From Simple to Composite Agency
On Kirk Ludwig’s From Individual to Plural Agency
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Abstract: According to Kirk Ludwig, we use the term ‘action’ in a secondary and derivative sense when we talk about collective actions. I argue that, on the contrary, collective actions are actions in a primary and non-derivative sense. First, this is because some primitive actions are collective primitive actions, where a primitive action is an action that can be performed directly, without intending to do something else by which it is brought about. Secondly, it is because (individual and collective) composites of primitive actions are also actions in a primary and non-derivative sense. I also claim that Ludwig exaggerates the contrast between individual and collective action by introducing a “sole agency requirement” into his account of the logical form of individual action sentences. I argue that sole agency is merely typically pragmatically implicated by such sentences. If I say, ‘I turned on the light’, after we each flipped one of two switches that together turned on the light, then I might be misleading the audience, but what I say is true. Finally, I argue that, contra Ludwig, individuals often have “I-intentions” to bring about an event that can be satisfied even if there are co-agents of the event.

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0. Introduction

Kirk Ludwig’s account of collective action is reductive in the sense that it only draws on resources that are already available within a reductive event-causal account of individual action and intention. It is individualistic in that a group doing something is analysed as a

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1 Thanks to Stephanie Collins, Mattias Gunnemyr, Alexander Heape, Frank Hindriks, Björn Petersson and Thomas Smith for helpful comments, questions and suggestions. The research behind this paper was funded...
single event that is brought about by several individuals rather than as an event that is brought about by a collective agent. At least when it comes to non-institutional collective action, this *multiple agents account* is surely in line with, as Ludwig says, “the common sense view” (2016, p. 168; see also pp. 181, 297). However, due to some of Ludwig’s background assumptions and terminological choices, the account also has the individualistic consequence that the only actions that exist are individual actions. When we talk about collective actions, we are only speaking loosely, using the term ‘action’ in an extended and derivative sense.² This is arguably not in line with our common-sense metaphysics of action.

Ludwig’s main focus is the ontology of action that is embedded in the logical form of the sentences used to talk about action, both individual and collective. His analysis of an individual action sentence such as “I turned on the light” is as follows:

There is an event $e$ and a time $t$ before now such that at $t$ I was a primitive agent of an event $f$ that directly causes $e$ and only I am an agent of $e$ in that way and $e$ is the turning on of the light.

An event that an agent is a primitive agent of is his primitive action—or basic action. It is an action that he can perform directly, without intending to do something else by which he brings it about. If my end is to turn on the light, I might (tacitly) reason about what I ought to do to achieve this end, which results in an intention-in-action to move my body in a certain way. The movement of my body is the event $f$ that I am a primitive agent of, my primitive action. Without primitive actions, the agent’s practical reasoning would end up in an infinite regress of reasoning about how to carry out ever smaller intentional actions as a means to his intended end. That $f$ “directly causes” $e$ here simply means that $f$ causes $e$ in a way that is not mediated by other agents. It would not be true that I turned on the light if the light were turned on as a result of my ordering you to flip the switch.

Turn now to Ludwig’s event analysis of plural action sentences. The sentence ‘We built a house’ can be read collectively (there was one house such that all of us built it) or

² Ludwig writes that “there is nothing strictly speaking that is a joint action in the sense in which there are actions in the case of individuals.” (2017a, p. 11). At most, “the notion of a collective action itself is a façon de parler.” (2016, p. 297)
distributively (for each of us, there was a house that he built\(^3\)). On the collective reading, interpreted as a collective action sentence, the sentence has the following logical form:

There is an event \(e\) such that for each of us—and no one else—there is a time \(t\) and an event \(f\) such that he is a primitive agent of \(f\) at \(t\) and \(f\) directly causes \(e\) and \(e\) is the building of a house.

