
GIAN PAOLO TERRAVECCHIA

University of Padua

gp.terravecchia@libero.it

A PHENOMENOLOGY OF SOCIAL STANCES*

abstract

The paper develops a phenomenology of social stances, trying to show that Margaret Gilbert's work on joint commitments can be understood as a special case of what here presented. The offered conceptualization shows that "to accept" is an important moment of social reality (as in Gilbert's work), but also that there are many more stances to be discussed which are important. These are "to refuse" (or "to rebel against"), "to suffer", "to assent" and "to make something one's own". The last part of the paper tests the explanatory power of the sketched theory, trying to show that it provides valuable elements for an account of convention.

keywords

social stance, joint commitment, acceptance, rebellion, convention

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**1.
From joint
commitment to
social stances**

The present paper will try to show that, through a phenomenology of social stances, it is possible to give a better account of some of the philosophical problems Margaret Gilbert tries to solve in her social philosophy and that in this way it is possible to better explain the phenomena of joint commitment and acting together.

First of all, let us consider Gilbert's core notion of joint commitment, in order to prepare the background for the following parts. Gilbert's social theory is built on the notion of joint commitment. According to Gilbert, a personal decision is a case of commitment. This means that the commitment as such does not need to have a social dimension; indeed "a personal commitment is brought into existence by one person alone" (Gilbert 2014, p. 31). Consequently, a personal commitment is rescinded when the person changes her mind. A joint commitment, instead, comes into existence when two or more people commit themselves to do something as a body, or as a unit, or as one. Gilbert expresses her idea with the formula: "to endorse a certain goal as a body" (Gilbert 2008, p. 33). The commitment brings out obligations, so that after the joint commitment is in place the parties are reciprocally obliged to act according to such joint commitment. Each of the parties cannot rescind the commitment unilaterally, under normal circumstances. On this ground, Gilbert defines a collective action as follows:

Persons X, Y, and so on, collectively perform action A if and only if X, Y, et. al. are jointly committed to intend as a body to perform A and, in light of this joint commitment, relevant persons from among X, Y, et al. act accordingly (Gilbert 2014, p. 70).

So, for instance, Jane and Hilda go hiking to the top of the mountain; for this reason they jointly commit themselves to intend as a body to hike to the top of the mountain (Gilbert 2014, pp. 70-71). Each of the two acts doing such things as not leaving the companion behind, encouraging her to move, or rebuking the other if she does not comply with the commitment. The notion of collective action is meant to work both for simple cases and for complex ones. As one can see the joint commitment creates obligations and collective actions: Gilbert introduces the "we", the collective action, as something new in social philosophy, not reducible to the acts of the individuals.

In what follows I will develop a phenomenology of social stances (§ 2.) trying to show that Gilbert's work on joint commitments can be understood as a special case of what here presented. The offered conceptualization will show that "to accept" is an important moment

of social reality, but also that there are many more stances to be discussed which are important, such as “to refuse”(or “to rebel against”), “to suffer”, “to assent” and “to make something one’s own”. Finally, (§ 3.) I will test the explanatory power of the sketched theory, trying to show that it provides valuable elements for an account of convention.

I will now present a phenomenology of social stances made up of five irreducible elements: to refuse (or rebel against), to suffer (or to be subject to), to accept, to assent and to make something one’s own.¹ I will try to show that each of them has its own essence so that in order to give an adequate account of social reality it is not possible to reduce their number. On the other hand, it would be possible to make further distinctions: for example, the case of refusal could be distinguished from that of rebelling (as I will point out).

For a better understanding of the importance of such distinctions it can be useful to consider the problems that their absence causes to other accounts of acting together. For this reason I develop my ideas keeping Gilbert’s work on the background. In so doing, I will try to show that Gilbert’s theory tends to overestimate the case of acceptance and does not see the importance of other relevant stances such as suffering, nor it is able to show the role played by refusal in social life.

Refusal is a special case in the scale of social stances. Of course, refusal is not exactly rebellion. However, they have something important in common: the interior attitude and the manifest attitude of resistance and/or of contrast to an X they are against. For this reason and for the sake of brevity I will discuss them here together. If not specified, what will be said about one can be considered valid also for the other.

Rebellion is the zero level of the social relationship, being effective even when not actualized, because it is in principle always possible (apart from Orwell’s dystopia described in 1984, and even in that case as a tragic result of a struggle of the system against individual free will). Every relationship is already conditioned by the mere possibility of a refusal or, worse, of a rebellion. It is possible to fully appreciate acceptance and all the further stances (and eventually to feel gratitude) only on the background of the possibility of a refusal.

