the case that I should row. But by (9) we should reject this consequence of (4), and so we should reject (4) itself. With (4) disqualified, (5) stands as the best candidate for a principle instructing non-mistake-making people to row.

E

You might think that, because my rowing counts as fulfilling (5) only if you row, (5) tells me to row just in case you are going to row. If my coming to row from my acceptance of (5) passes through (4) in this way, I must not appeal to (4)'s alleged unacceptability as a reason for accepting (5).

But I doubt that this is how (5) gets us across the river. How it else can it happen? You and I might form Gilbert-and-Velleman intentions:¹

(8)(me) I intend [to row if you have intention (8)(you) and if you know that I have 8(me).]

(you) You intend [to row if I have intention (8)(me) and if I know that you have 8(you).]

When each person has her part of this syndrome, and when each knows that the other has it, we each intend to row.

I think that (5) unconditionally requires of each of us that she intend to do, in circumstance C, any act of rowing that will count, in C, as part of the set of our rowing acts. In the circumstance that consists in your having (8)(you), in my having come to row by intending to row if you have (8)(you), and in your and my knowing that the other has these attitudes, my act of rowing counts as part of your and my rowing. So by (5) I am unconditionally required to form (8)(me). So if each of us knows that the other makes no mistakes, these intentions suffice for rowing. Away we row.

Notice that no such help is available to (4). Even when you've formed (8)(you), I can satisfy (4) either by rowing on the basis of (8)(me) or by not rowing. So (4) does not require that I intend [to row if you have (8)(you).]

Coordination problem solved? Not exactly. If we can't make these intentions known—the falls are too loud, there are more rowers than fit in my earshot—or if we don't know that the others make no mistakes, the (8) intentions don't suffice for rowing, and we're still stuck.

F

Suppose that each of us accepts (5) and is rational in the sense that she tends to form the attitudes that would be required if her normative beliefs were correct. So each forms her member of (8). We can't talk or pass notes, however, and neither of us knows that the other is rational. Then we're again stranded in breach of the joint requirement. And this is embarrassed by a principle like

(9) If R is a genuine requirement, and if the actors to which it applies are rational and accept R, then they can come to satisfy R by reasoning one of whose steps includes the thought that R.

I accept (9). I don't accept that these rowers stuck on the wrong bank are rational. If my and your belief in (5) is true, then we should eventually form intentions to row. In lacking the capacity to assure the others that we've formed our parts of (8), we lack the capacity to form these unconditional intentions. And in lacking that capacity, we are not rational though each of us is rational.

The last claim presupposes that not only persons but populations of persons can be rational or irrational, that a population of rational persons can be irrational, and that population-level rationality consists not only in the members' capacities for recognizing and reasoning from normative facts on their own but also in their capacities for communication. But these are the natural assumptions to make once you've granted that we face joint requirements and that rationality is the capacity to form the attitudes we judge to be required.

III

A

You and I are walking together up the street. A stranger is moving alongside us, at the same pace and in the same direction, taking care not to bump into us. Margaret Gilbert's question is What makes it the case that you and I walk together and that you and the stranger do not?

This question is sometimes answered with the proposal that you and I walk together in virtue of a *shared intention* to walk. So what's a shared intention? How do we count as holding one?

B

Michael Bratman thinks that you and I share an intention to walk in virtue (among other facts) of each person's intending that we walk. To this proposal David Velleman once objected that I can intend that p only if I take myself to be settling the matter of whether that p by intending that p and that it's not clear that more than one of us can each settle the matter of whether we'll walk.²

As Bratman points out in reply, the settling that's required for intention can take the form of settling on the assumption of a causal background that includes other persons' intentions or dispositions. Where I know that my moving the pump handle will pump water only thanks to your disposition to open a valve, I can by intending to move the handle intend to pump water into the house.

Imagine that I intend that we walk, that you intend that we walk, that at every moment the continuation of each intention is conditional on the current existence of the other, and that all of this is common knowledge. Then, says Bratman, my continuing to intend that we walk, given my belief that and the fact that you will continue to intend that we walk conditionally on my having that intention, settles the matter of whether we'll walk. And likewise for your intention.

C

But here's an important difference between the two settlings. When by intending to pump water I settle the matter of whether water will be pumped, I have an intention that not only causes the motion of the handle and of the water but that represents itself as causing those against the background of your dispositions. As Velleman would say, the intention settles the pumping matter not only in fact but notionally.

While it might be that my intention that we walk can cause our walking, it's far from obvious that it can represent itself as causing that. I can have an intention part of whose content is that it's going to cause me to walk. But for the intention to represent itself as causing our walking, its own content must include that it causes you to walk by causing you to maintain yours.

To meet this condition on the content of the intention, it's not enough that I intend to walk and that I believe that my having this intention causes you to walk. Otherwise a person who intends to drink a foul brew and who believes that her having this intention will lead a millionaire to give her some money has an

intention that she and the millionaire do the set of acts (she drinks, the millionaire pays).

Perhaps my intention that we walk includes not a belief about my causal powers but my intending [to bring it about, by having and maintaining the intention that includes this very content, that you walk.] But I doubt that I can intend [to bring things about by means of this very intention].

