# Social Action, Collective Responsibility, and the Difficulties of Social Decision Making

MICHAEL KOBER, FREIBURG

## 1. Social Action

Singing a duet together, dancing together, playing tennis or football together are paradigm cases of *social or joint action*. From one's own point of view, social action involves being a member of a team, a company, a community, or a state, and it requires from us, as from all partaking individuals, not to act in a merely individually focused or egocentric manner, but to act like one team, one company, one community, or one state. The discussion of social action during the past 20 years[1] has shown that social action cannot be described by or reduced to a sum of individually isolated acts, since social action consists of at least the following features essentially: (i) the single contributing acts need to be *coordinated* or *mutually attuned* to one another, (ii) the participants need to act *cooperatively*, i.e. they are required to mutually support one another, (iii) the single contributing acts need to be *connectable*,[2] i.e. each contribution or ›move‹ that is part of a joint action needs to be so brought forward that the other participants are able to react to that ›move‹ in an appropriate manner, e.g. by taking up the relevant issue and proceeding from it, by merely agreeing to it, by modifying it, or by more or less explicitly rejecting it, (iv) there must be an *interdependency of goals* among the participants, and (v) there is an *interdependency or ›meshing‹ of motives and/or plans* among the participants.

Two philosophically unhappy suggestions concerning social action, however, need to be avoided: firstly, the ontological postulation of a ›collective mind‹ that ›somehow‹ intends and directs group action (cf. Durkheim 1895, ch. 1, and Gilbert 1989), and secondly, the postulation of an infinitely layered ›common knowledge‹ of the form "You know that I know that you know that ... I intend to do act *A*" that is supposed to be as-

---

[1] Cf. e.g. Tuomela 1988, 1995, 2000; Gilbert 1989, 1996, 2000; Searle 1990, 1995; Bratman 1999; Balzer 1999; Kober 2001, 2002, 2005, 2005a.
[2] The term "connectable" originates from "anschlussfähig" in Luhmann 1984.

cribable to all partaking individuals such that it warrants the existence of a kind of ›collective intention‹ (as initially suggested by Lewis 1969 and Schiffer 1972). To my mind, both postulations are not necessary and philosophically mistaken. To begin with, as regards the intentional aspect of social action, we simply do not need to establish a ›collective mind‹ in order to explain joint action. Rather we merely need to introduce what Searle has called "collective intentions", i.e. mental states of each actively partaking participant that have the form:

I intend: We are doing a certain social action *SA* together,
　　　　　by means of me doing my part (i.e. action) *A*
　　　　　and by means of the others doing their parts $A_n$.

Such an account meets the intuitively plausible requirements of *methodological individualism*, i.e the presupposition that social action can be explained as the result of the action and interaction of individuals (cf. Elster 1989, 13).

The generation of an infinitely layered ›common knowledge‹ appears to me to be a philosopher's invention that has been invoked to guarantee the success of any specific joint action. But, as a matter of fact, there is no such warrant: Social action is always in danger to fail just because, among other things being hindrances, some of its participants may always discontinue to do his or her share, for whatever good or bad reasons. Participants of a specific joint action can only hope that this will not happen because, firstly, each participant is interested to achieve his or her goal that is part of the set of interdependent goals, and secondly, each participant considers him- or herself obliged to do his or her share until the joint action will be finished. In other words, the participants of any social action need to mutually *trust* in one another so that (i) they all are indeed interested in actually achieving the interdependent goals and that (ii) they consider themselves to be committed to do their share until the joint action will come to a successful end, unless the group decides to quit the joint action.

Accounts of social action typically concentrate on joint action of socially *equivalent* participants. Yet, there are many cases in our social life that involve a social hierarchy, e.g. within the military forces, within a company, or even when a family acts together where the parents still need to care for the younger children. Moreover, social action often involves *competition* such that the social action's participants are acting as opponents, e.g. in playing tennis, or in business action at the market. To my mind, these cases can easily be accounted for by the introduction of the no-

tion of a role (I owe the concept of a role to Mead 1934, Goffman 1959, and Popitz 1980). I think that Wittgenstein, when he is describing language-games and practices, taught us to look at the roles that can be played according to some rules: being a speaker or a hearer, being a builder or an assistant, being a mother, a son, a commander, a teacher, a student, a master, an apprentice, a tennis player etc. In general, a *role* is a certain position or function in a network of other roles within a certain practice, and the roles may be defined or ›shaped‹ by the constitutive rules of the relevant practice (the term "practice" is defined in Kober 2005a, 76f). Some roles, like being the president of a certain state or company, are often explicitly codified in detail in the constitution or some other kind of regulation of the respective practice or organization.