Here, each member of the group that built the house performed different primitive actions that collectively brought about that the house was built. There is no primitive action that each of them is an agent of, nor one that the group as such is an agent of. Now, Ludwig argues that there are no collective primitive actions. He also takes primitive actions to be all the actions there are. Hence, there are strictly speaking no collective actions at all according to Ludwig. However, Ludwig takes collective actions, *in contrast to individual actions*, to be actions in a secondary or derivative sense of the term ‘action’.

In section 1, I argue, contra Ludwig, that there are *some* collective primitive actions, and there are thus some actions, in the primary core sense of the term ‘action’, that are collective. In section 2, I point out that most individual intentional actions that are significant and interesting are, like most collective actions, *composites* of primitive actions. If I build a house, then I do not just perform one primitive action, I perform a “larger” composite action over time that is composed of many primitive actions. In the same way, we perform a composite of primitive actions when we build a house.\(^4\) I argue that both individual and collective composite actions are, contrary to what Ludwig claims, actions in the primary core sense of the term ‘action’.

In section 3, I argue that Ludwig also exaggerates the difference between individual and collective action by introducing a so-called “sole agency requirement” in his account of the logical form of individual action sentences (Ludwig 2017a, p. 15).\(^5\) This is the requirement that “only I am an agent of \(e\) in that way” in the analysis of ‘I turned on the light’ presented

\(^3\) In section 3, I will argue that Ludwig is mistaken in thinking that each must build a different house for the sentence to be true on the distributive reading.

\(^4\) As Santiago Amaya (2017) points out: “[In general, many everyday actions are not causal offshoots of others. […] Because human agency extends in time, agents have the opportunity to cobble together distinct actions to form larger wholes.” (p. 3) Such a larger whole is what I call a ‘composite action’. I am taking this term from the title and abstract of Sara Chant’s (2004) PhD thesis. I have not read her thesis itself though, so it is possible that I do not use the term in exactly the way she does.

\(^5\) Also referred to as “the unique agent requirement” (Ludwig 2016, p. 142 n. 17).
above. The requirement says that ‘I turned on the light’ would be false if two switches needed to be flipped to turn on the light and you and I each flipped a switch. (In the analysis of ‘We built a house’ above, the “no one else”-clause is a collective analogue of this requirement. The sentence ‘My family built a house’ would be false, according to Ludwig, if it were not only my family, but also a friend of the family, who together built the house.) I will argue that there is no sole agency requirement as part of such a sentence’s logical form. Sole agency is an assumption that is typically pragmatically implicated by an individual action sentence, but it is not entailed by it. This means that, if I say, ‘I turned on the light’, after we each flipped one of two switches that collectively turned on the light, then I might be misleading the audience, but I am not saying something false. (Similarly, saying ‘We built a house’ about oneself and one’s family might be misleading but never untrue if a friend of the family also participated in building the house.)

Ludwig does not only introduce the sole agency requirement as part of his account of the logical form of individual action sentences, he also introduces such a requirement into the content of I-intentions—that is, into the content of intentions to perform individual actions. According to Ludwig, my intention to make dinner tonight would not be satisfied if you ended up being a co-participant of the making of the dinner. In contrast, I argue in section 4 that agents often have intentions to bring about an event such that these intentions can be satisfied even if other agents bring about the event in the same way. What I intend is often just a composite action, and it need not be important to me whether I perform all component actions myself or whether some are left for others to perform.

Note that the analyses of ‘I turned on the light’ and ‘We built a house’ presented above leave open whether or not the event e is brought about intentionally or unintentionally. I might have moved my body and flipped the switch because I thought it would turn on the heating. The turning on of the light might thus have been an unforeseen and unintended consequence of my primitive action. Similarly, we might have built a house without having done it jointly intentionally. Suppose you begin to build a house and lay the foundation and then the outer framing, but then abandon your project. I then buy the land and decide to complete the building of the half-built house. Here, the building of the house would not have been caused and coordinated by a “shared intention” that we were parties to. It could even have been the case that neither of us had any intentions related to building a house. Suppose that we built a house as a result of our blindly following what we thought were instructions for building a boat. However, in most actual cases where the sentence ‘We built a house’ is true, the
sentence ‘We built a house (jointly) intentionally’ will also be true. Ludwig provides an ingenious account of shared intention and collective intentional action, but I will not touch on it in this commentary (but see Blomberg 2018a). In what follows, it can safely be assumed that the individual and collective action sentences that I discuss are made true by individual and collective actions that are (jointly) intentional.