At first sight, it might seem strange to consider the case of rebellion as one step, even if quite low, on the ladder of social stances. Indeed, rebellion seems to be the negation of such a ladder. On second thought, however, we should consider the enormous difference between simply ignoring (I add “simply”, because ignoring could hide a true and subtle form of rebellion), on the one hand, and rebelling, on the other. The former is a case of an unconditioned action, as it is not a reaction to something else: the action has its own reasons. Rebellion, on the contrary, entails the intentional action which has in its agenda the opposition to a social reality, such as a social status, a norm, an institution, which has a claim (or a set of claims). Rebellion fights the reasons of what is its target (X), or the very existence of X. It is indeed a social stance, even though extreme: its goal is to transform the social situation radically. The rebel, in her fight, acts “together” with her opponent: the fight is the resultant of the collective action.

There is a second way social agents can act together in rebellion. People can act together, having a common goal: they can go storming the Bastille, for example. Each rebel, in such a case, does not have any commitment to the others. If one simply leaves the ground, no one

2. A discussion of the social stances

2.1 To refuse (to rebel against)²

¹ The expression “stance” means the same as the german “*Stellungnahme*”. It refers to the intentional act of taking a position about something.

² I do not use the notion of opposition (“to oppose”) here: refusal or rebellion are discussed as social stances, while “to oppose” has more to do with an activity and therefore with a possible outcome of the social stance.

has the right to address her any complaint. At most, one can ask her: “Where are you going?”, “Why are you leaving?”, “Don’t leave” (which in this case cannot be a command), but this is far from a rebuke. The single rebel, for psychological reasons is expected to keep the pressure against the fortress, but he or she does not have any joint commitment. In the same way, mobs can perform collective actions, such as destroying a fortress, or killing the tyrant, without any joint commitment between the social agents performing the joint action. This gives some troubles to judge flash mobs performing violent acts. Accepting this leads to see that some collective actions, though being joint actions, do not have any collective “we” responsible for what happened; and yet each single agent is responsible for his or her own taking part in the collective action that emerged.

Students of social sciences, like Gilbert, tend to restrict the acting together to the acting in accordance with someone. As we have just seen, this is a limit that must be corrected. Here is Gilbert’s somehow romantic account of acting together:³

Two or more people are acting together (doing something together) if and only if: (1) they are jointly committed to espousing as a body the appropriate goal; (2) they are fulfilling the behavioural conditions associated with the achievement of the goal; (3) their satisfaction of these conditions is motivated in each case by the existence of the joint commitment (Gilbert 2008, p. 146).

In some cases of rebellion, however, people act together with others, as we have seen, but there is no joint commitment of any kind, nor any common goal (at least among opponents). At this level we have collective actions of opposing and allied agents, but we do not have any social obligation.

2.2 To suffer (to be subject to) While rebellion, acceptance, and the other social stances have been widely studied before (see e.g. Camus 1951; Gilbert 2014, pp. 131-162), the second step has been unfortunately neglected. To suffer or to be subject to the initiative of someone else does not entail being able to refuse it, or to rebel against it. Such stance is a midpoint between rebellion and acceptance. In this case, the social agent is passive, intimately not accepting what she considers to be wrong, or she dislikes, or she simply does not have reasons to accept. Yet she is not ready or able, or convinced, to contrast it. The strange thing is that apparently the social agent could be quite active in complying with what it is asked. This can be understood only by distinguishing social stances from social activities: one can be passive on the level of the interior personal stance and quite active on the level of the activity performed.

Let us take an example from Gilbert, whose discussions of going for a walk are possibly her major contribution to social philosophy. According to one of her examples, Paula and James ended up walking together, so performing a joint action. Let us see how she created and described the situation:

Perhaps Paula said, “Shall we go for a walk?” thus proposing a walk to James, and he accepted her proposal by saying “Yes, let’s”. In short, they agreed to go for a walk together. Having thus agreed, they set off their walk. Such an agreement is, clearly, a standard way of initiating joint action (Gilbert 2008, p. 116).

³ Gilbert’s defence is that her stipulative constructed theory explains the situations it explains. Her constructivist approach and her rigorous work give consistency to the theory. Here I try to show that the phenomena she discusses deserve a wider approach: consistency is important, but explanatory power is important too.

