1. Three questions

In my 2014 book I develop a plan-theoretic model of shared intentions of a group, for example the shared intention of a group to paint the house together, or to rob a bank together, or together to help curb an outbreak of a disease. (Bratman 2014) The model is broadly individualistic in the sense that it sees the proper functioning of a certain structure of the plan-like attitudes of the participants -- attitudes with certain contents, certain inter-relations, and in a certain context -- as sufficient for forms of social functioning characteristic of shared intention. In the cases on which this model focuses, what makes it true that the group intends, say, to rob the bank is that there is an appropriate inter-connected structure of relevant plan-like states of each of the participants. In such cases, if we want to consider the targets of judgments of moral responsibility for, say, robbing the bank, it can seem natural to suppose that those targets are simply the individual participants, though what they are each responsible for might well be affected by the facts underlying the sharing. (One can, for example, be responsible for participating in a conspiracy.) In such cases it can seem natural to understand a judgment that the group is morally responsible for the bank robbery as a summation of judgments about the responsibility of each of the individual participants. After all, insofar as the group intends to rob the bank, what is true is just that each of the participants has relevant intentions and these intentions are, in the context, inter-connected in relevant ways.
Matters would seem potentially different, however, if there were cases in which the group has intentions that are not themselves shared intentions. If the group intends, say, to curb the outbreak of the disease, and if this is not itself a shared intention of the group, then perhaps there is room for the idea that the group itself is appropriately subject to relevant moral praise (or, in a different case, blame), and in that sense is appropriately held morally responsible for the cited activity.

In saying this I am taking for granted, without argument, the common idea that in central cases S's moral responsibility for X is grounded, at least in part, in the role of associated intentions of S concerning X, in S's "quality of will". (Strawson 2003) A second idea that I will take for granted without argument, and that will figure in my discussion below, is that S’s intentions provide particularly significant support for such attributions of responsibility when the relevant guidance by those intentions constitutes S’s governing her own actions, when the relevant guidance constitutes S’s self-governance.

This leads me to the three questions I aim to discuss in this essay. First, does the plan-theoretic approach to shared intention provide resources for modeling robust group intentions that are not themselves shared intentions? Second, if there are such intentions of a group will their normal functioning at least prima facie help constitute the group’s relevant self-governance? Third, what is the implication of our answers to these questions for the very idea of group responsibility?

Concerning my first question, I do not say that a negative answer would establish that there are no group intentions that are not shared intentions. Perhaps there are other routes to a coherent model of such group intentions. Perhaps we can look directly
at the overall functional organization of a group, an overall functional organization at the
group level that may well itself be the result of shared intentional activities of members
of that group. And perhaps when we look directly at that group-level functional
organization we can sometimes justifiably ascribe intentions to that group as a part of
an overall theory of the group’s diachronic functioning that has significant explanatory
power.¹ We thereby try to see group intentions as functional (or functionally specified)
states within a group-level functioning system. And to do that we need not identify
these group intentions with corresponding shared intentions among members.

In contrast, the strategy of my 2014 book was to try explicitly to construct
relevant forms of sociality and group functioning out of the materials of inter-connected
individual planning agency. We see to what extent we can build characteristic forms of
group functioning out of characteristic forms of individual functioning, given distinctive
aspects of that individualistic functioning. And my first question in this essay is
whether, in articulating those materials of inter-connected individual planning agency,
we thereby have the resources to construct the infra-structure of robust group intentions
that are not shared intentions. My answer will be that we do, but that in acknowledging
these group intentions we need to give up the idea that such intentions must be
embedded in a robust holistic structure of attitudes of that very group.² It will sometimes

¹ This is, broadly speaking, the approach of (List and Pettit 2011). As they say, they
draw on “a broadly functionalist theory of agency”.(75) (Though in this book List and
Pettit focus primarily on beliefs and desires of a group, rather than intentions.) And see
also (Pettit 2003).
² List and Pettit write: “Let a collection of individuals form and act on a single, robustly
rational body of attitudes… and it will be an agent. …[I]t is possible for collections of
individuals to coordinate their individual contributions so as to achieve this level of
functioning. Hence [on the assumption that this possibility is realized] group agents
exist.” (List and Pettit 2011, 75) I take it that the “single, robustly rational body of
suffice, instead, that the intentions of a group are embedded in a larger structure of attitudes that primarily involves attitudes of the individual participants. And such group intentions can indeed play a central role in the self-governance of the group.