1. There are collective primitive actions, even strictly speaking

Following Donald Davidson, Ludwig argues that, strictly speaking, the only actions that exist are primitive actions. We can refer to my bodily movement (that is, my action) in terms of descriptions of its consequences, for example by saying that I flipped the switch or turned on the light, but the event of the switch being flipped and the event of the light turning on are not strictly speaking actions. I am an agent of these events, but they are not among my actions. Only events that I am a primitive agent of are my actions.

Why not take a more liberal view, according to which each bringing about of such a consequence is also an action of the agent? Although Ludwig thinks that this question “is more verbal than substantive” (2016, p. 84), he takes two considerations to favour his and Davidson’s restrictive view. First, if we ask when an agent brought about some event, then the most appropriate answer will be the time at which I performed the primitive action (ibid., p. 82). Suppose that things are set up so that the light turns on an hour after the light switch is flipped. According to Ludwig, the most appropriate answer to the question of when I turned on the light would be the time at which I flipped the switch rather than the time at which the light came on. Secondly, we regularly distinguish between an agent’s action and that action’s consequences. Now, it seems that the action must be identified with either the event of which the agent is a primitive agent (f), the consequent event (e), or both events. But it is only by identifying the action with the event of which the agent is a primitive agent that we can make room for the action-consequence distinction in a systematic way. Hence, this is what we should do (see Ludwig 2017a, p. 20).

I will argue that even on this restrictive view of the use of the term ‘action’, and even without considering the possibility of composite actions (see section 2), there are some collective actions. This is because there are collective primitive actions. Ludwig, on the other hand, thinks that, when we talk about collective actions, we are only speaking loosely, using the
word ‘action’ in a secondary and derivative sense.

In my paper “Socially extended intentions-in-action” (2011), I argue that “[t]he reach of an agent’s basic actions [i.e. primitive actions] is not necessarily limited by an agent’s body surface, not by another agent’s co-ownership of the action’s physical movement or event.” (p. 343) Furthermore, I argue that some skilled joint actions can be primitive actions for which each participant has an intention-in-action (in John Searle’s [1980] sense). Consider, for example, a joint move involving the tightly coupled bodies of two professional figure skaters as they are performing a dance on ice. The bodily movements of such a joint action are arguably normally appropriately caused and controlled by the intentions-in-action of all the participants together. In addition, it seems plausible that neither participant is exercising control over the fine-grained details of the joint move through personal-level practical reasoning and intention formation. Now, if anything is entitled to the label ‘collective primitive action’, it would arguably be such a primitive action. After all, in light of the multiple agents account of collective action sentences, as well as our common-sense view of collective action, it is at least a necessary condition that it involves an event or an outcome that is brought about by several agents. Hence, when a group does something primitively, arguably, there must be an event that has several primitive agents.

That this sort of skilled collective primitive action is both possible and actual is a natural upshot of the widely endorsed idea that an agent’s primitive actions are relative to her skills and habits, so that an agent’s repertoire of primitive actions can include quite complex activities (Ludwig 2016, pp. 80-81; see also Searle 1980, p. 66). New skills and habits lead to what Ludwig calls primitive action procedures, which at least partly operate subpersonally, “below the level of thought” (ibid., p. 80). At most, once a primitive action procedure has been triggered, “we must monitor it for breakdowns” (ibid., p. 81). It is thus these primitive action procedures that allow personal-level practical reasoning to get a grip on the agent’s bodily machinery and the wider world.