Here it seems that acceptance is essential: James accepted the proposal and after such acceptance the joint action began. Let us now consider some new background details and, after that, let us reconsider what is happening. We now know that Paula is a terrorist, she wants James far away from the other prisoners, for some reason. James does not want to look weak and, above all, he knows that it is useless to resist. Here James is not accepting any commitment, he is just suffering an imposition, though performed without brutality. He complies with the request and even declares that he will comply, but he does not have any commitment. It would be odd to say that if he tries to escape during the walk, Paula has the right to rebuke him, because of his saying “Yes”. That agreement was just a sign of non rebellion. Again, also in this case, we have a collective action, but there is no joint commitment. We have a *prima facie* “we” acting coordinately, jointly, but nothing more, so that the agent suffering the action is active in performing the action itself. He is however not properly responsible for the doing, unless rebellion were a true option.

To suffer the initiative of others without rebellion, nor acceptance, is more common than one could imagine. I will try to show it later, when discussing Gilbert’s account of conventions (see § 3.). I just want to anticipate here that to suffer the social reality does not necessarily entail feeling pain, being afraid or feeling sorrow; it is not necessarily a matter of negative feelings of any kind. It is rather a stance of the social agent not rebelling, nor accepting.

To accept the other’s initiative is a further step: in this case the agent does not just suffer the activity. Here we are two degrees far from rebellion (and refusal): with acceptance the social agent is not passive and intimately against what is done. More generally, acceptance is a stance in which the social agent is outwardly and inwardly open to what he has to deal with (whether an act, a status, an institution etc.). The point here is that the agent does not comply unwillingly, he is merely concessive. He has a neutral stance which is open to start a course of action: to be opened to something is quite far from giving one’s own assent to it. The initiative is of an X (someone or something) outside the social agent, so that the accepting social agent performs the minimal effort possible. Acceptance is the mildest stance.

To go back to the discussion of the walk of Paula with James presented above in its Gilbertian form, to accept the proposal, in the technical meaning here discussed, James will answer something like: “Why not?”: he does not have reasons to say “no”, and accepts the initiative of the other. Accordingly, one can see that Gilbert speaks of “acceptance” about James’ answer, “Yes, let’s”, because of the lack of a phenomenology of social stances in her thought. In a “Yes, let’s”, given under normal circumstances, we can find much more than a simple acceptance, as this stance is here explained.⁴

It is important here to notice that from this stance onwards, social obligations arise. Now James cannot leave Paula alone, taking a new direction, without any explanation or excuse. He has a social obligation to walk with her, and even amoral duty not to harm her sensibility leaving her alone or, worse, leaving her in a difficult situation such as walking alone in a dangerous neighborhood. Acceptance, however mild it may be, is the starting point for a collaborating activity, so that it is possible to say that it is the initial moment of an aware buildup of the social reality. Nevertheless, with sole acceptance, no social reality would be initiated, since acceptance is a passive stance. To find something more proactive one must go to the next social stances.

Assent can be treated in many ways: from a cognitive perspective, from a psychological point of view, with the approach of the philosophy of language. From the point of view of social

2.3 To accept

2.4 To assent

⁴ For more on this, see the next paragraph.

philosophy, assent has to do with the stance of social agent *a* in respect to an X (an act, a proposal, an institution, an emerging social reality, etc.) the agent *a* is dealing with. The assent is a social stance which consists in an interior “yes” given without reserve and manifested. The “Yes, let’s” of James, at length already discussed above, seems to be an instance of assent, rather than of acceptance. This is true, if the act is what it seems to be. In fact, we have already seen that a “Yes, let’s” could actually be a case of a suffered initiative.

The discussion so far can be summarized with the following table, built on the intuition of Adolf Reinach according to which social acts have two irreducible moments, an interior one and an exterior one (Reinach 1913):

	To refuse	To suffer	To accept	To assent
Interior attitude	-	-	0	+
Exterior manifestation	-	+	+	+

There are three values about the stance of the agent: negative (-), neutral (0) and positive (+). The table helps to understand why it may be easy to misinterpret, from an external perspective, a case of suffering situation X, with a case of giving assent to X.

The table also helps to grasp the reasons why assenting implies commitment: the intimate “yes” and its manifestation create social obligations. The social agent will be under a more severe judgement if she leaves the joint action assented, than she would by leaving a joint action she merely accepted. There are several levels of commitment. Social agents normally understand the social stance of the others and they judge and act accordingly. This fixes also the levels of trust from a degree that goes from assent to incorporation, the stance discussed in the next paragraph.

