

From Individual to Collective Intentionality

New Essays

EDITED BY SARA RACHEL CHANT, FRANK HINDRIKS,
AND GERHARD PREYER

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The Ontology of Collective Action

KIRK LUDWIG

5.1 INTRODUCTION

What is the ontology of collective action? I have in mind three connected questions.

1. Do the truth conditions of action sentences about groups require there to be group agents over and above individual agents?¹
2. Is there a difference, in this connection, between action sentences about informal groups that use plural noun phrases, such as “we pushed the car” and “the women left the party early,” and action sentences about formal or institutional groups that use singular noun phrases, such as “the United States declared war on Japan on December 8, 1941” and “the Supreme Court ruled that segregation is unconstitutional in 1954 in *Brown vs. Board of Education*”?
3. Under what conditions does it make sense to speak of a group doing something together, and what, if anything, is a collective action?

These questions are of interest in themselves, and they are of interest also for the light their answers promise to shed on the nature of social reality and on the difficult question of the nature and distribution of moral responsibility for the consequences of group action.²

In the following, I argue that

- a) understanding action sentences about groups does not commit us to the existence of group agents per se, but only to the existence of individual agents;

- b) there is no difference in this regard between sentences that attribute actions to informal groups on the one hand and institutional groups on the other;
- c) collective action can be both intentional and unintentional;
- d) any random group of agents, each of whom does something, is also a group that does something together;
- e) although there is a sense in which groups per se perform no primitive collective actions, and therefore no actions at all,
- f) there is a sensible extension of talk of actions to groups, though it should be treated, strictly speaking, like talk of group agents, as a *façon de parler*, for
- g) the only agents per se are individuals, and the only actions are theirs.³

In section 5.2, I argue that an analysis of the logical form of plural action sentences shows that plural action sentences are not committed to the existence of group agents.⁴ In section 5.3, I argue that the account of the logical form of plural action sentences can be extended to institutional action sentences, which employ grammatically singular subject terms. In section 5.4, I argue that groups do things intentionally and unintentionally, that a group can do something that is not intentional under any description, and that for any random group of agents, all of whom do something, there is something the group they constitute does. In section 5.5, I argue that since groups are not per se agents, they do not per se perform actions, but that there is a sensible way to extend talk of primitive actions to groups, and so of actions, though it should be treated as a *façon de parler*.

5.2 THE LOGICAL FORM OF PLURAL ACTION SENTENCES

Prima facie the only difference between [1] and [2] below is that a plural referring term occupies the subject position in [2], where a singular referring term does in [1].

- [1] I built a boat
[2] We built a boat

This suggests that, just as the agent in [1] is the referent of the subject term, so in [2] the referent of the subject term is the agent. We can show that this is a mistake, however, by attending to an ambiguity in [2] and how to project the standard event analysis of singular action sentences to the plural case in its light. [2] has a distributive and a collective reading. [2] is true on the

distributive reading if for each of us there is a boat that he built. On the collective reading, [2] involves us building a single boat together. The event analysis of singular action sentences treats the verb as introducing an implicit quantifier over events. The matrix of [2] may then be represented as follows, where “t” ranges over time intervals, “t*” is an indexical that denotes the time of utterance, and “<” is interpreted as “earlier than.”

[3] $(\exists e)[\exists t < t^*](\text{agent}_b(x, e, t) \text{ and } [\text{only } y = x]\text{agent}_b(y, e) \text{ and building}(e) \text{ and of}(e, \text{ a boat}))$

Two features of this go beyond the standard formulation. The first is represented by the second embedded conjunct, which requires that there be a unique agent (in the relevant respect—to be explained shortly) of the event. If I build the front half of a boat and you build the back half, neither of us gets to say that he built the boat. The second is the subscript on “agent.” Agency is a determinable. There are different ways in which one can be the agent of an event, and different verbs can require different specific forms of agency. We can be the agent of an event by causing it (as when breaking a window), by doing something of which it is a part (contracting the quadriceps when extending the leg), by doing something constitutive of it (moving the king pawn two squares forward to start a game of chess), or by being a primitive agent of it, as when one moves one’s lips and tongue when speaking. Action verbs often require specific forms of agency. For example, one can be an agent of a game of chess by causing it to be played (as when you organize a tournament), but that is not sufficient to have played a game of chess. To play a game of chess, you have to participate in part by doing things that are constitutive of its play. When as white you begin play by moving the king pawn two squares forward, what you do is partially constitutive of the play of the game because it is part of a pattern that provides a conceptually sufficient condition for the concept to subsume the activity. Similarly, if you hire an assassin to kill someone, you cause his death, but you did not kill him yourself. To kill someone, it is required that you cause his death, but it is also required that you not have brought about his death primarily through the agency of another. We can call this direct causation. Many ordinary action verbs require, in this sense, direction causation. When an agent brings about an event by way of direct causation, we can say that he is a direct agent of it.

Now, to be an agent of anything, there must be some event of which we are a primitive agent, something we do but not by doing anything else. We are primitive agents of those things we can bring about simply by willing it. I choose to move my finger now, and it moves. I am a primitive agent of the movement of the finger. I do not move it by doing anything else. I am an agent of further events by way of relations they bear to those events of which

I am a primitive agent. Thus, we can provide a further analysis “agent_x(x, e, t)” as “primitive-agent(x, f, t) and R_x(f, e),” where “R_x(f, e)” represents a relation required between f and e by the action verb (if a verb requires primitive agency, then it is the identity relation). In [3], the subscript “B” on “agent” is intended to indicate that the form of agency is determined by the action verb—in this case, it is what we have just called direct causation. Thus, the full analysis is represented in [3f].