These results in hand I will turn briefly at the end to their bearing on the very idea of group responsibility.

2. The planning theory of shared intentionality

In the background of my discussion will be the plan-theoretic model of shared intention and shared intentional action that I develop in my 2014 book. So let me briefly sketch aspects of that model. We begin with the thought that an important feature of individual human agency is that it normally involves complex forms of plan-infused cross-temporal organization. Given limits in our knowledge and our mental resources, these plans will typically be partial, and will need to be filled in as time goes by. These forms of practical thinking will be guided by an (implicit) acceptance of norms of plan rationality – norms of consistency, agglomerativity, means-end coherence, and stability. In this sense there is a distinctive rational dynamics of planning agency. And intentions are states in this planning system.

The next step is to describe inter-related planning structures of participating individuals such that the rational functioning of those planning structures – functioning in accordance with the rational dynamics of individual planning agency -- would constitute the rational, social functioning that is characteristic of shared intentional activity. This would be to show that our planning capacities are a common core that lies behind both attitudes” to which they appeal is a body of attitudes of the group, and so that they would suppose that group intentions would be embedded in a robust holistic structure of attitudes of that very group.
our capacity for cross-temporal organization in individual intentional agency and our
capacity for social organization in our shared intentional activities. (This is a version of a
familiar thought that there is a significant parallel between the temporal structure of an
individual's life and aspects of inter-personal sociality.) We aim in this way to articulate
sufficient conditions for robust forms of shared intentionality in terms of these inter-
related, individualistic planning structures; but we leave open the question whether
these conditions are strictly necessary for shared intentionality. This is the strategy of
sufficiency. And it supports one important aspect of the general thesis of the fecundity
of planning agency, the thesis that our capacity for planning agency lies at the bottom of
a range of basic practical capacities – in this case, our capacity for shared intentional
activity.

In developing this model we suppose that, at least normally, shared intentional
activity is explained by a corresponding shared intention so to act. We then seek to
describe inter-connected structures of individual planning agency whose functioning in
accordance with the rational dynamics of individual planning agency would ensure the
social-psychological functioning that is characteristic of shared intention. What social-
psychological functioning? Here I draw on analogies with the roles of individual
intentions in organizing individual thought and action. The characteristic social-
psychological functioning of a shared intention to $X$ will involve inter-personal
coordination of action and planning in pursuit of $X$ and in ways that accommodate the
rational agency of each of the participants. It will also involve framing shared
deliberation or bargaining concerning how the group is to $X$. And in the background will
be analogous social norms – norms of social agglomeration and consistency, social
means-end coherence and social stability -- whose violation would normally undermine these social roles of shared intention.

My proposal is to articulate this structure by appeal, in part, to conditions along the lines of:

1. Each intends that we $X$.
2. Each intends that we $X$ by way of each of our intentions that we $X$ (in this sense these intentions inter-lock with each other) and by way of $X$-tracking mutual responsiveness in sub-intention and action, and so by way of sub-plans of each that mesh with each other. (Plans mesh when they are co-realizable. Plans may mesh even though they do not match.)
3. Each believes correctly that there is persistence interdependence between the intentions in 1.
4. All this is out in the open.

