

On Non Mediated Collective Intentions

Emanuele Bottazzi^{1,2}, Carola Catenacci¹,
Roberta Ferrario¹, Robert Trypuz^{1,3}

¹Laboratory for Applied Ontology – ISTC-CNR

²Philosophy Department – University of Torino

³DIT – University of Trento

The aim of this contribution is to introduce the notion of *non mediated collective intentions* and to stress its importance in the current cross-disciplinary debate on collective intentionality. Intuitively, this kind of intentions are held by individual agents when they are involved in collective actions on which their attention is not currently focused, although nothing prevents that the focus is shifted and these actions are brought at the core of attention.

The locution “non mediated” is meant to express the hypothesis that the content of these intentions is not explicitly represented by the agents. Our general assumption is that intentions of this kind are usually linked to bodily movements. The fact that these intentions – at the time in which they are present – are not explicitly represented, however, does not imply that they cannot be represented at all: they are at the periphery of attention, but, if need arises, they can be brought under focus. A predictable objection to this formulation is that, since these intentions are not (in some sense) completely conscious, they should not even be called intentions. However, given the facts that: a) they do direct actions towards specific aims, and b) differently from mere reflexes, they can be inhibited, we believe that they should definitely be included in the intentional domain.

By way of example, let us consider the (non collective) case of a person who is traveling on a train which lacks cup holders; at a certain point, the train suddenly brakes and the bottle of water positioned on her console table starts to fall. Immediately, this person’s arms and hands are thrust out in order to grasp the falling bottle. In this case, we can fairly say that the person had the intention to grasp the bottle, even if she did not have the time to formulate any thought of the kind “I intend to grasp the bottle”. Notice that the same kind of action could have been interrupted (or inhibited), for instance if the person had also had a valuable fragile object with her, and had consequently chosen to grasp the latter instead of the bottle. That is, this kind of actions are not merely reflexes, and – in different

situations – they can be guided by explicitly represented intentions.

This line of thought is not new in the philosophical literature. For instance, in *Intentionality* [3], John Searle draws a distinction between what he calls “*prior* intentions” and intentions “*in-action*”, where, roughly speaking, the former are those directed towards future actions involving a planning activity and the latter are those that are present through the duration of an action. Moreover, while prior intentions are said to be representational, intentions in-action, according to Searle, are “presentational”. In [4], he also introduces the notion of collective intention in-action.

However, even though Searle’s stance, as expressed in [3], [4] and [5], appears to be compatible with the existence of non mediated collective intentions, it must be said that the main concern of his analysis is rather on actions guided by collective intentions in-action which are fully under the focus of attention, and that are explicitly represented at the time of action. This is also made evident by the examples he provides, as in the case of the preparation of hollandaise sauce [4] or that of the corpus of ballet [6]. So, even if – in some sense – our contribution could be seen as an extension of Searle’s analysis, on the basis of considerations and evidence emerging from both philosophical reflections and empirical studies, a thorough comparison of the two positions is still to be drawn, and will be addressed in future work.

Some authors like Tollefsen [7], Gallese and Metzinger [2] have already pointed out the difficulties shown by strongly representational accounts of collective intentionality (such as [1] and, under some respects, [8]) in dealing with a certain class of actions that can be described as both intentional – as far as their goal-directedness is concerned – and collective, given the sort of “we-awareness” that is exhibited by their participants. This is shown by listing a series of cooperative activities that infants and animals can perform regardless the fact that they lack a fully developed capability to represent mental states.

These empirical studies seem to provide a first motivation in favor of the introduction of non mediated collective intentions. However, they are not the only source for such motivation.

Even in the case of human adults, in fact, there are many situations in which no explicit representation appears to be involved, as can be shown by the following simple mental experiment. Let us consider two experienced tango dancers: we are inclined to think that – while dancing – they perform some particular coordinated movements, following a precise path which they are not really aware of; that is, which they are not necessarily paying attention to (contrary to what would happen if they were two beginners). We could observe the leader moving a step forward with his right foot while, at the same time, the follower moves a step backward with her left foot.

Now, suppose that, at the end of the dance, we ask them about which kind of reasoning there was behind that specific step. Would we expect a detailed reply such as “Since I believed my partner was going to put her foot backward in accordance with her willingness to perform the tango with me and I also agreed to dance the tango with her, I decided to put my foot forward”? It is reasonable to think that, with respect to that specific movement, the reply would rather be something like “I did it automatically, I did not think specifically about that...”. Notice that, in this case, it goes without saying that each of the dancers - although she/he is not fully aware of each single performed movement - is able to stop the dance whenever she/he likes.

This claim could be further straightened by the observation that many collective actions of this kind have to be executed very quickly in order to be properly accomplished. Thus, it is hardly arguable that in these cases a form of high level reasoning over representational contents is at stake (as shown by the case of the hypothetical first reply given in the previous example).

A thorough analysis of non mediated collective intentions could also provide a relevant contribution on the question of the reducibility of collective intentions to a summation of individual intentions.

The point we want to make is that non mediated collective intentions, due to their non representational character, are very hardly reducible to combinations of individual intentions. Thus, in our opinion, these intentions are exactly those which should be regarded as “primitive” (in Searle’s terms [4, 6]).

On the other hand, in more complex actions that involve planning and commitments, an higher level form of collective intentionality seems to be called into play: a form which undoubtedly relies on some sort of capability of ascribing mental states to other agents. It is this kind of collective intentionality which is explainable in terms of individual attitudes.

To conclude, if our analysis is correct, reducibility and non reducibility are not two mutually exclusive options. Rather, they are properties to be ascribed to two different forms of collective intentionality, namely mediated and non mediated intentionality.

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