

Comments on Abe Roth's "Can Shared Activity Simply Be Willed?"

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If we engage in a shared activity, then *we* do something together. That is, if an activity is genuinely shared it seems to involve a single, unified agent. On the other hand, we need more than one agent to do the sharing. So shared activity seems also to involve multiple distinct agents, but distinct agents who somehow act as one. Accounting for the individuality of the sharing agents while at the same time capturing the unity of the shared agency is what makes the topic of shared activity philosophically puzzling.

I think that we can see Roth's paper is as engaging this puzzle or task. It is puzzling how shared activity could simply be willed, because if anyone is to will shared activity it seems like it should be *us*, the unified agent. But Roth's puzzle is raised by the fact that prior to shared activity this unified agent doesn't seem to be around. There are just a bunch of individual agents. If *you* and *I* want to participate in some shared activity, how can we join ourselves in this unified agency in the first place?

In different ways the accusation that Roth levels against what one might call the naïve application of the intention thesis and the predictive strategy is that both fail to maintain adequate individuality. The naïve application has it that my intention *settles* what you will do. But Roth correctly points out that this raises a problem about your autonomy, so your individual agency gets lost here. The same sort of worry arises with the predictive strategy. Predicting what you will do in a deliberative context seems incompatible with regarding you as an independent *agent*. And if Roth's argument

works, it turns out that this is also incompatible with regarding myself as an agent. In the naïve application the problem is that one person's agency is subsumed by another's, so that though the shared agent was supposed to be us, it turns out to be me or you. With the predictive strategy the problem is purportedly even worse. The predictions that we need to make are said to eliminate the space for our individual agency altogether.

What about Roth's own suggestion that you can act directly on my intentions? One might worry that this approach still errs towards unity, subsuming the individual agency of one partner under the other. I'll briefly elaborate this worry in two ways.

First, Roth's solution appeals to the possibility that "you take [my] intention to settle the matter of what you, and therefore we, will do." But how am I to regard the possibility of your so taking it when I form my own intention? If I have to either coerce you to, or predict that you will, participate in the shared activity, wouldn't I also have to predict or coerce the sort of intention that Roth imagines here in order to will that we J? If so, it looks like we haven't escaped the problems of the approaches that he rejects.

Second, I am worried about how the authority that Roth imagines can get going in a way that respects both of our individual agencies. We need some story about how one person gets this authority over another. Clearly I can't gain it over you *just by willing that I have it*. Nor can you grant it to me *just by willing that I have it*. Roth rightly recognizes that it won't obviously work to appeal to consent here, because that might presuppose the idea of shared activity. But it looks to me like the problem that he sees with consent is more general: if I can have this authority with respect to someone it is only because our agency has already been unified. Thus, though I find the idea of acting directly on another's intention intriguing and promising, I think that it is more plausible

as an account of how shared activity can be carried out than how it can be initiated. But it's the initiation of shared activity, in particular its intentional initiation, that we are trying to understand.

Roth doesn't consider any strategies that err in the other direction, that of maintaining too much individuality for the parties at the cost of not failing to account for the unified agent of the shared activity. So I thought that I would try to be helpful by suggesting something that probably errs in that direction. My suggestion involves backing off a bit on the intention thesis, at least in its final version of. The intention thesis as originally stated holds that

If several individuals undertake a joint activity, J, then each participant must have an intention or intention-like attitude concerning J.

Later Roth further specifies the thesis, claiming that *joint activity involves each of us intending that we J*. It is this further specification that I propose to weaken. Making "our J-ing" the object of *my* intending is what raises the puzzles that Roth tries to solve, because it demands that we somehow bridge the gap between the individual agent who is intending and the joint agent whose action is intended. But if shared action can simply be willed by individual agents, it seems natural to think that this could only be by *each* of us willing it. *I* can't will it. We might understand the individual intentions as follows:

I intend that I will do my part towards the shared activity J, trusting that you will do your part, in order that we J.

This satisfies the more general statement of the intention theses: each agent has an intention-like attitude concerning J. And this, in turn, captures the participatory commitment that motivates the intention thesis. It makes sense for you to rely on me if you are confident that I have this commitment. And my intention meets precisely the

standard that Roth suggests for the mutual obligations inherent in shared activity: I am committed to doing what I can to see the activity through. The intention suggested also allows us to distinguish shared activity from other social phenomena. It involves aiming to do something together, and this sets it apart from cases like our collective, unintentionally coordinated, individual intentions setting the market price of a commodity. If this is right then the intention that I suggest meets all of Roth's desiderata, but does not require that any agent intend *that we J*.

Maybe that's not obvious. After all, the intention I suggest ends "in order that we J."¹ But I don't see that this requires me to *believe that we will J* as a result of my intention, and it's this belief that causes trouble for the simpler intention *that we J*. What we need here is a distinction between the action that I intend, which I must take myself to be able to settle, and my end in so intending, the achievement of which I can admit is not entirely in my power. I can intend to campaign hard in order to win the presidency, even though I am not at all sure that I will be successful in attaining this end.

In both this case and the case of shared activity, if I thought that my end were definitely unattainable the intention under consideration probably wouldn't make sense. This is in part why *trust* seems to me to be the right attitude with respect to your intention to do your part. Trusting someone to φ strikes me as different from, though related to, believing that she will φ . I think that much like acting towards an end, trusting requires that one *not* believe that she will *not* φ . So if can sensibly trust you to φ then I can sensibly do my part towards our φ -ing in order that we φ . Trusting also seems immune to the worry about disrespect for one's partner's agency that dogs the predictive attitude. It

¹ I'm not committed to the formulation "in order that." Other possibilities might be "in the hope that," "with the aim that," or "for the end that."

is interesting to consider whether the attitude of trust that I suggest is vulnerable to Roth's argument that its presuppositions eliminates my own agency. I think that it is not, first because I do not need to believe that you have any particular intention, and second since the intention that I trust you to have is just one to do your part, trusting that I will do mine. The sense of your intention would not then depend on it being true that I will do my part. Your intention does not *presuppose*, but rather *trusts* that I will do my part.

I am surprised by the absence of talk of trust in Roth's paper, as it strikes me as a helpful concept in thinking about shared activity. Of course trust itself is a philosophically puzzling attitude, and we can't solve the philosophical problems about shared activity just by invoking the word "trust." If we want to rely on this notion we will need to do quite a bit more work than I have here to spell out what an attitude of trust amounts to. But it nevertheless looks to me like the right direction.