However, a definition or codification of a role may leave many things open: not all possible cases are regulated in advance. Additionally, it also depends on the very person how exactly he or she plays his or her role in the respective contexts. Nevertheless, a role or a function often comes with certain *rights* and *obligations*, that is, the description of roles of a specific practice includes an explanation of how normativity enters the respective parts of social life. A role enables the person who is playing it to act in ways that are not available to others (e.g. the role of being a president who is able to make decisions that concern the entire organization), but it also imposes commitments or obligations on the role-player (a president has to make decisions for the group's benefit). The rights and obligations of the respective roles may also be codified in the respective regulations.

The fact that there are groups like big cities or nations that are so large that its members are not acquainted to one another also needs to be accounted for. Nations may act as a unit and may, for example, establish public transport or require tax payments, they may be organizing world soccer tournaments, or they may declare war. All these cases come along with some rights for and some duties of the citizens of a nation. Usually, however, there also happen to be some ›free riders‹ who do not fulfil the commitments of their role (like being a citizen), and there always happen to be some ›ignorants‹ who miss or lack understanding of what is currently going on. The following account of necessary conditions of social action will therefore contain the phrase "(almost) all members," instead of the simplified expression "all members":

*Necessary conditions of successful social action:*

Members $M_i$ of a group $G$ are carrying out a social action $SA$ in context $C$ only if the following conditions are satisfied:

(1) *Contextual Conditions*:
   (a) Due to their own understanding of context $C$ and their own acting competency, (almost) all members $M_i$ of $G$ agree on being more or less voluntarily[3] involved in $C$ and in a common practice $P$; this understanding includes that (almost) all $M_i$ believe that they are members of $G$.
   (b) The competency of $P$ includes, firstly, that (almost) all $M_i$ know that a specific social action $SA$ can be carried out in $P$, and secondly, that (almost) all $M_i$ know about (almost) all roles $R$ that are constituted by the rules of $P$, including the rights and obligations that belong to the respective $R$s.
   (c) (Almost) all $M_i$ know which role $R_{Mi}$ they are taking charge of, and (almost) all $M_i$ know (almost) all the other roles that are adopted by the other $M_i$ of $G$ within $P$.
   (d) (Almost) all $M_i$ of $G$ are voluntarily carrying out those acts $A_{Mi}$ that are specific to their roles $R_{Mi}$ within $C$, trusting that (almost) all other members $M_i$ of $G$ will also carry out their acts $A_{Mi}$ within $C$.

(2) *Collective Intention*:
   On the basis of their own plans or motives $MOT_i$ in $C$, (almost) all $M_i$ of $G$ voluntarily intend:
   We are carrying out social action $SA$ by means of (almost) all $M_i$ carrying out their own respective acts $A_{Mi}$ that are possible for or required by the respective roles $R_{Mi}$ in a mutually attuned, cooperative, and connectable way, such that the interdependent goals $IG_{Mi}$ are likely to be achieved.

(3) *Overall stance of the participants*:
   (Almost) all $M_i$ of $G$ are acting on the assumption that *de facto* (almost) all $M_i$ believe the conditions (1) and (2) to be satisfied. Yet, they assume *de jure* and *de more* that these conditions are indeed satisfied by all members $M_i$ of $G$.

---

[3] The "voluntary"-condition is meant to exclude coerced cases of group action, e.g. if someone obeys the orders of a bank-robber who carries a loaded gun in his hands.

## 2. Collective Responsibility

Condition (3) is so designed that it can account for *collective responsibility*. Of course, it might be possible that a certain group is organized by strict leadership, such that one person can meaningfully hold: "Whatever happens, I will be responsible for anything that concerns our group." But this is rarely the case, for it amounts to political dictatorship or to a family patriarchy. Intuitively speaking, responsibility concerning group action rather seems to be somehow distributed over all group members.

Condition (3) assumes a distinction between *causal, legal* and *moral responsibility* (cf. Rescher 2003, ch. 11). An example may help to illustrate this point: Imagine a group of teenagers playing soccer in a courtyard, and then, of course, a window gets broken. Causally responsible for the broken window is the player who actually kicked the ball. But the whole group is morally responsible, for there were no window-breaking kick if no match were played by the group. It is a case of *collective guilt*. That is to say that one can be morally entangled with guilt although one did not do anything wrong on one's own, i.e. although one is not causally responsible. But one can nevertheless be guilty just because one is a member of a certain group within which something wrong or evil has been committed, or whose activity resulted in a guilty state of affairs. Yet, it depends on the legal regulations that are in force in the respective context and that regulate who is required to pay for a new window. It might be the case that merely the kicker and the owner of the ball were legally found guilty, such that the other members of the group are set free. In other words: Causal, legal, and moral guilt need not be co-extensive. – In what follows, I will only account for moral responsibility, since this is the most interesting case from a philosophical point of view.