[3f] $(\exists e)[\exists t < t^*](\exists f)(\text{primitive-agent}(x, f, t) \text{ and } f \text{ directly causes } e) \text{ and } [\text{only } y = x](\exists f')(\exists t')(\text{primitive-agent}(y, f', t') \text{ and } f' \text{ directly causes } e) \text{ and building}(e) \text{ and of}(e, \text{ a boat}))$

This expansion will be relevant at various points in our discussion, but where it is not needed, I will suppress it.

On the distributive reading of [2], since the subject term does not tell us who are the members of the group referred to, we must treat it as involving implicitly a quantifier over the members of the group, as represented in [2’], where we use “[Each x ∈ us]” to express “Each one of us.” Combining this with the event analysis of the matrix, we get [2d].

[2’] [Each x ∈ us](x built a boat)

[2d] $[\text{Each } x \in \text{us}](\exists e)[\exists t < t^*](\text{agent}_b(x, e, t) \text{ and } [\text{only } y = x]\text{agent}_b(y, e) \text{ and building}(e) \text{ and of}(e, \text{ a boat}))$

As both the quantifiers represented in [2d] are implicit in [2], it is immediately evident that there is the possibility of a scope ambiguity. On the distributive reading, the quantifier over members of the group takes wide scope with respect to the event quantifier. The other reading is given by [2c] (where we adjust the uniqueness requirement to reflect the shift to multiple agents).

[2c] $(\exists e)[\text{Each } x \in \text{us}][\exists t < t^*](\text{agent}_b(x, e, t) \text{ and } [\text{only } y \in \text{us}]\text{agent}_b(y, e) \text{ and building}(e) \text{ and of}(e, \text{ a boat}))$

This says that there is an event of which each of us was an agent (in a certain respect), and no one other than one of us was an agent of it in that respect, and it is a building of a boat. Intuitively, this is just what is required for us to have built a boat.⁵ Thus, the ambiguity between the distributive and collective readings is revealed to be a scope ambiguity in light of the event analysis of the matrix and the treatment of the subject position required by the distributive reading. This generalizes straightforwardly to all plural noun phrases that pick out groups of agents.

This establishes part of the first thesis to be shown: plural action sentences do not commit us to the existence of group agents, but only to individual agents. This is not to say that we are not committed to the existence of groups. These are not eliminated. The key point is that the argument position in the agency relation is occupied by a variable that takes individuals as values.

This, at the same time, shows that, as far as plural action sentences go, there is no reason to suppose that we must attribute beliefs, desires, and intentions to groups, because the only motive for doing that is derived from the thought that we must treat groups as such as agents.⁶

5.3 THE LOGICAL FORM OF GRAMMATICALLY SINGULAR GROUP ACTION SENTENCES

Does this result extend to grammatically singular group action sentences such as the following?

The team went to the doctor for steroids.

The quartet went home after the concert.

The chess club met in the library on Friday night.

The United States declared war on Japan on December 8, 1941.

In 1954, the Supreme Court reversed, in its decision in *Brown vs. Board of Education*, its 1896 ruling in *Plessy vs. Ferguson* that racial segregation is constitutional.

Let us call groups picked out by grammatically singular noun phrases in action sentences, for the time being, singular group agents. Singular group agents appear to differ in a number of significant respects from groups picked out using plural noun phrases.

1. They typically can change their membership over time. The membership of the Supreme Court in 1954 was disjoint from its membership in 1896, for example.
2. They typically could have had different members at any time than they have had. If Bush had lost the 2000 election to Gore, the current membership of the Supreme Court would have been different than it is.
3. It seems to follow that a singular group agent can do something, though not all who are at some time or other members of it are agents of what it does. The United States elects a president every four years, though the electorate changes.

4. Many singular group action sentences seem not to admit of a distributive/collective ambiguity. For example, there appears to be no distributive reading of "the United States declared war on Japan on December 8, 1941" or of "the chess club met in the library on Friday night."
5. Membership in such groups is typically socially constructed, in the sense that whether one is a member depends on a collective agreement about the conditions under which one is to be counted as a member.⁷

These features of (at least some) singular group agents have suggested to many philosophers that, at least in these cases, we must admit group agents over and above individuals. A singular group agent may, for example, persist through many generations and engage in projects that extend beyond the lifetime of any individual who is a member of it. For example, it is the Supreme Court that reversed *its* earlier ruling in *Plessy vs. Ferguson*. The nine justices on the Supreme Court in 1954 were not reversing *their* earlier ruling.

I will argue, however, that all of these features of singular group agents can be understood compatibly with extending the basic analysis of plural action sentences to singular group action sentences. The two key ideas are that the grammatically singular terms that pick out singular group agents are definite descriptions and that the socially constituted membership relation is indexed to a time.

Let me begin with the charge that many singular group action sentences do not admit of a distributive/collective ambiguity. The explanation lies not in the grammatical number of the subject term but in the type of event that the action verb expresses. First, it is clear that many singular group action sentences exhibit the distributive/collective ambiguity. For example, "the team went to the doctor for steroids" has both a distributive and a collective reading. If each member of the team, struggling with his own conscience, eventually loses the battle and goes to the doctor for steroids, thinking he is the only one, in the end, the whole team went to the doctor for steroids, but not together. On the other hand, the team may have made a decision as a group to make use of steroids to improve their performance as a team and may have gone to the doctor all together. This motivates, in the same way as in the previous section, treatment of the collective reading as involving all members of the team being agents of an event of their going to the doctor for steroids. Similarly, "the quartet went home after the concert" has both a distributive and collective reading: if we know the members of the quartet live together, we give it the collective reading; if we know that they do not, we give it the distributive reading. Second, we can easily see that the reason that some sentences seem not to admit of a distributive

reading is that the verb expresses an event type that individual members of the group cannot bring about by themselves. It has nothing specially to do with grammatical number of the subject term. Thus, the reason that “the chess club met in the library” seems not to have a distributive reading is because meeting is not something that one can do alone. The same problem attends “they met in the library.”⁸

The main challenge is how to extend the multiple agents analysis of plural action sentences to singular group action sentences in light of the fact that membership in groups like the Supreme Court could have been different than it is and can change over time and that we ascribe actions to such groups that seem to require a single agent at times when the individual members who make it up are not all the same.⁹

A first observation, which will set the stage for our account, is that when the nominals of definite descriptions involve predicates with an argument place for time, we must supply it with an argument. What argument we supply it with is often determined by what best makes sense in the context. Consider for example [4]–[7].