Now, some of our skills are joint skills. We acquire such skills together with others and can normally also only exercise them together with others. When it comes to a joint bodily skill, we typically lack the primitive action procedure for performing our own part of the whole

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6 However, not every activity that is skilled or habitual constitutes a primitive action, since even skilled and habitual activity can involve practical reasoning and control by intentions. Hence, many primitive actions will be what might be called sub-habitual actions (see Blomberg & Brozzo 2017).
joint movement alone, where our own part is done in the absence of the normal contributions of others. For example, doing your own part of shaking hands with someone in the absence of the other’s own bodily movement is very difficult and, if one can do it, then it arguably involves a different primitive action procedure than that which is normally involved when we actually shake hands with someone. Merely doing one’s own part convincingly, as if one were shaking hands with someone, is a special skill that requires the practice of, say, a mime artist or an actor. Underpinning joint skills would then be joint primitive action procedures that, just like individual primitive action procedures, at least in part operate subpersonally below the level of thought. There is some evidence in cognitive psychology and cognitive neuroscience that suggests that we have such procedures (see e.g. Pacherie 2015; Knoblich et al. 2011).

In light of these considerations, there is arguably nothing that excludes some primitive actions from being collective primitive actions. The joint move involving the tightly coupled bodies of the two professional figure skaters would be a real-world example.

This is not in conflict with any core commitments of Ludwig’s theory. While he does say that an agent’s primitive actions are limited to her bodily movements and some mental changes (Ludwig 2016, pp. 78, 97; see also Davidson 1980/2001, p. 49), he also submits that it “seems plausible [that] something counts as part of one’s body if one can bring about changes in it primitively.” (Ludwig 2016, p. 78 n. 12) Hence, we can think of each figure skater as having a socially extended body that overlaps with the body of the other (for arguments favouring this characterisation, see Blomberg 2011)—or think of them when they perform the move as having a partly shared body, as it were. Furthermore, Ludwig writes at one point that, “on [his] account, it is left open what sorts of events we may bring about primitively. This is an empirical, not a conceptual question.” (2016, p. 68, n. 1)

Finally, Ludwig describes two variations of a hypothetical example, of which the latter is structurally similar to my characterisation of the figure skaters’ joint move:

Consider a hypothetical case, suggested by Paul McNamara, of Siamese twins, identical twins whose bodies are joined in utero, who share control over a shared arm. Suppose first that each has independent control over the arm. In this case, there is no reason to say that each does not perform a primitive action when each moves the arm, or, say, clenches the fist, independently of the other. […] In a variant, we
might suppose that they cannot move the arm at all without their willing it together. [...] They would each be a primitive agent of it in that case too [...].

(ibid., pp. 174-175)

However, Ludwig takes this Siamese twins case to merely “narrow the gap between collective primitive actions and individual primitive actions” (ibid., p. 174). It does not eliminate it. This is simply because Ludwig does not use the term ‘collective primitive action’ as I have used it here. He writes:

if we think of group action as what the group per se is a primitive agent of, or even an agent in any sense, then there are no group actions, because groups are not agents. [...] In this sense, the primary sense, we will say, then, there are no collective actions at all, only individual actions [...].

(ibid., p. 173, emphasis in original)

At least when it comes to non-institutional groups, I agree with the conditional. However, since the multiple agents account as well as the common-sense view of collective action suggests that we should not think of group action in the way specified in the conditional’s antecedent, Ludwig’s startling conclusion that there are no collective (primitive) actions at all does not follow. Were Ludwig faithful to his own multiple agents account and to common sense, he ought to say that there are collective primitive actions in the primary sense.

It is also worth noting that Ludwig repeatedly claims that it follows from his account that, when a group does something, there is no agent that has an intention-in-action that is directed at what the group does (ibid., pp. 139, 181, 297).7 However, the Siamese twins case, as well as actual skilled joint actions that have multiple primitive agents, shows that this is a mistake.