Crudely speaking, responsibility means from the first-person-point of view that a person can be proud of his or her deed or feel ashamed of it, and from the third-person-point of view, it means that someone may be praised or blamed for a deed. Praise may result in some forms of appreciation that may come along with preferential treatment of the praised person, blame may result in severe sanctions. My claim is:

> *Moral responsibility* with respect to social action *SA* of group *G* is distributed among the members of *G* according to the roles they are taking charge of within context *C* and practice *P*.

That is to say: If a company (like the pharma producer *Bayer*, Germany) had sold medicine (*Lipobay*) that, as it turned out years later, may cause

fatal side-effects, the main part of the moral guilt is (i) on the side of the Director or Chief Executive Officer of the whole company who was in charge when the decision to sell the product was made, and (ii) on the side of the person who was the head of the research team at that time. But even the present Chief Executive Officer, the gate-keeper of the company's parking-lot, or the members of the cleaning-group, if they somehow identify themselves with their working for that company, may feel entangled with guilt. They are, of course, not causally or legally guilty, but collective guilt is a moral phenomenon that spreads out through the whole group. (That is why Germans of my age - I was born 1959 - even today, i.e. 2006, may still feel somehow guilty for what happened in Nazi Germany. Even though I am not causally guilty, I feel entangled with guilt, because I grew up in a social context that was shaped by people who themselves grew up and were educated in Nazi Germany: my grandparents, my parents, my teachers, politicians, journalists, judges, etc. And, of course, Germany today is, in one way or another, still historically, culturally, and legally connected to Nazi Germany – though the affects, it should be admitted, are getting weaker and weaker in the course of time.)

## 3. Decision-Making

Decision theories that originate from some economically shaped background usually rest on a highly restricted context: They assume that the objectives are clear, that the means to achieve them are known, and that we are able to exactly calculate the costs of each goal that can be achieved by its specific means at its particular costs. Taking these issues for granted, the accounts of the decision theories of the mentioned kind advise us to make our calculations and then develop lists of preferences. To be sure, these theories are not false, but human life is usually more complicated or less clear than these decision theoretic accounts presuppose. Even individuals often do not know at which goals they could or should aim, they hardly know all the possible ways and means to achieve them, and least of all they are unable to calculate all the (e.g. moral) costs.

Prima facie, one may be inclined to think that collective decision making is similarly distributed among members of a group as collective responsibility is. For one may think that those who are considered responsible for some specific deeds also make the decisions. If at all, this may be true concerning legal responsibility, since legal responsibility may be tied to those who are the legally responsible decision-makers. The co-exten-

siveness of collective responsibility and collective decision-making may also be true as regards groups that are ruled by a strong dictator or patriarch. For if a single person feels responsible for everything good or bad that concerns a group, this may be due to the fact that this very person makes all the relevant decisions. But again, such cases are rare.

To show some differences, I will now take a look on how a well structured, hierarchical group like the German Army organizes decision making. It is both a description of how decisions are indeed made, and a prescription of how decisions should be made – under standard circumstances. It will become obvious that decisions will be made at almost all levels of the hierarchy (cf. Diepenhorst 2006). (1) There are the *political decisions* made by the political government. Of course, the political government cannot freely decide whatever it wants, for it is embedded in and controlled by several other institutions according to the German constitution, and by international laws and treaties. (2) Following up the political decisions, there are the *general strategic decisions* made by the Minister of Defence together with the highest military command, often in conjunction with the NATO-commander. Already on this level, the decision-makers need to think about how the several aspects of the group acting need to be coordinated. (3) There are the *overall tactical and operational decisions* made by the general operational command. On this level, the very mission gets planed and designed, tactical orders are formulated and transmitted to the military forces that are actually engaged within the operational area. (4) There are the operational units that are actually required to carry out the orders on the operational area (e.g., in 2006, in Afghanistan, Kosovo, Lebanon, or Congo). These units are confronted with the peculiarities of the very operational area, e.g. with the specific natural environment (mountains, swamps, deserts), with the specific military situation and the current availability of weapons, with the actual political situation as well as the cultural views and values of the civilians, etc. The *actual decisions* made by the commanders of the operational units need to take all these aspects into account.

