INTERPERSONAL PRACTICAL REASONING

Myles BRAND
The Ohio State University

During the past several decades, analytic philosophers have devoted a great deal of effort to clarifying the nature of individual human action, but surprisingly little attention has been paid to social action. This is surprising in part because a prime motivation for studying human action is to shed light on moral issues and such issues arise in social situations. I do not want to mislead: some philosophers have recently attended to social action, with Wilfrid Sellars and Raimo Tuomela prominent among them. But generally speaking, the situation needs to be rectified; significant attention needs to be focused on social action.

A social action, intuitively, is an action performed by an agent in the context of actions performed by other agents while in the pursuit of common goals or in following common rules, practices, or conventions. One example is four men carrying a heavy piano. Another is when a particular player executes a maneuver during a game of American football; and another is when the first violin of the orchestra plays a certain passage within the context of a Mozart symphony. What is common to examples of this type is that individual agents contribute through their actions to the overall goals of the group. Each of them could have done what he did — lift a piano corner, run with the ball, play a complex passage — even if the others had not done their part. Another type of social action is one that could not be performed unless everyone does his or her part. For example, no one person can contribute to the actions of getting married or signing a contract unless the others involved also contribute. But in each and every case, an agent carries out his actions as a part of a larger activity involving more than one person.

In this paper I shall sketch the basis for a theory of social action. I approach the topic by discussing the way in which we reason about deliberate, full-fledged social actions. In the first section, I discuss reasoning about individual action and in the second extend this perspective to social action. Reasoning about what to do is a mental activity and in the final part of the paper, I shall briefly discuss some of this mental activity salient to social action.

1. Intrapersonal Practical Reasoning

Since Aristotle, it has been common to represent reasoning about action by means of the practical syllogism. The practical syllogism contains a major premise stating what the agent needs or wants and one or more minor premises stating the plan by which the agent expects to satisfy this need or want. These minor premises detail the results of deliberation by the agent. To mimic Aristotle (*De Motu* 70 (a18-22)), suppose I need a coat. Given that I am capable of making my own clothing, I must obtain the materials for a coat. In order to obtain these materials, I must go to the cloth shop. So, I proceed to the shop.

Despite its long history, the practical syllogism is not well understood. What, for instance, is the conclusion of the practical syllogism? Most often Aristotle says that it is an action (or more exactly, a report of an action). However, since the practical syllogism details the result of deliberation, shouldn’t the conclusion be a report of an *intention to act*? The confusion arises because the practical syllogism can be elicited for two quite distinct purposes. First, it might be taken as a schema for explaining action. Why did he go to the shop? The explanation consists in pointing out a need or want of the agent and the steps necessary to satisfy this need or want. The explanation is exhibited by an argument leading from premises, often with a suppressed universal premise, to a report of the action. Or, second, the practical syllogism might be taken as a schema for describing the process leading to an action. In this case, the practical syllogism is a list of statements reporting the mental processes leading up to the agent’s action. Understood in this way, the conclusion of a practical syllogism is properly a report of the agent’s intention to act. The major premise reports the agent’s goal, the minor premises record his plan to satisfy this goal, and the conclusion specifies his intention to satisfy the goal by following the plan. This second interpretation