[4] The woman wearing the tiara was flirting with your husband.

(a) [The x : x is(t^*) wearing the tiara][$\exists t < t^*$](x is(t) flirting with your husband)

(b) [$\exists t < t^*$][The x : x is(t) wearing the tiara](x is(t) flirting with your husband)

[5] The man in the gabardine suit is a spy.

(a) [The x : x is(t^*) a man and x is(t^*) in the gabardine suit](x is(t^*) a spy)

(b) [$\exists t < t^*$][The x : x is(t) a man and x is(t) in the gabardine suit](x is(t^*) a spy)

[6] The fugitive has been recaptured.

(a) [$\exists t < t^*$][$\exists t' : t' < t$][The x : x is(t') a fugitive](x is(t) recaptured)

[7] The forty-fourth President of the United States will be inaugurated on January 20, 2009.

(a) [$\exists t : t > t^*$][The x : x is(t) the forty-fourth President of the United States][$\exists t' : t' > t^*$ & t' is on January 20, 2009](x is(t') inaugurated)

[4] has two readings. If we are talking about someone in view at the moment, the nominal may be intended to be true now of a unique person as in [4a]; if we are talking about what happened at a party last night, it may index to the event time of the main verb as in [4b]. [5] will typically be interpreted as about someone who uniquely satisfies at the time of utterance the nominal as in [5a], though if I assert it after we have been looking at a photograph taken last year, it will be understood as involving a time in the past of the present as in [5b]. In

[6], the sense of “fugitive” requires, if we take the speaker to be competent and rational, that it index to a time in the past of the event time of the main verb, as in [6a]. In [7], if uttered before January 20, 2009, the nominal must be interpreted relative to a time in the future of the utterance in order to pick out the right person, given that the forty-fourth president began his first term in office on January 20, 2009, as in [7a].

Now consider [8]. The entity we have in mind is not any particular group of nine justices who have served on the Supreme Court at some point in its history, but the entity that has had various members (justices serving on it) over its history. We can treat this as the group whose members (in the generic sense) are everyone who has been a member of (in the sense of having been officially appointed to and served on) the Supreme Court, since the Supreme Court at any given time consists of exactly those individuals who are the justices at that time. The nominal formed from “Supreme Court (of the United States)” has an argument place for time, as shown by: there was no Supreme Court (of the United States) in 1700, but there was one in 1800. Since one can utter [8] without knowing when the Supreme Court was created and how long it will last, I suggest that we simply read it as involving an existential quantifier over a time interval. Thus, we can interpret [8] as in [8a], where I use a capital letter as a variable taking groups of individuals as values.¹⁰

[8] Four women have served on the Supreme Court.

(a) ($\exists t$)[The X : X is(t) a Supreme Court (of the United States of America)][$\exists t' : t' \leq t^*$](served-on(X , four women, t'))¹¹

Let us turn now to an action sentence involving the “the Supreme Court.”

[9] The Supreme Court went to lunch.

[9] has both a distributive and a collective reading. On the distributive reading, each of the nine justices of the Supreme Court went to lunch, but not necessarily together. On the collective reading, they went to lunch together. In uttering [9], on either the distributive or collective reading, however, we do not mean that everyone who was ever a member of the Supreme Court went to lunch. Rather, we have in mind the members who are justices at the time of utterance. On the distributive reading, then, the quantifier has to be restricted to members of the group who are justices at the time of utterance. This is shown in [9d], where we use “ e_t ” to express the socially constructed membership relation, that of serving on the court at t —that is, having been appointed and officially approved and not having resigned or been removed at t . This is to be distinguished from the generic sense of membership in a group

(for which we have used “ \in ”) in which for any random selection of individuals there is a group G of which each of them is a member (each x in the selection is such that $x \in G$). When I mean to speak of a socially constructed membership relation or of members understood in terms of such a relation, I will speak of ε -membership or ε -members. I omit the temporal argument place in the agency relation in the uniqueness condition, and this should be read as only members of X are agents in the relevant way of e at any time. We get the collective reading in [9c].

- [9d] $[\exists t][\text{The } X: X \text{ is}(t) \text{ a Supreme Court}][\text{Each } x \varepsilon_r X](\exists e)[\exists t' < t^*]$
 $(\text{agent}_G(x, e, t') \text{ and } [\text{only } y \varepsilon_r X]\text{agent}_G(y, e) \text{ and going}(e) \text{ and to}(e, \text{lunch}))$
 [9c] $[\exists t][\text{The } X: X \text{ is}(t) \text{ a Supreme Court}](\exists e)[\text{Each } x \varepsilon_r X][\exists t' < t^*]$
 $(\text{agent}_G(x, e, t') \text{ and } [\text{only } y \varepsilon_r X]\text{agent}_G(y, e) \text{ and going}(e) \text{ and to}(e, \text{lunch}))$

This gives us the tools we need to interpret sentences about the Supreme Court involving its institutional actions. We give an analysis first of [10] in [10c]. Since “ruled” expresses an action type that can only be performed intentionally by an appropriately constituted institutional group, only the collective reading can be rationally intended.