7 “When a group acts, it does so because its members do. Its members have intentions-in-action, all directed at different individual acts. [...] Even if we say the sum of the primitive actions of its members is the group’s primitive action, it is absurd to suggest that there is any intention-in-action directed at that by anything.” (Ludwig 2016, p. 139)

“[T]here is nothing that strictly parallels primitive action in the case of a group because the closest approximation, what the group does but not by doing anything else, is not something to which any agent directs a de re intention-in-action.” (ibid., p. 181)

“When groups act, no agent stands in the primitive agent relation to anything to which the multiple agents bear the agency relation.” (ibid., p. 297)
In those cases, several agents each have an intention-in-action that is directed at what they all do.

My conclusion that there are collective primitive actions is not in substantive conflict with Ludwig’s analyses of collective action sentences. My disagreement with Ludwig is about how the term ‘collective primitive action’ should be used. Should it refer to an event that a group as such is a primitive agent of, as Ludwig himself and a group agent account of collective action sentences suggest, or should it refer to an event that several agents are primitive agents of, as I and a multiple agents account of collective action sentences suggest? By adopting the former use—the use of his philosophical opponents, as it were—Ludwig ends up presenting his theory in a more individualistic and eliminativist light than necessary. Thus, while nothing I have said in this section shows that Ludwig’s theory is substantively mistaken, it does show that his presentation of it is misleading.

2. There are (individual and collective) composite actions, even strictly speaking

One might object that the argument that there are collective (primitive) actions does not touch the main point of Ludwig’s discussion about the ontology of collective action. His main point is arguably that many collective action sentences will be true even if no collective primitive action is performed. When we build a house together or write a paper together, no collective primitive actions need to be performed. Indeed, examples such as the Siamese twins case and figure skaters’ joint movement seem to be the exception rather than the rule here. So even if there are some collective primitive actions, there is surely, one might think, an important difference between individual actions and—loosely speaking—collective actions. As Ludwig puts it, “whether or not we decide we will find a use for the expression ‘primitive action’ in the case of collective action, the important thing to recognize is in what ways collective action differs from the individual case with respect to the initiation of actions.” (ibid., p. 175)

Ludwig suggests that we can find a use for a secondary and derivative notion of collective primitive action as well as of a group being an agent of an event:

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8 Whether we use ‘action’ to refer only to primitive actions or to their consequences too is also mainly a question of terminological choice and convenience. If one adopts the latter more liberal view, then one can say that there are collective actions even if there were no collective primitive actions.
[First,] we may speak about a group being an agent of an event in a derivative sense when all and only members of the group bear the relevant agency relation to the event. In this sense, we may say that the group of carpenters is an agent of the building of a house because all and only those carpenters are direct agents of its building. The second point is that a primitive action is defined as something done but not by doing anything else. We then get a derivative notion of group action as what the group does but not by doing anything else. The team of carpenters builds the house by way of its members doing the various things they do to contribute. […]

Thus, the mereological sum of the primitive contributions of the group’s member[s] may count in an extended, or secondary, sense as the group’s primitive action.

ibid., pp. 173-174

After presenting this secondary and derivative notion of collective primitive action, Ludwig proceeds to highlight what he thinks are two important differences between individual and collective action. First, he argues that, in the individual but not in the collective case, what is done but not by doing anything else is always a primitive action. Secondly, he thinks that groups but not individuals can do things—be agents of events in the derivative sense—even if there is no description of what they do under which it is done intentionally. In this section, I will argue that Ludwig is mistaken in thinking that these two differences hold between individual and collective action.

That Ludwig is mistaken is revealed if, instead of contrasting collective action with an individual primitive action (such as clenching one’s fist), as Ludwig does, we contrast it with individual composite (or aggregate) action. As Sara Chant rightly points out, “for the purposes of modeling an account of collective action after an account of individual action, it is important to note that there is an obvious analogy between aggregate and collective action—for both are actions that are performed only in virtue of the agent or agents having performed several distinct actions.” (2007, p. 249)

Consider the action of building a house. This action will be a large complex whole that is composed of many smaller actions: doing the site preparation, building the foundation, constructing the outer and inner walls, fixing electricity and plumbing, etc. These smaller actions will all have been carried out by composites of ever smaller actions, until we arrive at primitive actions such as, say, pulling the switch on the drill, swinging the hammer, or extending the measuring tape. If I built the house on my own, then all the component actions
of the larger whole would have been performed by me alone. If we built it together, then some component actions would have been performed by me, others by you. In the former case, the building of the house would be an individual composite intentional action; in the latter case, it would be a collective composite intentional action.