Putting aside some details, what I argue in my 2014 book is that when such a public structure of intentions of each functions in accordance with the rational dynamics of individual planning agency, it thereby realizes the roles characteristic of shared intention in part by way of conformity to the associated social rationality norms. Further, when this structure of intentions of each leads to the joint activity by way of relevant mutual responsiveness there is shared intentional activity. We thereby highlight conceptual, metaphysical and normative continuities with individual planning agency, while also providing the resources to articulate central ways in which shared intentionality goes beyond simple individual planning agency.
A key is the appeal to the intention of each in favor of X by way of the other’s intention, mutual responsiveness, and meshing sub-plans. It is not just that each intends his part in X and merely expects the other to play her part. So the rational pressure on each to make her plans coherent and consistent ensures rational pressure on each to support the success of the joint activity and the meshing role of the other in that activity. Each is thereby under rational pressure to coordinate with the other – perhaps by way of helping actions – and to avoid ways of acting that are incompatible with the joint activity. These rational pressures on each, pressures grounded in the rational dynamics of individual planning agency, induce, given these distinctive contents and inter-relations, pressures in the direction of social coherence and consistency and associated social coordination and effectiveness.

There can be such shared intentions even though each participates for different reasons. Further, since each intends the joint activity in part by way of the relevant intention of the other, and by way of mutual responsiveness and so meshing sub-plans, each is under rational pressure to seek to ensure that the sub-plans of each, agglomerated together, both are adequate to the shared task and do indeed mesh interpersonally. So, in the absence so far of adequate, meshing sub-plans, a shared intention will tend to structure bargaining or shared deliberation (or the like) in the pursuit of such mesh.

This gives us a plan-theoretic model of those intentions of a group that are shared intentions. A group intends, say, to rob the bank, when its members share an intention to rob the bank together. And the plan-theoretic model of such a shared
intention consists of the cited structure of inter-related intentions of the participants, in
an appropriate context.

3. Shared policies of weights

The next step is to see how this plan-theoretic model can be extended to an
important kind of shared policy, namely a shared policy to give certain weights to certain
considerations within the group’s shared deliberation.

Shared deliberation of the sort of interest here is a shared intentional activity in
which the participants bring to bear common standards in their effort to settle questions
about how to proceed within a shared intentional activity in which they are engaged. In
a central case this will be a matter of bringing to bear shared commitments to weights in
the shared deliberation. We might, for example, share a commitment within our shared
painting of the house to our giving substantial weight to environmental concerns as we
deliberate about which paints to use, and how to dispose of various materials. Or
perhaps an academic department has a shared commitment to its giving weight to
collegiality, or to issues of sub-field, in its shared deliberations about faculty
appointments.

I argue in my 2014 book that while such shared commitments to weights will
normally be grounded to some extent in relevant evaluative judgments of the individual
participants, sameness of value judgment, even in a context of common knowledge, is
neither sufficient nor necessary for a corresponding shared commitment to weights in
shared deliberation. And my proposal is that our shared commitments to weights are
better modeled as shared intentions that favor our giving certain weights to certain
considerations in relevant shared deliberation. Since such shared intentions will
normally have a characteristic generality, they will be shared policies of weights – where policies are intentions with suitably general contents. We then extend the plan-theoretic constructivist architecture of shared intention to these shared commitments to weights: a shared commitment to give weight to R is a shared policy to give weight to R in relevant shared deliberation; and this shared policy consists in public, interlocking, and interdependent general intentions, on the part of each, in favor of our giving weight to R in relevant shared deliberation.³

Shared policies of weights are policies about how the members of the group are to think together in their share deliberation. The next step is to consider other kinds of shared policies concerning how those members are to think together.

4. Shared policies of procedure

Begin by noting that shared deliberation can itself be embedded in yet a further structure of shared policies of procedure. A group might have a shared policy to turn to shared deliberation – in contrast, say, with various forms of bargaining -- in sorting out issues concerning how it is to carry out a shared project. And such a shared procedural policy might help explain why the group is now engaging in such shared deliberation.

Once we see this we can go on to note that such shared policies of procedure can instead favor other group decision procedures.⁴ A shared policy might favor, say, a

³ For a more extensive discussion of these matters see (Bratman 2014, chap. 7). In (Bratman 2007d) I classify such shared policies of weights as a kind of shared valuing
⁴ A point highlighted by Thomas Hurka in conversation. Appeal to such shared procedural policies is in the spirit of Peter French’s work on “Corporate Internal Decision Structures.” See (French 1984) esp. chaps. 3-4. Related ideas can also be found in (Tuomela, 1995), esp. 176-180; (Pettit 2003); (List and Pettit, 2011) esp. chap. 3; (Hindriks, 2008); (Hindriks, 2014); and (Ludwig, 2014).
majority vote procedure. Or it might favor a consensus procedure characteristic of a Quaker meeting. And so on.