- [10] The Supreme Court ruled in *Plessey vs. Ferguson* in 1896 that segregation is constitutional.
 [10c] $[\exists t][\text{The } X: X \text{ is}(t) \text{ a Supreme Court}](\exists e)[\exists t' < t^* \ \& \ t' \text{ lies in } 1896]$
 $[\text{Each } x \varepsilon_r X](\text{agent}_R(x, e, t') \text{ and } [\text{only } y \varepsilon_r X]\text{agent}_R(y, e) \text{ and ruling}(e) \text{ and}$
 $\text{content}(e, \text{segregation is constitutional}) \text{ and in}(e, \text{Plessey vs. Ferguson}))$

The key here is that since the ruling is located in the past of the present and in 1896, we must let the temporal argument place in the membership relation be bound by the quantifier introduced by the past tense marker on the verb.

Now we can show how to handle sentences that attribute to the Supreme Court actions at different times at which there is no overlap in membership. Consider [11].

- [11] The Supreme Court ruled in 1896 that segregation is constitutional, but in 1954, it reversed itself and ruled that segregation is not constitutional.
 [11c] $[\exists t][\text{The } X: X \text{ is}(t) \text{ a Supreme Court}](\exists e)[\exists t' < t^* \ \& \ t' \text{ lies in } 1896]$
 $[\text{Each } x \varepsilon_r X](\text{agent}_R(x, e, t') \text{ and } [\text{only } y \varepsilon_r X]\text{agent}_R(y, e) \text{ and ruling}(e) \text{ and}$
 $\text{content}(e, \text{segregation is constitutional}) \text{ and } (\exists e')[\exists t'' < t^* \ \& \ t'' \text{ lies in } 1954]$
 $[\text{Each } x \varepsilon_r X](\text{agent}_R(x, e', t'') \text{ and } [\text{only } y \varepsilon_r X]\text{agent}_R(y, e') \text{ and reversal}(e', e, X) \text{ and ruling}(e') \text{ and content}(e', \text{segregation is not constitutional}))$

This shows that the fact that we speak of institutional groups doing things at different times does not commit us to group agents per se and that the account of the logical form of plural action sentences extends straightforwardly to singular group action sentences.

We can also now explain the appearance that institutional groups like the Supreme Court can change their membership over time. There is something of an illusion here, generated by the fact that there are different senses of “membership” in play. When we speak of the Supreme Court as such, as in [8], it is the group of individuals who are its ε -members at any time that we have in mind. That group does not change its membership over time, though not all of its members exist at the same time (think of a family extending over generations). But which individuals bear the socially constructed ε -membership relation to the Supreme Court, the serving-on relation, is different at different times, and in that sense of “membership” we can speak of the membership of the Supreme Court changing over time (a member of it in the first sense may resign and so cease to be a member of it in the second sense, but once a member in the second sense, one is always a member in the first sense—that is, a member can resign and so cease to be an ε -member, but once an ε -member, one is always a member). This is clearly compatible with all action sentences about what the Supreme Court does being understood in terms of the agency of its then appointed ε -members.

Finally, to deal with modal statements involving singular group action sentences, we have only to note that the fact that the Supreme Court could have had different members *in toto* and different ε -members at any time is simply a reflection of the fact that “the Supreme Court” is a definite description and not a proper name, that is, that it is not a rigid designator. The fact that the Supreme Court might have had different members than it actually has in 2012 no more supports the claim that when we talk about what the Supreme Court does, we are talking about anything other than what its members at the time do, than the fact that the forty-fourth President of the United States might have been someone else shows that when we talk about what the president does, we are talking about someone other than the occupier of that role at this time. We would analyze “the forty-fourth President of the United States might have been someone other than he is” as in [12].

- [12] $[\text{The } x: x \text{ is}(t^*) \text{ a forty-fourth President of the United States}](\text{it is possible that: } [\text{the } x': x' \text{ is}(t^*) \text{ a forty-fourth President of the United States}](x' \neq x))$

In parallel fashion, we analyze “the Supreme Court could have had different members in 2012 than it does” as in [13].

[13] $[\exists t][\text{The } X: X \text{ is}(t) \text{ a Supreme Court}][\text{the } Y: Y \text{ are } \varepsilon\text{-members of } X \text{ in } 2012](\text{it is possible that: } [\exists t'][\text{The } X': X' \text{ is}(t') \text{ a Supreme Court}][\text{the } Y': Y' \text{ are } \varepsilon\text{-members of } X' \text{ in } 2012](Y \neq Y'))$

This simply expresses the fact that the description, “the Supreme Court in 2012,” might have picked out a different group of people than it in fact does.

5.4 WHEN DOES A GROUP COUNT AS DOING SOMETHING?

It sometimes seems to be supposed that collective action is always intentional. But this is incorrect. For example, it is undeniable that we human beings are poisoning the environment through what we do and the way we live. This is not something that any one of us alone could do. But we are not doing it intentionally. It is an unintentional by-product of other things that we are doing. Clearly, then, unintentional collective action is possible, and it is easily explained on my account: it is simply a matter of there being multiple agents of an event.

This example is interesting for another reason. It shows that we can do something together though, in contrast to individual action, there is no description of it under which it is intentional. There is nothing we are all doing together intentionally that has the poisoning of the environment as its unintentional consequence. This point is also made nicely by an example of Sara Chant’s in “The Special Composition Question in Action” (2006).

Imagine that if someone flips two switches at the same time, an alarm goes off. Suppose he does so, not knowing the consequence. Then he sets off the alarm unintentionally, though he did do something intentionally, namely, flip both switches. Now suppose there to be two people, each of whom flips one of the switches at the same time as the other, with neither knowing the consequence or even what the other is doing. They set off the alarm, albeit unintentionally. However, though each did something intentionally, there is nothing that *they* need have done intentionally.