D

Velleman offers to step around these problems by discarding Bratman's intention-that-we-walk. Velleman thinks that a shared intention can consist in a pair of mutually referential utterances in the approximate image of (8), understood as intentions [to perform individual acts if others have the corresponding intentions.] When I say "I'll walk if you will" and you say "I'll walk if you will", and when we interpret these so that each satisfies the antecedent of the intention expressed by the other, each person's saying her thing settles the matter of her walking and causes the other person to walk. Velleman claims that the collection of these utterances is a representation of our walking, shared out between us in our component representations, that causes us to walk and that represents itself as causing that.

But all I can find here is a collection of representations of individual acts that represent themselves as causing those acts conditionally on other representations' being in place. I don't see that any of these intentions represents itself as causing anything other than the individual act. Nor do I see how the collection of those individual representations counts as a single representation of our walking, let alone one that represents itself as causing us to walk. (When you and I film each other filming each other, we make, not a composite representation of two people filming, but two representations, each of one person filming. Instead of *Two Men and a Movie Camera*, it's *Man with a Movie Camera* and *Man with a Movie Camera II*.)

So I have trouble believing that anything in this neighborhood amounts to a shared intention. A couple of examples will next suggest that, whatever you want to say about shared intention, a system of mutually conditioned intentions is neither necessary nor sufficient for acting together.

E

In *The Third Policeman* by Flann O'Brien two laborers kill an old man with a bicycle pump and hide his money by the side of the road. Each fears that the other will go back for the money or confess the crime to the police. Each decides never to let the other out of his sight. They work side by side, eat from the same dish, sleep in the same bed.

We're out in the road. Each of us wants to go home. Each also wants not to lose sight of the other. We set off. Each intends to walk down the road so long as the other intends to walk down the road. Each knows this last fact. Each walks partly so as to keep the other walking by assuring the other that he himself intends to walk.

We don't share an intention. We don't walk together. We are just two people walking, each of whom intends to walk on the condition that the other intends to walk and partly so as to sustain the other person's intending to walk. Even after we've told one another "I'll walk if you will" we still walk one by one.

F

The show was good, and I start clapping. I do this even as I'm unsure that the others agree or will clap. The crowd is enormous, and my own clap can't promote any person's clapping later on as it can't discernibly raise the overall volume of clapping noise. (What is the sound of two hands clapping?) But I think we should clap; we should let the performer know that we liked her. I start clapping just on the chance that the others will do it too, so that I may participate in sending this signal. If the others bring their hands together for the same reason, I think it clear that, while no one intention to clap depends on any other such intention and while no one has told anyone else that she'll clap if he will, we clap together.

G

Here's a difference between our walking together up the street and O'Brien's murderers' dragging each other down the road. When I walk with you, I think that
We should walk up the street.

I think this because I think that we should eat in the restaurant at the end of the street or that we should have a talk. This judgment governs my own intention by leading me to intend to keep pace with you and to walk in the direction you're taking so that we both end up at the restaurant or so that we manage to exchange thoughts. The murderers have no corresponding judgments about what they should do. Each thinks only that

I should get home to boil some potatoes

I should stay in visual range of the other murderer.

The same structure helps make sense of clapping together. When I clap, it's not immediately because I intend to communicate my own judgment to the performers. It's instead because I think that we should clap so as to deliver a judgment shared by large numbers of us. I can respond to this requirement by clapping even if I don't expect that my own intention to clap will sustain any other person's clapping.

H

How do our responses to a joint requirement qualify us as acting together? I'm still trying to figure this out. This is what I've got so far.

Each person has an attitude with the same content, a belief that we should walk up the street. Each token of that attitude is causally indispensable for the production of the set of acts whose requiredness forms its content. So we share something—this belief—such that each person's having her token of that thing is causally indispensable for the event that it's about. Shared belief plays in this telling the interpersonally unifying role that Bratman and Velleman assign to networks of intentions. It's an attitude in favor of the entire event of our walking such that our sharing it leads us to make the thing happen.

IV

The thesis of joint requirements raises a “missing agent” flag for some people. They can’t detect an actor capable of meeting these requirements by accepting them and acting on their basis. One reply insists that several persons can compose a single actor after all. Persons make an actor when their acts, beliefs, and intentions stand in some special relation. Perhaps when the members of a club are committed to abide by a majority vote, this qualifies them as a group actor so that it’s true of them that they should not raid other clubs or leave their campsite a mess.

On this picture joint requirements have a fairly specialized deliberative role. They tell independently constituted group actors what to do where those group actors happen to exist. As my discussion in I and II made clear, I think that’s too special. I think that joint requirements have force even over populations whose members don’t satisfy any special conditions of group actorhood.

The argument of III suggests that this joint-requirements-for-independently-constituted-group actors view has things backward in a sense. Not only do the unincorporated fall under joint requirements. But they can succeed in acting together—they can make an actor, if you want—if each of them acts from these requirements that apply to them whether or not they come together to meet them.