One kind of procedure that might be embraced within a shared policy is a procedure that authorizes a certain sub-group to settle certain issues for the group in its execution of certain shared activities. (Note, though, that such a policy of authorization need not insure legitimate authority.) A Philosophy department might have a shared policy of procedure for graduate admissions, one that authorizes a sub-committee to make the decision. And once such procedural policies of authorization are available they can iterate: a sub-group that is authorized by the larger group may have its own policies of authorization of a sub-sub-group, or even just a different group, to make certain decisions that it has been authorized to make.

We can extend our plan-theoretic construction to such shared policies of procedure, including shared procedural policies of authorization. As a first approximation, such a shared procedural policy can be modeled as a public, interlocking and interdependent structure of relevant policies of each that favor the operation of a given procedure (e.g., some voting procedure), where that includes follow-through with the output of that procedure.

We can distinguish two potential elements in such follow-through. Follow-through may involve further shared intentional activity of the group, shared intentional activity that is guided by the outcome of the procedure. This will involve relevant interlocking, mutual responsiveness and intended mesh across the group. In contrast, follow-through may be distributed among the activities of certain individuals or sub-groups. Such distributed follow-through need not involve interlocking, mutual
responsiveness and intended mesh across the overall group, and so need not involve
share intentional activity of the overall group itself.

A shared policy of procedure will normally favor follow-through that to some extent involves further shared activities of the group, shared activities that are guided by the outcome of that procedure. However, the shared policy may well also favor follow-through that consists in activities distributed across individuals and/or sub-groups. I will return to this difference below.

5. Group self-governance

So the plan-theoretic model can include shared policies of weights and of procedures, including shared policies of authorization. Intended follow-through with the outcomes of procedures favored by such shared policies may be to some extent a matter of further shared activities of the group itself, and to some extent a matter of distributed activities of individuals or sub-groups. Throughout we extend the plan-theoretic architecture and see these shared policies of weights and/or procedures as structures of relevant, inter-connected policies of each of the participants. Such shared policies of weights and/or procedures are compatible with divergence in the underlying evaluative judgments of the participants and with differences in the reasons for which each participates. Nevertheless, given their central role in the functioning of the group, it is plausible to see such shared policies as speaking for the group on relevant matters. In this way we extend to the group an idea that is important in our understanding of individual agency, namely: that certain attitudes are not merely wiggles in the agent’s psychic stew but speak for the agent in the sense that their guidance is, prima facie, the
agent’s self-governance. And the proposal is that such shared policies of weights and/or procedures will normally be such that when they guide relevant thought and action the group is, in that domain, governing itself.

If we share a policy in favor of weights or a procedure and you knowingly violate that policy, then you are in violation of norms of consistency and coherence on your own intentions and plans. I can appeal to that in criticizing you for your violation. I may also be able to criticize your violation as tending to undermine our group self-governance. Insofar as you yourself value group self-governance, this criticism will engage your own concerns. In this way the connection with group self-governance can help stabilize such policies. And this stability of such policies contributes to their claim to speak for the group. So the contribution of such policies to the group’s self-governance is self-reinforcing in the sense that this contribution supports their stability and that stability in turn supports their status as attitudes whose guidance is, prima facie, the group’s self-governance. Or at least this is true for groups whose participants value the group’s self-governance.

So the planning model provides for structures of shared policies of weights and procedures whose guidance is, prima facie, the group’s relevant self-governance and whose functioning is thereby potentially stabilized in a way that supports their role in the group’s self-governance. I now want to argue that such shared policies of procedure can ground group intentions that are not shared intentions.