This is likewise a consequence of my account. It is also a consequence that whenever two people do anything, there is something that they do together, provided that we are generous enough about what counts as an event. Thus, if we count as an event any mereological sum of events, then there is an event of which any group of agents who each do something are the joint agents: each is an agent (in the sense introduced above) of the mereological sum of the events of which they are sole individual agents.

I want to address now an objection to this, drawing on an example that Chant gives in the paper I just mentioned. We imagine two boy scouts, in different

parts of the same town, at the same time each helping a little old lady across the street, neither of them knowing about the other or aware of what the other is doing. In this case, Chant says, we do not accept the collective reading of “they helped two little old ladies across the street.” This shows, Chant argues, that when they each do what they do, they are not participating in a collective action.

Consider first the case of two boy scouts who have made a compact with each other to help two little old ladies across the street every day for a month by each helping one little old lady across the street every day. It is day one. Each goes looking for a little old lady to help across the street. At the end of the day, each reports that he found someone to help across the street, and they agree that they have helped two little old ladies across the street on this first day of the project. This seems clearly to be a case in which they jointly help two little old ladies across the street and do so intentionally. Suppose now, instead, that they have just each independently decided to help a little old lady across the street each day for a month. Events proceed as before. Each boy scout is responsible for helping a little old lady across the street, but it is also the case that, in virtue of that, two little old ladies were helped across the street, and that is something that was not brought about by the efforts of only one of the boy scouts. So the helping of two little old ladies across the street, what was done intentionally in the former case, is in this case done by the boy scouts together but unintentionally.

Why is there an initial reluctance to accept that the two good boy scouts who act independently jointly aided two little old ladies across the street? I suggest that it is because we ordinarily think of helping someone across the street as something that is done intentionally. It is difficult, though not impossible, to imagine circumstances in which one could do that without doing it intentionally. So if we hear that someone helped another person across the street, we imagine that it was done intentionally. This suggestion that the action was undertaken intentionally then naturally carries over to plural action sentences whose main verb is “help.” When we consider an utterance of “they helped two little old ladies across the street,” we can interpret it distributively, in which case we imagine each of them intentionally helping a little old lady across the street, or collectively, in which case we imagine them intentionally together helping two little old ladies across the street. Since in the case as initially described it is made clear that there was no joint intention, we feel a reluctance to endorse the truth of the statement on the collective reading because of the pull of this default reading. Yet we can see after reflecting on similar cases that there is a collective reading on which they together help two little old ladies across the street but do not do it together intentionally.

5.5 WHAT ARE COLLECTIVE ACTIONS?

What do we mean to speak about when we speak of actions? We have in mind *what people do*. But the question “what did he do?” is answered canonically by an action sentence: he F-ed. It is not like: what did he build? To this, we can answer with a name or a noun phrase, “H.M.S. Endeavour,” “a tree house,” “an empire,” and so on, which specifies a particular object or an object of a certain type. Here “what” stands in for the direct object of the verb “build.” In the question “what did he do?,” “what” stands in for an action verb, and action verbs are not referring terms or noun phrases. Do we need to countenance actions at all then?

It is best to consider this question from the standpoint of the event analysis of action sentences. Take [2] as an example, repeated here, with its full-dress analysis in [2a].

[2] I built a boat.

[2a] $(\exists e)[\exists t < t^*](\exists f)(\text{primitive-agent}(I, f, t) \text{ and } R_b(f, e) \text{ and } [\text{only } y = I] \text{ agent}_b(y, e) \text{ and building}(e) \text{ and of}(e, a \text{ boat}))$

[2a] shows that the action verb introduces three quantifiers, one over time and two over events. The action verb then relates the agent to a time and to two events, in addition to (in this case) a direct object. Thus, even though we answer the question “what did he do?” with an action sentence, supplying an action verb, say “F” for the placeholder “what”—“He F-ed”—we may take this to indicate a thing of some type to which he is related as the agent. There are, however, two candidates. The time, of course, is not something one is an agent of, though one is an agent of things at a time. But there are two events that are candidates for being the action. One is the event that is expressed by the action verb “to build” (represented by the variable “e” in [2a]), and the other is the event (which may be complex) of which I am a primitive agent, which results in the event of boat assembly (represented by the variable “f” in [2a]).

We have two choices. We can say that any event of which I am an agent is an action of mine, or we can say that only events of which I am a *primitive agent* are my actions. The first thing to be said is that this does not appear to be a substantive issue, but rather a terminological one, so long as we are agreed upon the distinction between being an agent of an event primitively, and then being an agent of an event by way of something of which we are primitively an agent bearing the right sort of relation to it. Deciding how to use (or how we in fact use) “action” in relation to this picture does not add any details to it.

On the point of usage, I favor the view that “action” counts events of which we are primitive agents on the following grounds. First, we do not treat consequent

events described as such as actions. Suppose that I kill someone. The consequent event is his dying. But his dying is not an action of mine. Rather, what I did to cause his death—that is, what I did that caused his death—is my action. Second, there is no end to the consequences of events of which we are primitive agents. These continue long after we are dead. But we do not continue to perform actions when we no longer exist. We can say that things Napoleon did are still affecting the present long after his death, but not that Napoleon is still doing things. Third, intuitively the time to which an action verb indexes is the time of action. When we ask when Brutus killed Caesar, the answer is *when he stabbed him*, not when Caesar dies. If Brutus stabbed Caesar on the Ides of March and Caesar dies on March 22, we do not say that Brutus killed Caesar on the 22nd. He may have been imprisoned or have died himself in the meantime. Intuitively, the time of Brutus’s killing of Caesar is the time of his action, which is the time of his primitive action, the movement of his arm as he stabbed Caesar.

