

Margaret Gilbert. *Joint Commitment: How We Make the Social World.* Oxford University Press 2013. 464 pp. \$85.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780199970148); \$39.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780190251956).

What does my promise to take my daughter to the cinema this weekend have in common with the political unity of the EU, or with the value some societies attach to freedom of speech? Not much, it seems, apart from the fact that they all involve more than one person, and so qualify as ‘social phenomena’ in some suitably broad sense of ‘social’. But according to Margaret Gilbert’s new collection of essays, they are also all ‘joint commitment phenomena’. That is, they cannot be adequately explained or understood without reference to the people involved being parties to a joint commitment.

To be party to a joint commitment, according to Gilbert, is to be in a distinctive normative situation, involving various directed obligations and entitlements. For example, when Beth and Sue are jointly committed to taking a walk together, then, all else being equal, they ought to take a walk together. This means that each owes it to the other to play her part in seeing to it that they walk together, and each has the standing to rebuke the other for failing to fulfil that duty. Importantly, these normative statuses derive only from the commitment itself, and not from some exogenous moral principle, such as the principle that we should stick to our agreements, or keep our promises, or something similar. Equally important, a joint commitment is not a ‘concatenation of personal commitments’ (7), nor is it an exchange of promises or an agreement. (In fact Gilbert maintains that both promises and agreements should themselves be explained in terms of joint commitment, rather than the other way round.) Joint commitment is thus a profoundly ‘non-singularist’ concept—it is a commitment of and by the various parties considered as a collective or ‘plural subject’.

As befits a book whose central theme is collectivity, the eighteen essays make a striking joint impression. Taken together they amount to a sustained, wide-ranging and largely compelling defence of ‘the importance of *joint commitment* in the lives of human beings’ (ix). Each essay contributes to this defence via some variation of a basic three-step strategy. First, some central ‘social phenomenon’ is identified, and it is observed that the participants involved appear, on account of their involvement, to owe it to one another to act in designated ways, and have the standing to make demands or issue rebukes when the other fails to comply. Second, it is argued that the predominant ‘singularist’ approach to understanding this phenomenon—the approach that recognizes only interacting individuals, with their personal states of belief, intention and the like—is unable to account for this peculiar normative situation. Then, finally, it is shown that the situation can be adequately explained by seeing the participants involved as parties to a joint commitment, since joint commitment is a source of such directed duties and standings.

After a helpful, orienting Introduction, the phenomena which receive this treatment include: joint action (Chapters 1, 2 and 4), collective responsibility (Chapter 3), shared intention (Chapter 5), collective belief (Chapters 6 and 7), shared values (Chapter 8), social convention (Chapter 9), collective guilt (Chapter 10), marital love (Chapter 11), promises (Chapters 12 and 13), mutual recognition (Chapter 14), political unity (Chapter 15), patriotism (Chapter 16), political obligation (Chapter 17), and practical commands (Chapter 18). This is, by anyone’s standards, a dizzying array of topics, and Gilbert’s argumentation is fine-grained and exceedingly careful throughout. For this reason I will not attempt a comprehensive overview but will instead raise two quite general worries about Gilbert’s joint commitment project as it is developed over several chapters in the

book. The first relates to the way she construes the *content* of joint commitments, while the second relates to *applicability* of the concept of joint commitment to a particular subclass of social phenomena.

Although she herself eschews the term, a good deal of Gilbert's book (primarily Chapters 5-10) relates to what philosophers now call 'collective intentionality'. Here two analyses loom particularly large:

[Shared intention] 'Members of some population P share an intention to do A if and only if they are jointly committed to intend as a body to do A' (114)

[Collective belief] 'The members of a population, P, collectively believe that p if and only if they are jointly committed to believe that p as a body' (137)

As these suggest, the content of a Gilbertian joint commitment is always *doing something as a body*, where 'doing' is construed broadly enough to include psychological states like believing and intending. This ensures that there will be a mismatch between the content of the attitude being analyzed and the content of the joint commitment underpinning it. The shared intention *to do A* is seen as constituted by the joint commitment *to intend as a body to do A*; the collective belief *that p* by the joint commitment *to believe that p as a body*. But this, I think, generates a 'wrong kind of reasons' problem for Gilbert's approach to collective intentionality, leading to concerns about the genuineness of the various collective attitudes she seeks to explain.