---

5 This idea is rooted in work of Harry Frankfurt. See his reflections on "where (if anywhere) the person himself stands" in (Frankfurt, 1988) at 166. For my development of this idea see (Bratman, 2007b) and (Bratman 2007c).
6 And this supports the idea that participation in such shared policies ensures membership in the group.
6. Procedure-based intentions of a group

Suppose a group is engaged in a shared intentional activity of providing medical aid in crises around the world. In the face of many claims on its resources it has a shared policy that specifies procedures for deciding whether to provide aide in a specific case. Let’s say that this policy authorizes a sub-group to make a decision by way of its own shared deliberation, followed (if need be) by a majority vote. Suppose that in a particular case this procedure issues, by way of a split vote on the part of the authorized sub-group, in a decision to provide aide in a certain context, C. Given that this is the output of procedures favored by policies that are shared by the participants, this output will be poised to guide relevant follow-through in the sense that given relevant knowledge and rationality on the part of the participants, the output would guide such follow-through. This follow-through may simply involve distributed activities of individuals or sub-groups, distributed activities carried out in accordance with the outcome of the procedure. But this follow-through may also involve further shared intentional activities of the group itself, shared intentional activities that are guided by the output of the procedure. In both cases the outcome of the procedure guides thought and action (given knowledge and rationality), but in the second case it guides, in particular, shared thought and action of the group itself.

And now my proposal is that when the output of such a procedure is poised to guide (inter alia) further shared intentional activities of that very group, the fact that the procedure has issued in that output ensures that the group itself intends to act in accordance with that output. In our present case, it is likely that the outcome of the procedure is poised to guide, for example, further shared deliberations of the group
concerning how to coordinate this aide with other aide the group plans to provide (though breakdowns in the guidance remain possible). If this is true then the group itself intends to provide the aide in context C: this is a procedure-based group intention.

Will this procedure-based group intention be a shared intention? Well, there may be members of the group who judge, at least prior to the outcome of the procedure, that it would be better for the group not to do this. But that does not show that the group’s intention to provide aide in C is not a shared intention: it is important that a group can share an intention despite such differences in evaluative judgment. What stands in the way of identifying this group intention with a shared intention lies not in such evaluative disagreement but, rather, in the possibility of limited knowledge or rationality. Some members might simply be unaware of the outcome of the procedure. (This will be increasingly common as the group grows in size and complexity.) Given this ignorance, though the group intends to provide aide in C there may not be a shared intention to provide aide in C. Again, suppose some members are aware of the outcome but -- because they strongly hold the view that it is a mistake -- resist intending that the group provide aide in C even though they continue to participate in the general shared policies of procedure. This would be a breakdown on their part in plan rationality; but such breakdowns are all too possible. And given such a breakdown there will not in fact be a shared intention that corresponds with the group intention to provide aide.

So if there is relevant ignorance, or relevant breakdown in individual plan rationality, there may not be a shared intention to provide aide in C. But such ignorance or rational breakdown may not stand in the way of its being true that the group intends to provide aide in C. This is because the outcome of the procedure establishes an
intention of the group so long as the outcome would guide shared thought and action under conditions of relevant knowledge and plan-theoretic rationality. So the plan-theoretic architecture can make room, in this way, for procedure-based group intentions that are not shared intentions.

Granted, so long as there is no relevant ignorance or rational breakdown, the procedure-based group intention will correspond to a shared intention. Nevertheless, the group intention will not always correspond to an actual shared intention. In this sense procedure-based group intention and shared intention are separable, even though the infrastructure of procedure-based group intention systematically involves shared intention. The underlying structures and processes that make it true that there is the procedure-based group intention in favor of the procedural outcome need not ensure a corresponding shared intention (though they will involve other shared intentions).

Suppose that, in this procedure-based way, the group intends to provide aide in C. What makes it true that the group so intends is a complex structure of shared intentions and policies, actual social procedures and their output, and resulting tendencies toward relevant guidance of shared intentional activities, and associated forms of shared thinking, of the group in the direction of providing aide in C. Appeal to this plan-theoretic structure remains in the spirit of the general thesis of the fecundity of planning agency. But this structure does not itself ensure a corresponding shared intention to provide aide in C.

