

xxWhat Is Joint Action?

A modestly deflationary approach



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Stephen A. Butterfill  
js.butterfill@warwick.ac.uk

August 15, 2011

### **Abstract**

Joint actions paradigmatically include two people painting a house together or lifting a heavy sofa together. What more is needed to understand what joint action is? Joint action is standardly characterised by appeal to shared intention (a technical notion) or some other ingredient distinguishing joint from individual action. By introducing the notion of a collective goal, we argue that it is possible to characterise joint action without shared intention or any other distinctive ingredient. This has implications for understanding what joint actions are and which abilities are involved in understanding or engaging in them, as well as for philosophy of action generally.

## 1. The Question

There are phenomena, call them *joint actions*, paradigm cases of which are held to involve two people painting a house together (Bratman1992), lifting a heavy sofa together (Velleman1997), preparing a hollandaise sauce together (Searlex1990), going to Chicago together (Kutz2000), and walking together (Gilbert1990). In developmental psychology paradigm cases of joint action include two people tidying up the toys together (Behne et al.2005), cooperatively pulling handles in sequence to make a dog-puppet sing (Brownell et al.2006), bouncing a ball on a large trampoline together (Tomasello & Carpenter2007), and pretending to row a boat together. Other paradigm cases from research in cognitive psychology include two people lifting a two-handled basket (Knoblich & Sebanz2008), putting a stick through a ring (Ramenzoni et al.2011), and swinging their legs in phase (Schmidt & Richardson2008, p. 284).

These examples are not supposed to be merely cases of joint action, whatever that is. They are also supposed to be paradigm cases, and they are supposed to be cases reflection on which could provide an intuitive understanding of what joint action is. Given that there is some notion (at least one but not necessarily only one) an intuitive understanding of which could be gained by reflection on these supposedly paradigm cases, what is this notion—or, if there is more than one, what are those notions? Our aim, broadly put, is to answer this question. (We shall gradually narrow focus in this section and the next.)

The question can be constrained by noting that joint actions are the focus of a tangle of scientific and philosophical questions. Psychologically we want to know which mechanisms make it possible to engage in and understand different sorts of joint action (Vesper et al.2010). Developmentally we want to know when joint action emerges, what it presupposes and whether abilities to engage in it somehow facilitate socio-cognitive, pragmatic or symbolic development (Moll & Tomasello2007; Hughes & Leekam2004; Brownell et al.2006). Conceptually, we want a principled way of distinguishing joint from individual actions which supports investigation of mechanisms and development (Bratman2009), plus a formal account of how practical reasoning for joint action differs (if at all) from individual practical reasoning (Sugden2000; Gold & Sugden2007). Phenomenologically we want to characterise what (if anything) is special about experiences of action and agency when the actions are joint actions (Pacheri2010). Metaphysically we want to know what kinds of entities and structures are implied by the recognition that some actions are joint actions (Gilbert1992; Searlex1994). And normatively we want to know what kinds of commitments (if any) are