

# Gilbert on Group Action

Philosophy 444

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## Two Big Questions

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.

The argument against the first of these is reasonably simple.

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.

The argument against the second is more controversial.

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.

## Why No Obligation

- Because Strong Shared Plan gives you at most mutual reliance, not trust.
- Set out Baier's example of the difference between trust and reliance.
- The kind of criticism you can make of someone who doesn't follow through on the plan, according to Gilbert, is kind of like a breach of trust.
- What SSP would give you is kind of like known reliance.
- **Objection:** Are we really sure that known reliance is not enough?

## What is the Obligation

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.

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

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.

It's also not a prudential obligation. This should be clear, but Gilbert spends a bit of time on it.

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

## Positive View

That there is a group action when (and only when) the people form a plural subject. What's that?

- I do not understand the difference between the positive view and the things it is supposed to be distinguished from at the bottom of page 7.
- The connection to philosophy of language is not good.
- Sometimes I can use 'we' to describe things that are not a group.
- E.g., I can use it to pick out the people on a bus, or even an internally hostile group. ("We are about to start killing each other for food.")
- There is an important distinction between distributive and collective readings of plural sentences, but this is not the same thing.
- The good point around here is authority by doing. This is a real and important and (to my mind) interesting phenomenon. Big question how much actual political authority starts this way.
- And note the point at the bottom of 11 top of 12 about the very special nature of 2 person groups, namely that for now they have their membership essentially. This I think is a huge problem for Gilbert's view.

How accurate is it to take the obligations to just be the definition of the plural subject? That is how I end up reading it, though the textual evidence is not the strongest.

## Puzzle Cases

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