Indeed a good part of Gilbert’s analysis, rather than with acceptance, deals with assent, so that her theory of joint commitment can be considered a special case of a wider theory sketched through the analysis offered in the present paper.

2.5 To make something one’s own

It may seem that a social stance more positive than assent could not exist; and indeed the fifth stance I am about to discuss does not differ in degree from the previous one. In order to make something one’s own the agent must have a positive stance and also manifest it. The difference has rather to do with the distance of the X accepted from the social agent *a* which takes her personal position. All previous cases entail a certain distance of agent *a* from the X judged and refused, accepted and so on. In the present case, on the contrary, the distance is zero: the agent makes of X her own mind. She decides to identify herself with it, somehow.

Let us try to understand how it works, using a comparison with a joint action derived from the assent stance. James and Paula are going for a walk, as we already know. We can imagine the two being happy about it and manifesting their feeling. In this case they will behave as a body, walking together for some time. We have here a body given by two distinct members, each doing their part. They behave as “a we”, but I would not say “as one”. Each is doing his or her part and is responsible for that alone.

Let us now imagine that the two are colleagues, cops for instance. They are not just giving their assent, they are now part of a patrol. While having the walk, they see a well known thief and they decide to capture her. Paula blocks the way of escape and James goes straight to the thief. They capture her, performing a joint action in which they acted as “a we”, and indeed “as one”. They are responsible for the action as a whole and probably they will be praised. They both identify themselves as cops, they act as such and in this joint action the social

bond between them made them be one thing: the police making an arrest. To be incorporated into something (e.g. family, group of friends, a social institution) gives reasons to act as a we, performing collective actions “as one”.

Discussing David Lewis’ famous book on conventions (Lewis 1969), Margaret Gilbert presents her own explanation. It seems to be plausible to read her text as I will do here, but I leave it opened if this is a correct way. For the sake of my argument, it is enough to show that in comparison with the perspective presented, my account of social stances gives a contribution. Now, Gilbert defines conventions as jointly accepted *fiat*. Here is her definition of a joint behavior according to a given convention: “Members of a population, P, jointly accept a given *fiat* if and only if (by definition) they are jointly committed to accept as a body that *fiat*” (Gilbert 2014, p. 218).

I want to stress three points about this approach to conventions. First, it is not true that any possible convention is the result of a *fiat*. Under the Nazis, during the Holocaust, Jewish people were supposed to wear the star of David. This convention was the result of an odious *fiat*. However, there are and there have always been many other conventions – such as “wearing a top hat”, “using in English the word ‘convention’ to mean convention”, “nodding to indicate acceptance” – which have not been instituted by any *fiat*. The *fiat* is an intentional act of institution, while the mentioned conventions simply emerged. There is a second and perhaps more dramatic trouble within such understanding of conventions: it seems to require acceptance. To keep with the example of the star of David, even if a few Jewish, at the beginning, accepted proudly to wear it, in the end they all realized that it was an instrument of discrimination and hate. We see here a convention which cannot and should not be accepted and indeed was suffered by the majority of the Jewish people and at end by all of them. Finally, when one follows a convention, she does not bother to do it as a “we”, if not in special cases. Again, as I said, some Jewish people were initially proud to wear the star of David, because it gave them the feeling of being a “we”. But, to make a different example, when we use the word “convention” we are not thinking of our being a “we”. Which kind of “we” would be at stake? The degrees of stances I have discussed above are useful to understand the mechanism of following a convention. People can just suffer a convention or they can accept it. These two cases allow us to understand why it is quite easy to change conventions: there is a significant number of people that do not feel any particular commitment to follow a given convention. This fact is not explicable within Gilbert’s account. Some people may give their assent to a convention, for various reasons (they like it, they have a special role etc.). These are the supporters of the convention and they usually tend or are in duty to give social sanctions to those who do not follow it, if this is expected. A teacher, for instance, will underline with a red pen her student’s text if it reads “convintion” instead of “convention”. Finally, there are those who think that a certain convention expresses the “we” of their group. In this case, they will be ready to apply some kind a social rebuke, from a nasty look to more severe sanctions such as ostracism. Indeed, to enter the tatami in jeans and sweater is not advised, not even to a beginner.

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