

# 444 Lecture 12.1 - Gilbert on Group Action

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- They have desire-like states: hopes, plans, intentions.
- They do things.

# Three Big Questions

1. Are these claims literally true, or are they just figures of speech?
2. If they are true, when are they true? If they are not, when are they appropriate?
3. What turns on the answers to 1 and 2?

## Gilbert on Group Action

- Start with a picture of a very simple group - two people walking together.
- Leverage that into a picture of what it is for groups to act.
- The picture will eventually include groups having other states - the group will be an agent.
- But that's not quite how Gilbert builds things up.

## Two Big Questions about Gilbert

1. Does Gilbert have the right analysis of “walking together”, or other small group activities?
2. Is it the right model for larger group activities?

## A Traditional Way of Thinking About Problem

1. What makes some people a group, as opposed to merely some people?
2. What makes it the case that that group is engaged in a group action, shares a group intention, and so on?

Gilbert's view is that this is the wrong way to look at things. Rather, these two questions should be answered simultaneously.



# Two Theories of Group Action

**Weak Shared Plan** All the people in the group have the same plan.

**Strong Shared Plan** All the people in the group have the same plan,  
and this is common knowledge.

## Argument Against Weak Shared Plan

1. If each person is trying to do X, and thinks they are the only one trying to do X, then there is no group action of trying to do X.
2. If **Weak Shared Plan** is true, then in such a situation there is a group action of trying to do X.
3. So **Weak Shared Plan** is false.

## Argument Against Strong Shared Plan

1. If **Strong Shared Plan** is true, then the members of the group have no obligation to the others to continue with the plan if they lose interest in it.
2. In cases of group action, members of the group do have an obligation to the others to continue with the plan even if they lose interest in it.
3. So **Strong Shared Plan** is false.

Both parts of this are controversial. Gilbert spends time on each, first defending 1, then clarifying 2.

# Trust and Reliance

- Gilbert's objection is that **Strong Shared Plan** gives you mutual reliance, but it doesn't give you trust.
- The distinction between reliance and trust is hard to state precisely, but there are very intuitive examples of reliance without trust.
- Note in particular that how you can criticise someone who betrays your trust is very different to how you can criticise someone who you mistakenly relied on.

1. If **Strong Shared Plan** was true, then members of a group could properly rely on each other to continue the group's operation, but they couldn't properly trust each other to continue the group's operation.
2. When someone abandons a group project, the criticisms we can make of them are more like the criticisms of people who betray a trust than people who let us down even though we relied on them.
3. So, **Strong Shared Plan** is false.

I'm personally somewhat sceptical of 2, at least as a universal claim about group projects.

# What is the Obligation to Continue

It's not a moral obligation. Here is Gilbert's argument.

1. You can have shared plan between people with no concept of moral obligation.
2. If the obligation is moral obligation, that's impossible.
3. So the obligation is not moral obligation.

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This is, I think, a bad argument. 1 is only true for psychopaths, and not clear they can engage in group action.

# What is the Obligation to Continue

Here is a better argument for the same conclusion.

1. You can have a shared plan to do an immoral thing.
2. You don't have moral obligations to do immoral things.
3. So the obligation is not a moral obligation.



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So what kind of weird sui generis obligation is it? This is a big question for Gilbert to answer.

## Gilbert's Positive View

- That there is a group action when (and only when) the people form a plural subject.
- So, what is a plural subject.

## First Person Plural

One account is that we have a plural subject when the plurality can literally be the subject of a sentence.

- This can't be right.
- "We are about to start killing each other for food" is a well-formed English sentence, but the 'we' there does not pick out a Gilbert-style group.

There is an important distinction between distributive and collective readings of plural sentences. The distinction turns on whether this inference is valid.

1. Group G is F.
2. a is in group G.
3. Therefore, a is F.

# Distributive Reading

1. Our class has an exam tomorrow.
2. I am in the class.
3. Therefore, I have an exam tomorrow.

This is the distributive reading; the group has the property because everyone has the property.

## Collective Reading

1. Our class is surrounding the building.
2. I am in the class.
3. Therefore, I am surrounding the building.

This is the collective reading; the group does not surround the building in virtue of each individual surrounding the building.

## Plural Subjects

A better version of Gilbert's view on pronouns is that a group is a plural subject when they can be referred to by a first person plural pronoun understood collectively, not distributively.

- This rules out really bad cases - that we have an exam tomorrow doesn't make us a group.
- But it doesn't do enough - the example I gave earlier is collective not distributive.



# Authority and Doing

- I think at the heart of Gilbert's view is a really fascinating phenomena about the emergence of authority.
- In some cases, the fact that a person is giving instructions and other people are following them gives that person a kind of authority.
- By that I don't just mean the descriptive claim that their instructions will be followed.
- I mean that some others should (in some sense) follow these instructions; they are doing the wrong thing if they don't.

## Authority and Gilbert Groups

- If a person has this kind of authority, then some others should follow.
- And that sort of suffices for the people involved to form a group in Gilbert's sense.

# Duos and Gilbert Groups

But there is something very special about the two person groups Gilbert considers.

- No one can leave without the group dissolving.

# Many Person Groups

Imagine that you're in a group, and that you have (somehow) the following obligations.

1. To not do something that would constitute the dissolution of the group.
2. To follow the rules of the group conditional on being in the group.

In a two person group, these will entail an obligation to continue following the group rules. But not in larger groups.

# Puzzle Cases

1. Large groups
2. Immoral group activities
3. Explicit disavowal of long term commitment

# Large Groups

- If I'm in a large group (e.g., a protest rally), how much obligation do I have to continue from the fact that I've joined?
- Intuitively, not much.
- And maybe the fact that I wouldn't dissolve the group by leaving matters here.

# Immoral Groups

- Gilbert knows this, but it's a challenge for her to say what the obligation is in cases where the group is, say, robbing a bank.
- To be fair, this is kind of a problem for everyone.
- If I join a bank robbing group, and promise to do my part in a plan, then just bail when the plan is in operation, there is a sense in which I've done something wrong.
- This sense can persist even if it would be all things considered worse to continue in the group.
- Perhaps Gilbert can offer resources to explain what's going on here.

## Explicit Disavowal

Sometimes a person can join a group and explicitly say they have no long term commitment to it.

- We're watching football in a common area, and someone we know comes by.
- We invite them to join us, and they say "Sure, but I might have to go if I get a call."
- They are in the group, even though they do nothing at all wrong if the call comes and they leave.



## For Next Time

Bratman's very different picture of group action.