The problem, very briefly, is that many of the reasons which would be of the right kind for *jointly committing to believing that p as a single body* or *jointly committing to intending as a body to do A* could be of the wrong kind for *believing that p* or *intending to do A*. In the case of collective belief, there may be considerations that bear on the question of whether believing that p as a body would be good for us to do, regardless of whether p is true. For example, our believing that p as a body might be the friendliest option, or might portray us in the most favourable light. To find any such consideration decisive would be reason enough to form the joint commitment to believe that p as a body, but it would not be enough to form the (collective) belief that p. For, inasmuch as the collective belief that p is a genuine belief at all (something which many of Gilbert's critics have questioned), it is the sort of thing that should only be formed by settling the question of whether p is true.

The same applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to shared intentions. There will often be considerations that speak in favour of us intending as a body to do A, but do not speak in favour of our A-ing. For example, our intending as a body to do A, when it becomes known to others, might deter certain unwelcome behavior, or might be good for our psychological wellbeing. However, in being moved by such reasons—and in this way coming to form the joint commitment to intend as a body to do A—we have surely not yet formed the intention itself, for we have not yet broached the question of whether A is to be done. But then it is unclear how the joint commitment to intend as a body could possibly constitute a shared intention, just as it is unclear how a joint commitment to believe as a body could constitute a collective belief.

After the chapters concerning these and other facets of collective intentionality, Gilbert's joint commitment approach is brought to bear on 'small-scale' social phenomena such as promises, mutual recognition, and commands. These phenomena paradigmatically involve just two

participants, but aside from effecting a change in the preferred formulation of her analyses—from ‘members of a population P...’ to ‘persons A and B...’—Gilbert seems to attach little importance to this fact. In each case it is still what the parties are jointly committed to which explains the peculiar normative situation in which they find themselves.

The results are somewhat jarring. A promise, for instance, is not seen by Gilbert as an undertaking or commitment of one person *toward* another, but rather as a sort of joint undertaking—a joint commitment ‘to the decision that one of them (‘the promisor’) is to perform one or more specified actions’ (318). Commands, too, are given an awkward gloss: the authority of a genuine command derives from the commander and commandee jointly committing to endorsing a plan, according to which the commandee should do what the commander says (within certain limits). And perhaps most bewildering of all, mutual recognition is seen not as A recognizing B and B recognizing A, but as A and B recognizing something together: ‘where there is mutual recognition...the parties will be jointly committed to recognize as a body their co-presence’ (334).

In each of these analyses it seems that something crucial, related to the characteristic dyadic structure of the phenomena in question, gets lost, or overlooked, when joint commitment comes in as analysis. In the case of promises and commands there is the role of explicit, second-personal address. (Why, if joint commitment to some decision or plan is the key to these phenomena, should I not be bound by unvoiced promises or commands, or those which are not addressed to me?) In the case of mutual recognition there is the dimension of reciprocity—part of what I recognize, when I recognize you, is you recognizing me. To put the concern more generally, we could say that all these phenomena have an essentially ‘I-thou’ or ‘second-personal’ character, which cannot be captured in terms of jointness or collectivity.

That being said, it is worth emphasizing that many other social phenomena are plausibly understood through the concept of joint commitment. The first few chapters of the book, concerning joint action, and the last few, related to aspects of public and political life, are in my view the most successful of the lot. Here we find discussion of things like two people walking together, political unity, and the notion of a patriotic act, where the fact that the content of joint commitment is construed in action-centred terms is largely unobjectionable. These phenomena also seem to exhibit the aspect of collectivity (‘I-we’ sociality) for which the joint commitment approach is best suited.

It may be that concerns such as the two I have raised here, about the content and scope of joint commitment, are inevitable accompaniments to any project as single-minded and ambitious as Gilbert’s. Elsewhere she has referred to joint commitment as ‘the social atom’, and this collection of essays can be seen as an attempt to vindicate that metaphor, and test its limits. The outcome, I think, is a partial success. While joint commitment is surely an important, central concept for understanding the social world, it is also quite far from the whole story.

Leo Townsend, University of Oslo