7. Group intentions and dispersed beliefs and plans

---

7 A point emphasized in conversation by Olle Blomberg, Brian Epstein, and Arto Laitinen.
But now we have a problem. The idea that the group itself intends to provide aide is in tension with a common idea about the holism of the mental. This is the idea that a mental attitude of S -- for example, an intention of S -- must be embedded in a substantial, holistically coherent web of related attitudes of S. (Davidson, 2001) (Rovane, 1998). In particular, when we ascribe to S an intention to X we are committed to seeing that intention as part of a holistic web of attitudes of S, attitudes that include, for example, beliefs about the nature of X and how it might be done, intentions not to interfere with X and to take needed steps toward X, beliefs about the nature of such needed steps, beliefs needed to have the cited beliefs, other pro-attitudes toward X and/or its expected upshots, and so on. But while there may be special cases in which there are sufficiently rich plan-theoretic structures to provide the infrastructure of such a robust holistic web of attitudes of the group, this does not seem to be ensured by the local, procedure-based infrastructure of the group intention that we have described.

But if the group does not have specific beliefs about how to execute its intention to provide aide, and plans about how to do that, how will that intention be effective? The answer is that the efficacy of this procedure-based group intention can involve the operation of a range of related beliefs and plans dispersed among the individual participants. For example, certain participants may know how to prepare and distribute a needed vaccine and have specific plans for doing this in their particular circumstances. We need not suppose that the group itself has this knowledge or this specific plan for preparing and distributing the vaccine (though it may). While we have seen reason to attribute to the group itself the procedure-based intention to provide the aide, we can allow the operation of that intention to draw on relevant beliefs and plans.
dispersed amongst relevant participants, beliefs and plans that are responsive to their specific circumstances. We need not suppose that this attitudinal background must come entirely – or even primarily -- from attitudes of the group.

Granted, the specific plans of certain participants for preparing and distributing the vaccine are downstream outcomes of the procedures that are supported by relevant shared policies. And I have claimed that the basic outcome of those procedures – an outcome in favor of providing the aide – may be an element in an intention of the group to provide the aide. So why not say that these specific plans are, as well, an element in a procedure-based intention of the group to prepare and distribute the vaccine in this specific way? The answer is that to generate a procedure-based intention of the group an outcome of a procedure needs to be poised to guide shared intentional action on the part of that group. But the cited specific plans for preparing and distributing the vaccine are only poised to guide the thought and action of a sub-set of individuals.

I conclude that the functioning of procedure-based group intentions can draw substantially from a web of dispersed beliefs and plans of individuals or sub-groups that need not be elements in corresponding intentions of that overall group.

This is an extension of an idea implicit in our plan-theoretic treatment of shared intention. Suppose that you and I share an intention to paint the house together. For this shared intention to be effective each will need to have relevant sub-plans, and those sub-plans will need together sufficiently to specify preliminary steps, means, and the like so that in following through with those sub-plans we do indeed paint the house.

——–

8 This is broadly in the spirit of F.A. Hayek’s emphasis on “knowledge of the particular circumstances of time and place,” knowledge “that is dispersed among many people”. See (Hayek 1945) at 521 and 530. For the use of this idea in understanding the distinctive strengths of ancient Athenian democracy, see (Ober, 2008).
together. But the theory does not insist that all the sub-intentions associated with these sub-plans must be elements in corresponding shared intentions. In intending that our relevant sub-plans mesh we need not intend or expect that our relevant sub-plans match. And aspects of my sub-plans may not themselves be out in the open, or may not involve intentions of mine that interlock with corresponding intentions of yours. For example, my sub-plan for shopping for the paint at Ace Hardware need not be an element in a shared intention in favor of shopping at Ace Hardware. It will many times suffice that you know that some sub-plan or other of mine will solve the problem of how we are to get the paint. You do not need to know what that sub-plan is, nor do you need yourself to have an intention that matches and interlocks with my intention concerning Ace Hardware.

