Hello Steve,

A few quick thoughts on your paper. I think the main thesis is exactly on the right track – the debate about joint actions has focused so much on collective intentions that it sometimes seems as if a satisfactory account of collective intentionality were all that’s needed for a good account of joint action. But that’s plainly not the case, just as an account of individual intention won’t tell you everything there is to know about individual action. So I agree with all of that, and I also think your move of comparing individual and joint action in this respect is on the right track.

What I’m not sure I quite fully see yet is your (if you want, methodological) move to set out a number of necessary conditions for shared intentions and then to show how events we would want to call ‘joint actions’ may fall short of meeting these conditions. Before saying why, let me point out that I am rather a sceptic about the notion of intention quite generally, at least if it is supposed to correspond to something metaphysically real. I think the notion of intention is a helpful explanatory device, but I’m not sure all that much follows from that. So it’s a vaguely Dennettian stance I am taking here, which I think is plausible with regard to collective intentions, too (maybe even more so). Thus I am regarding the twenty-odd years of literature we have on collective intentions, and the enormous technical effort that’s been made here, by Bratman, Searle, Gilbert, and others, with slight suspicion. I’m just saying this so that you see my remarks in the right perspective.

I think you are right that most writers on collective intention link the notion rather closely to ‘awareness’ of various kinds. But obviously this doesn’t establish they are correct in doing so. If you consider the case of individual intentions, it’s not clear that awareness of your intention is a necessary condition for entertaining it. You can discover that you harboured an intention long after you’ve carried out the corresponding action; the discovery finally explains your seemingly erratic behaviour (Velleman (2000) has a nice case of that sort, Campbell (1995) does, too). If that’s correct, and if you want to tie individual and collective intentions together as closely as you suggest early on, then the question arises why sets of agents could not harbour collective intentions without being aware of doing so. So the connection between collective intention and the various kinds of awareness you mention may not be as clear-cut as Searle, Bratman etc. suggest.

But even if you respond to this consideration by saying that after all you have to start somewhere and you just stipulate the various necessary conditions of collective intention in order to get the discussion going, I’d like to hear more about what is meant by ‘awareness’ here. In particular, I would want to know whether the kind of awareness at issue is, to use Dretske’s (1993) distinction, an awareness ‘of’ or an awareness ‘that’ – in other words, whether it’s propositional (and hence conceptual) awareness or not. This seems absolutely crucial to me, as one may think (as I sometimes do) that joint motor activity, which does not require collective intention but perhaps nevertheless some kind of awareness, can be characterised as ‘thing’awareness, while collective intentions require ‘fact’awareness. If something like this is on the right track, saying that a certain kind of awareness is necessary for collective intention does not enable you to distinguish between that kind of state and motor cognition, since you may hold that awareness of some kind is necessary for motor cognition also. Perhaps something like this distinction is already implicit in your first kind of awareness (‘of jointness’), which one might argue is available to agents who are merely jointly engaged on the motor level, as opposed to your third kind of awareness (‘of others’ states and commitments’), which perhaps really is strong conceptual awareness of some kind. So it would be helpful to have a more detailed discussion of what kind of awareness is at issue here, and to have that compared and contrasted with awareness (if any) on the motor level.

I like your approach of introducing various case studies that are meant to demonstrate the wide range of interactions between agents which are possible in the absence of anything like joint intention. But I’m still not quite sure I see why one should understand the first case as joint in any sense. If, like me, you are inclined to tie joint motor action to a particular kind of (low-level, non-conceptually grounded) experience, then that case doesn’t qualify, as there just is no joint experience or awareness here. The case is interesting because it provides an unusual angle on the perception of affordances; in the present case, the environment is perceived such that acting on it, for each agent, requires that some other event in the action-relevant surroundings must take place in order for the action to come off; if the other person doesn’t do her bit the block won’t be lifted. But what’s joint about this? It doesn’t matter at all whether what’s happened on the other end is carried out by a person or a bit of machinery. What this case does deliver, I think, is some kind of argument in favour of the Extended Mind idea, but not in favour of the idea that the domain of this extension itself be minded.

The subscription to ‘motor simulation’ is too quick for me. Yet another disclaimer is necessary here on my end, I’m a bit of a sceptic about simulation theory, so again take this with a grain of salt, but it’s not obvious to me why the case of Sam and Ahmed requires us to take on board ST. At least one paper you mention, Iacoboni 2005, is subject to (in my mind) convincing criticism (Borg 2007), and quite generally I think that critics of ST such as Gallagher have rather a lot going for them. But again, I agree with the ultimate conclusion – joint motor activity can be made sense of without stipulating collective intention. Perhaps a simple disclaimer, that for the purposes of the paper you take on ST, would help.

One thing I really like about the paper (particularly in contrast to how I write…) is that it’s very clear and tries to keep things simple, and if you spend too much time discussing what you mean by experience and whether ST is on the right track you obviously run the risk of losing that. But one discussion that’s definitely needed here, I think, is the one about awareness – whether you want to say that motor cognition does not rely on awareness, or whether it’s a different kind of awareness from collective intentionality, or whether there’s some overlap (awareness of jointness perhaps) but also a big difference (CI requires you to be aware not only of but also that the other person is jointly acting with you, or some such). My hunch is that this discussion requires you to consider not only awareness of the other person, in its various forms, but also awareness of the environment you are manipulating with this person. You mention this briefly, when bringing in the idea of ‘collective affordances’ (though, as I said, I’m not sure they obtain in the case you mention). I attach Sinigaglia’s paper for the Joint Attention collection, which perhaps you will find interesting in this respect. It’s a draft (though the ultimate one), so please don’t quote without asking him.

Cheers

Axel.