This is reflected in [2a] in the fact that the temporal variable has a place in relating the agent to the event of which he is primitive agent, but not to the consequent event. If this is right, then we would expect that the consequent event could occur after the time of utterance, and this is indeed the case. For example, in *Hamlet*, Laertes says, after having wounded Hamlet with a sword dipped with poison and while dying himself from a poisoned wound, “Hamlet, thou art slain... In thee there is not half an hour of life.” Hamlet’s slaying here lies in the past of the speech act, but his death lies in its future. It is easy to think of examples of a similar sort. For example, one may say of the central administration at the university, after they have closed the PhD program to cut costs: “They have destroyed the department because the senior faculty will leave.” The destruction of the department coincides with the leaving of the senior faculty, which lies in the future of the utterance act, though the administration’s action lies in the past of the utterance act. Similarly, a chess player who has just executed a knight fork of his opponent’s queen and king may say correctly: “I have just won the game,” though he is not able to checkmate his opponent without further play. And so on.

When we turn to collective agency, the question whether there are collective actions now becomes the question whether, or in what sense, groups can be primitive agents of events. The answer is *in one sense* “no” and, *in another sense*, “yes.” If the analysis of collective action given above is correct, it is immediately clear that there is a sense in which groups per se are not primitive agents of any events, because they are not per se agents of any events—not at least so far as the truth conditions of collective action sentences go. So if we think of group action as what the group per se is a primitive agent of (or even an agent in any sense), then there are no group actions, because groups are not agents.

Groups as such never figure as the agent argument of the relation expressed by “primitive-agent(x, f, t)” and so do not figure as the agent argument in “agent(x, e, t).” In this sense, the *primary sense*, we will say, then, that there are no collective actions at all, only individual actions—whether we choose the events of which we are primitive agents as our actions or any events of which we are agents.

There remains the question whether there is a close enough analog to a primitive action for a group for it to deserve the honorary title of the group’s “collective action.” Let us consider a team of carpenters building a house. We can represent what the structure of what a group does in cases like these in diagram 1.

Here, while each member of the group bears the primitive agent relation to an event, there is no event to which the group bears the primitive agent relation, as we noted above. There is, however, a best candidate for a primitive action of the group in these kinds of cases, namely, the mereological sum of the primitive actions of its members.

To establish this, we bring to bear two points. The first is that it is an undeniably useful *façon de parler* to speak of group agency. Groups are not, of course, per se agents of any events. When we speak of a group as an agent of an event in some particular way, we have in mind that there is an action sentence involving the group that is true on its collective reading. Thus, we may speak about a group being an agent of an event in a derivative sense when all and only members of the group bear the relevant agency relation to the event. In this sense, we may say that the group of carpenters is an agent of the building of a house because all and only those carpenters are direct agents of its building. The second point is that a primitive action is defined as something done, but not by doing anything else. We then get a derivative notion of group action as to what the group does, but not by doing anything else. The team of carpenters builds the house by way of its members doing the various things they do to contribute. The individuals’ primitive actions are not actions of the group. But if we allow their mereological sum as an event, that is an event that is brought about only

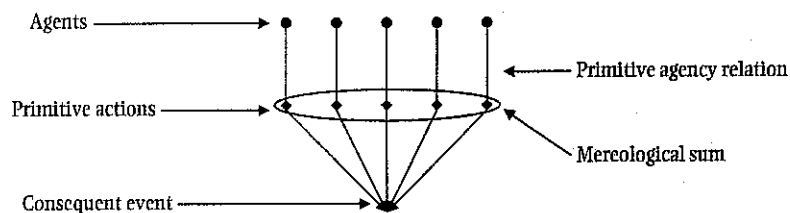


Diagram 1 The Case of the Carpenters

by the group as a whole and toward which all and only members of the group bear the agency relation. When the group builds the boat, it is by way of the complex event consisting of the primitive contributions of its members. But there is no event the group is an agent of in the derivative sense (I will suppress the qualification from now on) by which it brings about the mereological sum of the relevant primitive actions of its members. Thus, the mereological sum of the primitive contributions of the group’s members may count in an extended, or secondary, sense as the group’s primitive action.

In the case we are considering, it is important to note that what we have identified as the primitive action of the group, though it is an event of which each member is an agent, is not an event of which each is a primitive agent. Rather, each member of the group contributes to it by way of doing something that is a part of it, in the way in which an individual’s clapping is a constitutive part the complex event of an audience’s applauding a performance. We may say, then, that a group performs a primitive action F when its members contribute to its coming about by way of performing primitive actions themselves that are constitutive parts of F . Then we can represent what is required for F to be, in the extended sense, a primitive action of the group G in [14].

[14] [Each $x \in G$]($\exists t$)($\exists f$)(primitive-agent(x, f, t) and f is a constitutive part of F) and [only $y \in G$]($\exists t'$)($\exists f'$)(primitive-agent(y, f', t') and f' is a constitutive part of F)

In certain cases, it may be possible to narrow the gap between collective primitive actions and individual primitive actions even more. Consider a hypothetical case, suggested by Paul McNamara, of Siamese twins—identical twins whose bodies are joined in utero, who share control over a shared arm. Let’s imagine that each has independent control over the arm. In this case, there is no reason to say that each does not perform a primitive action when each moves the arm, or, say, clenches the fist, independently of the other. In a case in which they struggle to control the arm, one wishing to do one thing and the other another, it would seem that neither does what he intends, and neither succeeds in performing an action. In a case in which they intend to do the same thing at the same time with the arm, say, clench the fist, and that comes about through their overdetermining it, they are joint agents of the clenching in the sense that both are agents of it in the way they are when they clench the fist independently. Since there is a single event in question, it would appear that they would each be a primitive agent of the same event. We would then have the situation represented in diagram 2.