V

A

I think that in my action and deliberation I should treat the similar interests of different persons similarly. Call this my belief in moral equality. I don’t understand it very well. To understand it better I’ll need a more definite conception of the similarity of interests and a fuller-fledged conception of interests’ being treated similarly within a person’s deliberation.

B

I think that on some of the occasions when I can help, in the same kind of way, either myself or another person, I should help myself and not the other. Apparently I believe that it’s okay for my action and deliberation to treat my interest and that of the other person differently.

This seem inconsistent with my first thought, though the open-endedness of moral equality makes it hard to tell. It might turn out that on the correct final conception of treating similar interests similarly—on that conception on which the claim that I ought to treat similar interests similarly comes out true—I do after all treat similar interests similarly when I help only myself.

C

Suppose that each of us, in thinking what to do, tends to put extra weight on reasons rooted in her own life. There are nonetheless dimensions on which we treat the similar interests of persons similarly at the level of our entire population. For example each person’s interest enters the sum of our n deliberations via the same

pattern of attention to it: there's one actor putting extra weight on a reason based in it, and $n - 1$ actors who hang smaller weights on it.

To reconcile partiality and equality you might think that we deliberate and act in a pattern that qualifies us as treating similar interests similarly in this or some other respect. You might think that this fact about *us* qualifies *me* as acting consistently with moral equality notwithstanding my practice of assigning special force to my own concern.

D

Left there the suggestion is no good. From the claim that we treat like alike in some way it fails to follow that I treat like alike in any way. I am not us. I am me. For all that I've said I am only a person who puts extra weight on his interests, surrounded by a bunch of other people who put extra weight on theirs. For all that I've said the pattern in which we act is not a fact about my action that matters to its moral character.

But suppose that everyone does her part because she thinks that we should do the set. In this way we act together. Then you can after all describe me as treating like interests alike in virtue of my participation in our treating like interests alike.

E

Imagine that, for every act that I might perform as the outcome of deliberation in which I put extra weight on the reasons attached to my own interest, that act forms part of a set called for by a joint requirement enjoying strictly symmetrical support from the reasons attached to the interests of different persons. Imagine that I do this thing, not only because it's favored by the balance of partially weighed reasons for and against my individual act, but also because it's part of what we should do in virtue of reasons given by all persons' lives weighed on a par. Then the entire course of my action and of my thinking about what to do can count at once as partial and as morally egalitarian.

This sets a problem for moral construction. I'm to revise my initial judgments about what I should do, and my initial judgments about what we should do, so that individual and compound principles come out recommending the same acts and attitudes to me. The warrant for this revision is that, without it, my judgments about the individual requirements are inconsistent. One of them, the requirement that I treat like alike, condemns the others for favoring me.

I won't try to say now how that revision goes. Its result would be a kind of totalitarianism under which everything you do is part of what we should do. But it would be a liberal totalitarianism since one of the things we should do is, as I'll now explain, to leave each one of us alone.

F

For any situation *S* in which you and I are each deciding what to do, the reconstructed principles will recommend to me and to you acts and aims whose conjunctions are also jointly required. I don't suppose that, to be jointly required under those principles, aims must count as particularly cooperative. It might be for example that in *S* we should have (I aim to win the pie-eating contest, you aim to win the pie-eating contest). But at least one form of interpersonal inconsistency

seems untenable. It's presumably false that in S we should do (I x, you try by y'ing to get me to do something other than x). Then in S I should not try to get you to do things unless in S you should do them. Since S is characterized prior to my y'ing, I should not try to get you to do things unless you should do them in virtue of reasons that hold independently of my y'ing.

G

This is at least halfway to the principle

(11) You should not (do y and believe that your y'ing will lead me to x and that this fact is a reason to y) unless, for some reasons R that hold independently of your y'ing, your y'ing helps me to [do x as a result of my belief that I should x in virtue of R].

that I've defended as a major moral constraint on getting people to do things.

That principle speaks, not only against your getting people to do things unsupported by good independent reason, but also against your getting them to do things along paths that bypass their recognition of independent reasons.

By doing my part of what we should do I can treat like alike. But this works only if we act together. If my action is not part of something that we do together, then it doesn't participate in a population-level equal treatment of all persons. In III I've argued that we act together if each [does her act because she thinks that we should do the set that includes it.] Directing your conduct in a way that runs around your recognition of the independent reasons for it puts that possibility of living with others as equals by sharing collective action with them out of reach. That is another argument for (11).

Notes

1. Gilbert, "Walking together"; Velleman, "How to share an intention".

2. Bratman, "Shared intention", "I intend that we J", "Modest sociality and the distinctiveness of intention"; Velleman, "How to share". My criticisms of Velleman and Bratman are too fast to do any real damage. Bratman's mature proposal includes further conditions for shared intention that save him from the counterexample of III.E, for example by requiring that each person be disposed to help the others in carrying out what they intend.

3. The argument of section I is indebted to Derek Parfit, "What we together do" and to Christopher Woodard, "Group-based reasons"; the arguments of section II and III to the work of Michael Bacharach as developed by Natalie Gold and Robert Sugden; and the argument of section V to Thomas Nagel, *Equality and partiality*.

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