Note that, in both cases, *what is done but not by doing anything else* is not a single primitive action, but rather a mereological sum of primitive contributions: a composite action. To see this, consider the following characterisation of what Ludwig takes to be an important difference between individual and collective action:

> Where in the individual case we would say that so and so did such and such by doing $A$, where that picks out a primitive action, in the collective case we would say instead that they did such and such by their severally doing various things […].
> Ludwig 2016, p. 175

However, for most of the interesting and valuable things that people do by themselves, $A$ will not pick out a single primitive action that brings the thing about. Rather, it will pick out a composite of primitive actions performed over a (potentially very long) period of time that brings it (such and such) about. It would be very odd to say that I built the house by, say, extending the measuring tape, even if it might be true that this is a primitive action that, within the context of a host of other primitive actions, appropriately caused the house to be built. Rather, I built the house by *extending the measuring tape & drawing a line with the pencil & picking up a nail & etc.*, where each of these conjuncts is a description that picks out a primitive action. As Ludwig mentions, what one does that brings about a consequent event such as the building of the house “may cover multiple actions” (ibid., p. 73). The phrase ‘my building of the house’ describes the composite of those primitive actions, not each component primitive action. Hence, I conclude that Ludwig’s “secondary” and “derivative” notion of (composite) primitive action is just as useful for making sense of individual action as for making sense of collective action.

Now, there is a sense in which I did the composite action ($A \& B \& C$ etc.) *by* doing each of

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9 As Will Small (2012) points out: “The relationship between an action and a proper part of it (itself an action) cannot be cast in terms of two descriptions of the very same action.” (p. 154)
its components \((A, B, C, \text{ etc.})\). To do a whole, one must do each of its components.\(^{10}\) I extended the measuring tape & drew a line with a pencil & picked up a nail etc. (in part) by extending the measuring tape. But suppose you ask me when I extended the measuring tape & drew a line with a pencil & picked up a nail etc., or—as is more likely—simply ask me when I built the house. Answering by giving the time at which I extended the measuring tape would not be an appropriate answer. The appropriate answer would rather be a specification of the time period from the initiation to the completion of the composite action. Furthermore, consider what was my action and what were the consequences of the action. Clearly, the action was the composite of all the primitive actions I performed in building the house, and the house being built was one of the consequences of that composite being performed.

Recall that it is the appropriate answer to the when-question and the possibility of making room for the action-consequence distinction that lead Ludwig to adopt the restrictive view according to which all actions are primitive actions. Hence, I take it that the composite of primitive actions that an agent performs is an action in the primary and non-derivative sense of the term ‘action’.

Even if one accepts that there are individual composite actions in this primary and non-derivative sense, one might resist the suggestion that there are collective composite actions in the same sense. When several agents bring about a mereological sum \(A\) of primitive contributions, they are, as Ludwig puts it, “severally doing various things”. But when \(A\) is a composite of an individual’s primitive actions, one and the same agent is the primitive agent of all the various components of \(A\). Does this difference matter for the ontology of action?

Stephanie Collins (2013) suggests that it does. She suggests that the platitude that ‘Only agents can act’ should be interpreted in such a way that it not only entails that ‘Only an agent can do any component of an action’, but also that ‘Only an agent can do any action as a whole.’ (ibid., p. 235) If this were right, then several agents could not perform a composite action. However, this interpretation of the platitude is clearly too strong. Not only would it then not be a platitude, as I will now show, it would also not be true.