Let us designate the event in question as “ C .” We can then say that they are the primitive agents of C both as individuals and as a pair. But we still cannot

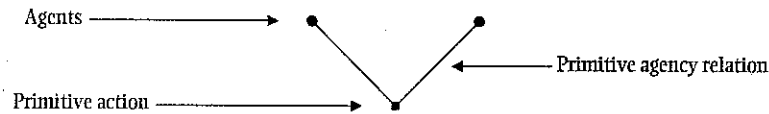


Diagram 2 The Case of the Siamese Twins

say that the pair as such is a primitive agent of C in the sense in which the two individuals are. For to be a primitive agent of an event, one must have a *de re* intention-in-action directed at it, and while each of the twins has a *de re* intention-in-action directed at what they are doing, the pair of them, as such, does not, and so the pair does not figure in the primitive agency relation as such. In a variant, we might suppose that they cannot move the arm at all without their willing it together. But this does not affect the conclusion. The only difference is whether they jointly overdetermine the movement of the arm or whether they each make necessary contributions that are only together sufficient. They would each be a primitive agent of it in that case too, but the pair still would be a primitive agent of it only in the secondary sense.

The case of the Siamese twins is a special case of [14] in which we trade the twins for G , and C for F , and the event that makes the matrix [15] true is likewise C , and we allow identity as a limiting case of being a constitutive part of a thing.

[15] [Each $x \in$ the twins]($\exists t$)(primitive-agent(x, f, t) and f is a constitutive part of C) and [only $y \in$ the twins]($\exists t'$)($\exists f'$)(primitive-agent(y, f', t') and f' is a constitutive part of C)

Here, neither twin is the sole primitive agent of any event, and so neither gets to claim any action as his. But this is captured by the above without there having to appear on the scene any agents other than each of them.¹²

5.6 CONCLUSION

I have argued that

- (1) when we assert group action sentences, whether plural or singular, we are asserting that certain events had multiple agents;
- (2) collective action can be intentional and unintentional;
- (3) a group may perform an action though it is not intentional under any description;
- (4) any random group of agents is a group that does something together;

- (5) in a certain sense, there are no collective actions, if we mean by that events of which groups are primitive agents in the way individuals are primitive agents of events;
- (6) but the mereological sums of events of which the members of a group are primitive agents in standard cases of collective action are reasonable surrogates; and
- (7) although in some conceptually possible cases in which we press the analogy between primitive actions of individuals and groups, like the Siamese Twin cases, the distance between individual and collective primitive action can be reduced, it cannot be completely eliminated.

The picture that emerges of collective agency, understood as the subject matter of collective action sentences, is that talk of groups acting, of group agents, and of group actions is a *façon de parler*.¹³ Groups are not *per se* agents, and they do not *per se* perform actions. Rather, collective action sentences are true when there are multiple agents of a relevant event in relevant ways. The only actions, strictly speaking, are the actions of individuals—that is, it is only individuals who stand in the agency relation to events. There is nothing objectionable in the vocabulary of group agents and group actions, so long as it is understood as shorthand for there being multiple agents of certain events that stand as primitive relative to further events of which they are all thereby similarly agents. All agency, strictly speaking, is individual agency; all collective action is a matter of there being multiple agents of events, in the first instance of aggregates of individual primitive actions and then of their consequences.

NOTES

1. This way of putting the question is important. I am not concerned with whether, as a matter of fact, some of the groups picked out using plural or singular group-referring terms are agents, but with whether the truth of the action sentences that such terms figure in as the subject requires that they be agents.
2. I won't be developing it in this chapter, but it is clear that the question whether there are genuine group agents is of central importance in considering whom to hold to blame for what groups do, intentionally or unintentionally. If there are only individual agents on the scene, then the blame and responsibility must be distributed over them—which is not necessarily to say *divided* among them. Two recent collections of papers attest to the contemporary interest in the intersection of issues in the ontology of collective action and collective responsibility (French and Wettstein 2006; May and Tuomela 2007).
3. This puts me at odds with a number of theorists, including Baier (1997), Copp (2006), French (1984), Pettit (2003), Schmitt (2003), Stoutland (1997, 2008), and Tollefsen (2002, 2006). Many more talk of collective agents without making it clear whether they regard such talk as a *façon de parler* or as literally true. On the

individualist side are, *inter alia*, Bratman (1992, 1993), Miller (2001, 2002), and Searle (1990). None of these authors on either side of the issue approach the topic from the standpoint of the logical form of action sentences.