The success of a mission requires all decision-makers on all levels to reflect on the necessities and possibilities of the respective situation, and there is no strict manual, i.e. there are no rigid operational rules that can be followed blindly: The *Heeresdienstvorschrift*, i.e. the Regulation for the German Army, even declares: "Military leadership is an *art*. It is a *creative* activity that depends on character, competency, and mental powers. The doctrines of military leadership cannot be spelled out exhaustively. They

cannot be reduced to rigid formulas or strict regulations [...]" ("Truppen-führung ist eine Kunst, eine auf Charakter, Können und geistiger Kraft be-ruhende schöpferische Tätigkeit. Ihre Lehren lassen sich nicht erschöpfend darstellen. Sie verträgt weder starre Formeln noch starre Regelungen [...]"; HDV 100/100, quoted from Diepenhorst 2006; italics by M.K.). The Ger-man Army, however, has a meta-rule of thumb: The more tactical or opera-tional a task is, the more you can find your way along some given and spelled out tactical advices. Yet, the more strategic or even political a deci-sion is, the lesser you can guide your decision along some rules. In this sense, military leadership remains an art, not a rule-governed technique.

Why is that so? To begin with, I will first concentrate on our individual acting and individual decision-making. I already mentioned that decision making usually does not consist in listing the obvious options, calculating their costs, and then encountering the correct decision. As a matter of fact, we are usually lacking a bird's eye view of the context we are in. That is to say: (1) We are often *lacking relevant information* and therefore feel re-quired to make decisions on probabilities only (admittedly, there are mod-els in decision-theory that can handle this). (2) We often do not merely have to decide among a list of preferences, we often rather need to ac-knowledge that there are, no matter which preferences we have, conven-tional, legal, religious, or moral obligations, that is, there are *desire-independent reasons for action*, as Searle (2001) calls them. (3) Tragedy may evolve if there are compelling, often desire-independent *reasons de-manding logically incompatible actions* from you, that is, there might be situations where an agent is required to act, but each single option demands unbearable costs for the agent. (4) It is often not entirely clear what is in-volved in the natural as well as in the social or cultural context, that is, it is *not apriorily clear what the boundaries of our decision-realms are*; they are not simply given. (5) From this follows that *we do not know any crite-rion that warrants our awareness of the complete list of all our options*. (6) As already mentioned, it is difficult or even *impossible to estimate the ex-act costs of all the options* we have. (7) It is not the case that decisions are made at a specific point of time, and then the respective action will proceed in an unstoppable way; quite often, we make a decision (e.g. we aim at writing a dissertation), and then, in the course of time, we are assessing and *reassessing how the project's progress is* and what its costs are, sometimes by rearranging our values or developing new ones, and we may come to the rational decision to quit the whole project.

Keeping these considerations in mind, I am going to focus on social action and collective decision-making again. This time the example shall be the *management-decisions* that need to be made in order to reorganize a large company, that is, for example, reorganizing the company's administrational structure or designing new products and thereby changing the company's profile on the market (cf. Hanisch 2006). It is usually not the case that in a specific sudden moment, all participants within a company gain the insight that some things need to be changed. Such an insight rather develops gradually, i.e. it gradually evolves, for whatever reasons, on the side of a very few decision-makers, and it then also gradually evolves ›within‹ the whole company by means of more or less informal communication. Therefore, more and more of the company's decision-makers develop a bias that some things should be changed. Some few of these decision-makers, not necessarily the highest ranks, will then explicitly refer to the situation in a meeting and will make one or two proposals of how to change the company's administrational structure or its orientation on the market. Some other co-workers will then make objections, while still others will agree in general, but they will nevertheless suggest to modify the initial proposals. Because of that, a long-lasting process of communication may start, and this may cause some changes.

Like in the military forces, decision-competency in a company depends on leadership on all levels and parts of the company: One needs to make the urgency of the changes clear, one needs to convince or at least persuade more than a ›critical mass‹ within the top management, one needs to present a convincing vision and a realistic strategy to achieve it, one needs to communicate the convincing vision and the realistic strategy to many others in the company, then several people need to be officially empowered to start the changes, short-term goals need to be defined and must be achieved relatively quickly (so that critics will become silent and undecided work-fellows become motivated), new short-term goals need to be set up, long-term goals perhaps need to be readjusted, and so on. As already mentioned, one has to convince the colleagues or work-fellows on all these steps, and additionally, one needs to form coalitions that support the process. In order to form coalitions, one must be open for revising one's initial plans, and at the end of such a long-term process, the actual outcome may substantially deviate from the original vision. In retrospect, one usually cannot point to a specific single decision-maker that started the whole process because of a specific decision, and one certainly cannot point to a specific (sub-)set of work-fellows that are responsible for the outcome.