Just as a group is not strictly speaking a primitive agent of the mereological sum of the group members’ primitive contributions, neither is an individual agent strictly speaking a primitive

\(^{10}\) One way in which I can be an agent of a complex event \(e\) (such as a composite action) is by performing a primitive action \(f\), where “\(f\) constitutes \(e\) in […] part” (Ludwig 2016, p. 76).
agent of a composite action, even if he is a primitive agent of each of its components. To illustrate, consider how Ludwig would analyse a sentence such as “I built the house”:

There is an event $e$ and a time $t$ before now such that at $t$ I was a primitive agent of an event $f$ that directly causes $e$ and only I am an agent of $e$ in that way and $e$ is the building of a house.

Note that $t$ clearly picks out a stretch of time that the event $f$ spans. Furthermore, $f$ is a composite event—or a “complex event” (Ludwig 2016, p. 18). Because of this, it would be misleading to say, as Ludwig’s analysis would say, that I was a primitive agent of $f$. At no point during $t$ did I have an intention-in-action directed at this composite event $f$, even if I had an intention-in-action directed at some component part of $f$.11 For some relatively “small” individual composite intentional actions, this might be resisted. One could argue that an intention-in-action could be sustained throughout the performance of a composite intentional action and that it could have temporally mixed content, representing both the proximal primitive action to be performed now, the primitive actions to be performed in the future, and perhaps also those that already have been performed (see Ludwig 2016, pp. 43-44). Or one could resist the claim that the action is a composite rather than a (complex) primitive action. Once one has acquired the skill to perform some complex task, then one has in effect “acquired a new primitive action procedure that encompasses and knits together (and transforms at the same time in the integration) the separate action procedures” that one relied on when one could only perform each component task separately (ibid., p. 81). However that may be, there is clearly no such intention-in-action or complex primitive action in the case where I build a house. At many times during $t$, which would span many months, I would not have any intention-in-action (nor any occurrent future-directed intention) related to the building of the house at all.12 Nor would I be executing any primitive action procedure related to it. I would be asleep, say, or busy reading the Journal of Social Ontology.13

In light of this, it seems useful to introduce a derivative and secondary notion of a composite

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11 Compare with Ludwig’s claim that, when a group does something, there is no agent that has an intention-in-action that is directed at what the group does (see footnote 7).

12 As Ludwig points out: “A temporally extended complex event may consist of a sequence of events that are not temporally contiguous.” (2016, p. 18) There is no reason to think that the event $f$ could not be a composite action that is such a temporally extended complex event.

13 In his talk at a workshop I organized on shared and temporally extended agency in Copenhagen (April 28-29, 2017), Thomas Smith pointed out that the best individual analogue of collective intentional action is temporally discontinuous individual composite intentional action.
primitive agent. An agent (in the primary non-derivative sense) is a composite primitive agent of an event \( f \) if \( f \) is a composite event and the agent is a primitive agent of each of \( f \)'s components. We then get the following analysis of “I built the house”:

There is an event \( e \) and a time period \( t \) before now such that when \( t \) was over, I was a composite primitive agent of an event \( f \) that directly causes \( e \) and only I am an agent of \( e \) in that way and \( e \) is the building of a house.

A group can be a composite primitive agent as well. A group \( G \) is a composite primitive agent of an event \( f \) if \( f \) is a composite event and for each of \( f \)'s components, a member of \( G \) is a primitive agent of it, and each member of \( G \) is a primitive agent of at least one component of \( f \). A group being a composite primitive agent is thus a special case of Ludwig’s derivative notion of “a group being an agent of an event” (ibid., p. 173), where the event in question is the mereological sum of the members’ primitive action contributions. Note also that, if \( G \) is allowed to have only one member, then the analysis of “I built the house” merely exemplifies a special case of a singleton group being a composite primitive agent of an event.\(^{14}\)

We can then give the following analysis of the sentence “We built the house”:

There is an event \( e \) and a time period \( t \) before now such that when \( t \) was over, we were a composite primitive agent of an event \( f \) that directly causes \( e \) and only we are agents of \( e \) in that way and \( e \) is the building of a house.