The further web of intentions that supports the efficacy of our shared intention need not be solely a matter of other shared intentions; it can, and normally will, involve as well relevant sub-intentions dispersed among the participants, sub-intentions that are not themselves elements in corresponding shared intentions. And the situation with a procedure-based intention of a group is analogous in the sense that the further web of intentions that supports the efficacy of that intention of the group need not be solely a matter of other intentions of the group; it can, and typically will, involve relevant, distributed intentions of the participants, intentions that themselves need not be elements in corresponding intentions of the group. There will be important rational pressure for all these various intentions to mesh within a consistent and effective overall web; but they can mesh without themselves being elements in corresponding intentions of the group.
I conclude that we should not insist that for the group to intend to provide the aide its intention must be embedded in a substantial, holistic web of attitudes of the group. It may suffice that it is embedded in a social context in which relevant attitudes of the participants do a lot of the work.

8. Between shared intention and a robust holism

This may seem to be an unstable result. After all, it seems that we would not allow for an individual to intend X in the absence of a robust web of relevant attitudes of that individual. Our plan-theoretic construction of procedure-based group intentions is in tension with a plausible view about the holism of the mental. What to say?

In “How to Share an Intention,” J. David Velleman addresses a somewhat similar issue. Velleman begins with a Searle-inspired idea that an intention is a representation that “causes its own fulfillment by representing itself as doing so.” (Velleman, 2000 at 211) Now, Velleman has a distinctive view about why certain representations tend to cause their own fulfillment, a view that appeals to our purported concern with self-knowledge. But I want to put that view aside here and focus on an issue to which, as Velleman shows, his Searle-inspired account leads.

Suppose that you and I arrive at a shared intention to walk together, and we arrive at this shared intention by way of a normal conversational exchange in which you say “I will if you will” and I reply “I will”. About this pair of interdependent statements Velleman says:

Our statements … combine to form a joint statement saying, in effect, that they will jointly prompt us to take a walk; and they jointly prompt us to take a
walk, as they say. They consequently add up to a single representation that causes our actions by representing itself as causing them.

Again, Velleman’s view about why this joint statement does indeed “prompt us to take a walk” goes by way of his appeal to our concern with self-knowledge, a matter I have put to one side here. What is important here is that, in light of his Searle-inspired account of intention, these reflections lead Velleman to the conclusion that this joint statement is itself “a single token intention that is literally shared between us.” (Velleman 2000, at 217-8)

But how could a joint statement literally be an intention? Aren’t intentions states of mind? If Velleman is right that this joint statement satisfies his Searle-inspired condition for intention, isn’t that an argument against the sufficiency of that condition for intention?

Velleman’s discussion of this question involves three main ideas. The first is that his Searle-inspired account of intention does indeed entail that the joint statement is an intention. The second is that we should see this as an insight of that account, not as the basis of an objection to that account. And the third is that if we, as is plausible, resist the idea that such a joint statement is itself a state of mind, then we should resist the idea that intentions are, quite generally, states of mind.

What is most important to my discussion here is that this opens up the theoretical possibility of intentions that do not satisfy some further condition for being states of mind. Velleman arrives at this theoretical possibility by way of his Searle-inspired account of intention, married to his appeal to the distinctive role of a concern with self-knowledge. But we can take this theoretical possibility seriously without accepting the
specific theory of intention and motivation that led Velleman to it. All we need is an account of sufficient conditions for a kind of intention, conditions that do not on their own ensure conditions that, on independent grounds, are plausibly seen as a necessary aspect of being a mental state.

And that is what our theorizing about procedure-based group intentions has led us to. We have described a plan-theoretic infrastructure of such group intentions, one that is poised to play standard roles of intention in guiding downstream thought and action of the group even though these group intentions need not ensure corresponding shared intentions. These group intentions may not be embedded in the kind of robust holistic web of attitudes of the group that we may plausibly suppose to be characteristic of mental states. Nevertheless, these group intentions may still be poised to be effective in part because of the way in which they are set to interact with relevant attitudes of the participants. So we should recognize the theoretical possibility of procedure-based group intentions that are not embedded in the kind of holistic web of attitudes of the group that we might plausibly suppose is a condition of being a mental state.