4. My account of the logical form of plural action sentences is developed in Ludwig (2007). I provide a sketch of the account in section 2.2 and show in section 2.3 how it can be extended to grammatically singular group action sentences. See also Ludwig (2010) for discussion of the details of the event analysis and its motivation.
5. One should not be misled here by thinking the conditions specified do not secure that we were intending to build a boat. It is compatible with our building a boat that we not have been aiming at building a boat. We might have been intending to build a tree house but got the wrong plans out of the drawer. But even so, when we were done, we would have built a boat, not a tree house, as a result of our mistake.
6. This leaves the question of what distinguishes the intentions of individuals who are participating in group intentional action from the intentions of individuals who are not—that is, it leaves the question of how to analyze *we-intentions*. I provide a reductive account of *we-intentions* that builds on this account of the logical form of plural action sentences in Ludwig (2007). I use this to provide, in turn, an analysis of collective intentional behavior.
7. This is not invariably so. The Paris Mob was not an institutionally organized group, though it is picked out using a grammatically singular term. A mob can change its membership over time, does not have its members essentially, can engage in acts (storming the Bastille, rioting) that individuals cannot, and arguably, in some cases act through spokespersons. The account I sketch for action of institutional group agents through changes in membership extends to mobs, crowds, gangs, packs, and other similar groups. The main difference has to do with how we conceive of the relation of an individual to other individuals at a time for them to be members of such a group. Membership in an institutional group involves having a certain status function, the conferring of which on an individual is a matter of a settled practice (such as being appointed by an appropriate official or being selected in an election or paying dues and being inscribed in the membership roll). Being a member of a mob is a matter of intending to participate in a joint action with others characterized by (a) some relation they bear to oneself (being in the vicinity, for example) and by (b) their sharing a goal and the same conception of the group with whom they are acting, *i.e.*, as participating in a collective action (perhaps rather vaguely defined) with a group satisfying some unique description whose various members think the same.
8. Some philosophers seem to have assumed that if there is a type of event that only groups can bring about by their members intentionally doing something together, then there must be an agent over and above the individuals who make up the group (Stoutland 2008, 537–38). But our analysis shows that this is a mistake. Suppose the faculty convened on Friday afternoon. Convenings are essentially intentional collective action types. A group convenes only if the agents involved each intend to be meeting the others as a part of their coming together. So for an event to be a convening, it has not only to exhibit a certain pattern of behavior involving more than one individual but also to have come about as the result of the individuals who instantiate the pattern each having the intention

- to do so with the others jointly intentionally. But the only agents of the pattern required to instantiate the description are individual agents. To put it in terms of the account here, “they convened on Friday afternoon” has the logical form: $[\text{Each } x \in \text{them}][\exists e][\exists t < t^*](\text{agent}_c(x, e, t) \text{ and } [\text{only } y = x]\text{agent}_c(y, e) \text{ and } \text{convening}(e) \text{ and } \text{on}(e, \text{Friday afternoon}))$. Everything we have said about what is required for convening to take place has to do with there being an event that satisfies “convening(*x*),” and we explained that in terms of conditions on the agents and their intentions. As the analysis of the logical form of “they convened on Friday afternoon” shows, this is compatible with only individuals standing in the agency relation to the event. There remains the question whether the participatory intentions of individuals who participate in such actions can be analyzed in terms of concepts already at play in individual action. As noted above (end-note 6), I argue that they can in Ludwig (2007). However, the present point—that group agents *per se* are not required for essentially collective intentional action—is unaffected by the outcome of this further issue.
9. There are various other objections that can be raised to the account that I will not address in this chapter. For example, it may appear that institutional groups may act through the actions of appropriately authorized subgroups, such as spokespersons, though not all of the members of the group make a contribution. I argue elsewhere that a proper understanding of the type of acts involved in these cases and of the authorization relation show that this is not, in fact, a counterexample. See Ludwig (2007, 378–87; 2013) for responses to this and other connected objections. My main goal in this section is to show how the account of the logical form of plural action sentences can be extended smoothly to singular group action sentences compatibly with the points in 1–5 above.
 10. This gives rise to a puzzle in the case of “the Supreme Court did not exist before 1779” because the group picked out by “the Supreme Court” on the analysis indicated includes individuals who existed prior to the institutional arrangements necessary for anyone to be appointed to it. Thus, if the group that is the Supreme Court exists when some of its members do, the Supreme Court existed before 1779, only it was not during that period a Supreme Court. Thus, it would seem that “the Supreme Court did not exist before 1779” comes out false rather than, as we might think, true. However, a similar problem attends talk about ordinary objects. If I say “the desk in my office did not exist before last Tuesday,” what is it that I am picking out? The desk would seem to be identical to the collection of its parts, and these existed before they were used in the construction of a desk. Thus, “the desk in my office did not exist before last Tuesday” seems to come out false. We could say the desk is not identical to its parts, but because it occupies the same place and there is no property including being a desk that the parts (taken together) lack that the desk has, it is difficult to make good sense of this (not that philosophers have not tried). I suggest instead that in this case, what we really understand by “the desk in my office did not exist before last Tuesday” is “the desk in my office did not exist before last Tuesday as a desk.” Thus, we would understand this to mean: $(\exists t)[\text{The } X: X \text{ is}(t) \text{ a desk in my office}] \sim [\exists t': t' < t^* \ \& \ t' < \text{last Tuesday}](X \text{ exists}(t') \text{ and } X \text{ is}(t') \text{ a desk})$. I suggest similarly that we read “the Supreme Court did not exist before 1779” as “the Supreme Court

did not exist as a supreme court before 1779" and read this as "($\exists t$)[The X: X is(t) a Supreme Court]~[$\exists t'$: $t' < t^*$ & $t' < 1779$](X exists(t') and X is(t') a Supreme Court)."

11. "Four women" here may take wide scope over the temporal quantifier "[$\exists t'$: $t' \leq t^*$]," but as the temporal quantifier is over time intervals and "on" may be interpreted as in the interval, whatever state of affairs makes the sentence true on the one reading should make it true on the other and vice versa.
12. If we were to retreat to the view that our actions are merely internal events—for example, as some philosophers have suggested, mere tryings—then we would restore the picture in diagram 5.1. I am unpersuaded by arguments for the retreat, but this is not the place to discuss this issue. See Hornsby (1980); Pietroski (2003).
13. Pettit (2003) has argued for the existence of group agents on the grounds that certain groups instantiate functional descriptions of agents. Whatever one thinks about this claim, it turns out to be entirely unconnected with the question of what the truth conditions of collective action sentences are. Thus, it is not about collective action or agency in the sense in which I am concerned with it in this chapter. On Pettit's view, it turns out that the fact that the group that instantiates the relevant functional description (if any does) is only incidentally connected with the fact that its members are themselves agents and only incidentally connected with their being the subject of a collective action sentence.

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