In sum, the considerations of this chapter illustrate that decision-making in a group may easily become ›*overcomplex*‹ – and that is in particular: the development of the decision-processes that result in certain (social) actions are neither predictable nor can they be planed in every detail. Similar to a physical chaos that occurs if a physical system functions in so volatile a way that a minute difference in its initial conditions can make for a vast difference for the state that ensues, the process of decision-making within larger groups usually shows a *cognitive chaos* (as Rescher 2003, 85f calls it). A cognitive chaos "occurs whenever a minute variation in input information can produce great differences in its inferential consequences" (Rescher 2003, 86), and this is especially true if the process expands in time and therefore depends on every new decision-making.

Thus, from a philosophical point of view, there is *no descriptive theory possible* that accounts for how different groups actually develop decisions. In other words, we seem to be at the limits of our cognitive capacity when we are reflecting the decision-processes of larger groups. One may rather develop a ›historical approach‹: we wait and see what happens on each single occasion and then try to reconstruct the process that was happening in retrospect. Perhaps we then may even point out who was a more and who was a less influential decision-maker in that very process (for whatever reasons: competency, charisma, rank, etc.). From this, however, also follows that there is *no normative theory possible* that tells us how groups should develop decisions. Any such suggestion would narrow down the possibility of creativity that may be developed in such a process (in perhaps hitherto unknown contexts). That is, as long as decision-making may be connected to the need of coming up with new, unknown, innovative suggestions, there should not be any strict manual of (collective) decision-making.

From an existential point of view – and this is, of course, a truism – our social life and our social acting is uncontrollable and always has its risks. There is no warrant of rationality, creativity, and success. On the other hand, decision-processes might always open the chance for seeing or creating something novel. And this is just the way how human (social) life is.

**REFERENCES**

Balzer, U. 1999 *Gemeinschaftshandeln*, Freiburg etc.: Alber.
Bratman, M. 1999 *Faces of Intention,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Breuninger, R.(Hg.) 2006 *Entscheiden*, Ulm: Humboldt-Studienzentrum.

Diepenhorst, B. 2006 "Entscheiden in den Streitkräften", in Breuninger 2006, 77-92.

Durkheim, È. 1895 *Les Règles de la Methode Sociologique,* Paris: Flammarion 1988 (nouv. edition).

Elster, J. 1989 *Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gilbert, M. 1989 *On Social Facts*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

- 1996 *Living Together*, Lanham etc.: Rowman & Littlefield.

- 2000 *Sociality and Responsibility*, Lanham etc.: Rowman & Littlefield.

Hanisch, J. 2006 "Entscheiden in der Wirtschaft", in Breuninger 2006, 107-115.

Kober, M. 2001 "Moral als eine rational gewählte Institution einer Gemeinschaft", in A. Stephan, K.P. Rippe (Hgg.), *Ethik ohne Dogmen*, Paderborn: mentis, 201-237.

- 2002 "Max Weber und die Konstituierung und Akzeptanz staatlicher politischer Institutionen", in U. Baltzer, G. Schönrich (Hgg.), *Institutionen und Regelfolgen*, Paderborn: mentis, 17-43.

- (Hg.) 2005 *Soziales Handeln. Beiträge zu einer Philosophie der 1. Person Plural,* Ulm: Humboldt-Studienzentrum.

- 2005a "Soziales Handeln und die Frage der Verantwortung", in Kober 2005, 63-84.

Goffman, E. 1959 *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, New York: Doubleday & Co.

Lewis, D. 1969 *Convention*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Luhmann, N. 1984 *Soziale Systeme. Grundriß einer allgemeinen Theorie*, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.

Mead, G. H. 1934 *Mind, Self, and Society*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Popitz, H. 1980 *Die normative Konstruktion von Gesellschaft,* Tübingen: Mohr.

Rescher, N. 2003 *Sensible Decisions*, Lanham etc.: Rowman & Littlefield.

Schiffer, S. 1972 *Meaning,* Oxford: Clarendon.

Searle, J. 1990 "Collective Intentions and Actions", in J. Searle, *Consciousness and Language,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2002, 130-41.

- 1995 *The Construction of Social Reality*, New York: Free Press.

- 2001 *Rationality in Action*, Cambridge/MA: MIT Press.

Tuomela, R., Miller, K. 1988 "We-Intentions", *Philosophical Studies,* 53, 367-89.

Tuomela, R. 1995 *The Importance of Us*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

- 2000 *Cooperation. A Philosophical Study,* Dordrecht: Reidl