We can put the point in terms of the idea of a subject of an attitude. In one straightforward sense, if it is true that the group intends to provide the aide then the group is the subject of that intention. But there is also a stronger idea of a subject as a unitary locus of a robust holistic web of inter-related attitudes. And in this sense of a subject of attitudes, the group may fail to be a subject of its intention to provide the aide.

In this respect the situation parallels the situation Velleman aimed to describe in which (a) there is literally a single intention that is shared, namely the joint statement; (b) this joint statement plays what Velleman sees as the defining roles of intention, and
so (c) we do indeed intend to walk together; but (d) there is no single subject of that intention. (As Velleman says, the “joint making up of minds” that is involved in the joint statement “is not the making up of a joint mind.” (2000, at 219)) Similarly, the procedure-based group intention whose plan-theoretic infrastructure I have tried to describe need not be an intention of a group mind, in a sense of group mind that involves a robust holistic web of attitudes of the group. Nor need it be an intention whose subject (in the strong sense) is the group. So it is a mistake to suppose that a group intention is either a shared intention or an intention of the group that is embedded in a robust holistic structure of inter-related attitudes of that group. Certain procedure-based group intentions occupy the space between these two other possibilities.

Even if these procedure-based group intentions are not embedded in such a holistic web of attitudes of the group, and even if the group is not, in a strict sense, the subject of those intentions, these group intentions may still be poised to be effective in part because of the way in which they are set to interact with relevant attitudes and activities of the participants. These procedure-based group intentions are located within our plan-theoretic framework of construction. And, given that the background shared procedural policies normally speak for the group, the functioning of such group intentions will normally be a form of group self-governance. So we have shown how our plan-theoretic approach can model robust group intentions that are not themselves shared intentions; and we have explained why the normal functioning of such group intentions will normally help constitute the group’s relevant self-governance.

9. Group responsibility
This suggests that such procedure-based group intentions are candidates for the kind of intention-based grounding we wanted for attributions of responsibility to the group, at least in those cases in which the group intention does not correspond to a shared intention. While such procedure-based group intentions do not correspond to a shared intention, they are nevertheless poised to provide relevant guidance of downstream thought and action both of the group and of relevant distributed activities of individuals and/or sub-groups; and their playing these roles is, prima facie, the group’s self-governance. And all this can be true even if these group intentions are neither shared intentions nor embedded in a robust holistic web of attitudes of the group.

But what should we say of those cases in which the group intention does correspond to a shared intention? Well, if the group intention were adequate to ground the group’s responsibility in the case in which it did not correspond to a shared intention why would we deny that it also grounds group responsibility in the case in which there is as well a corresponding shared intention? Granted, if there is a corresponding shared intention that might help ground as well various forms of distributed responsibility – responsibility not only of the group but also of the individual participants. But once we have seen how the group intention might well ground the group’s responsibility in the absence of a corresponding shared intention, there seems little reason to deny that it can also do that in the presence of a corresponding shared intention. In these latter cases what we may have is both group and related, distributed individual responsibility.

This opens up the possibility of group responsibility without robustly holistic group minds. I do not say that it follows that there is such group responsibility. My claim is only that one fundamental condition for such group responsibility – a condition of group
intention that need not be simply shared intention and is poised to be involved in group self-governance – can be realized in the way I have described, and in the absence of a robustly holistic group mind. It remains to be determined whether this way of satisfying this fundamental condition suffices for such group responsibility.\(^9\)

REFERENCES


Bratman, Michael E. 2007c. “Three Theories of Self-Governance,” as reprinted in (Bratman 2007a)

Bratman, Michael E. 2007d. “Shared Valuing and Frameworks for Practical Reasoning” as reprinted in (Bratman 2007a)


\(^9\) Some of the ideas in this essay were presented at the Insead-Wharton December 2013 Conference on "The Moral Responsibility of Firms: For or Against?". A later version was presented at the University of Copenhagen October 2014 Conference on "Thinking (about) groups." I benefited from comments from participants at both of these conferences. I have also benefited from written comments from Olle Blomberg, Frank Hindriks, and Philip Pettit, and related discussion with Christian List.


Tuomela, Raimo. 1995. The Importance of Us (Stanford University Press)