My point here is not that we need this notion of a composite primitive agent. I am not trying to argue for a group agent account of composite action sentences. Rather, my point is that the individual and the collective cases of composite action are perfectly parallel. For the ontology of action, it does not matter whether or not it is one and the same agent that is the primitive agent of all the various components of a composite action.

Arguably what matters in the case of composite intentional actions is that the right psychological connections are in place between different agents or between different time-slices of one and the same agent. In both the individual and the collective case, these

\(^{14}\) According to Ludwig (2016), there are no singleton groups: “I am not a group, for example.” (p. 133) Intuitively, this seems right. The important point though, is that both groups and individuals can be composite primitive agents.
connections organise, coordinate and unify the various component actions with respect to some end that they are all directed to. There are arguably many important structural similarities between the individual and the collective case here when it comes to which connections are needed (Rovane 1998, ch. 4; Bratman 2017). No doubt, there are differences as well. But there is no reason to think that these make collective intentional action derivative or secondary in comparison to individual composite intentional action.\footnote{Following a suggestive discussion by Carol Rovane (1998, ch. 4), I take joint intentional action and individual composite intentional action to be flavours of one and the same phenomenon of composite intentional action. In Rovane’s terminology: individual \textit{long-term activities} and joint \textit{activities} are both species of \textit{coordinated activities} (ibid., p. 144).}

Once we compare collective action with individual composite action, an alleged difference that Ludwig thinks holds between collective \textit{unintentional} action and individual \textit{unintentional} action also withers away. This alleged difference, as Ludwig puts it, is “that we can do something together [even] though, in contrast to individual action, there is no description of it under which it is intentional.” (2014, p. 122; see also 2016, pp. 168-169, 176-177) Consider Ludwig’s example here of a man who intentionally scratches the back of his left hand in Beijing and another man who intentionally scratches the back of his right hand in Buenos Aires (2016, p. 176). According to Ludwig’s multiple agents account, this is a case of collective action since there is a complex event of which they are both agents, namely the event of their scratching the back of their hands. They are, as it were, a composite primitive agent of this event. However, there is no description under which this complex event is brought about intentionally. Now, consider a similar case involving just one agent. Suppose I intentionally scratch the back of my left hand in Beijing, then travel to Buenos Aires, where I, among other things, intentionally scratch the back of my right hand. In this case, there is a complex event of my scratching the backs of my hands that I am an agent of, and thus scratching the backs of my hands is something I did. I am a composite primitive agent of this event. However, there is no description under which this complex event is brought about intentionally. The difference that Ludwig thinks we find between the collective and the individual case is nowhere to be found. In both cases, we have a composite primitive agent of a composite action, and this composite action is not intentional under any description. Hence, insofar as there can be composite collective action that is not intentional under any description, there can also be composite individual action that is not intentional under any description.
Is anything of what I have said here in direct conflict with any substantial core parts of Ludwig’s theory? Ludwig never discusses whether composites of primitive actions in the individual case themselves count as action. There is a similar absence of discussion of composite actions in Davidson, from whom much of Ludwig’s action-theoretical framework is taken. With the exception of ‘I built a boat’ (in Ludwig 2007), Ludwig’s examples of individual action are not paradigm cases of composite action. Anyway, there is no reason why Ludwig could not accept that individual composite actions are actions in a primary core sense. Furthermore, this is arguably an ontological status that they share with collective actions. Once composite action is brought into view, any apparent great disanalogy between individual and collective action withers away. Hence, even if my disagreement with Ludwig here is also mainly terminological, the disagreement is important in that it demonstrates another way in which he presents his theory in a much more individualistic light than necessary.

In the next section I turn to a disagreement that clearly is substantial. I there discuss the sole-agency requirement in Ludwig’s event analysis of individual action sentences. I will argue that it is more plausible that an assumption of sole or unique agency is merely typically pragmatically implicated by an individual action sentence than that it is entailed by it.

3. The sole agency assumption as a pragmatic implicatum

Recall that, according to Ludwig’s sole agency requirement, a sentence stating that an action ‘was done by x’ entails that x was the sole agent of that action. It is part of the truth conditions of the sentence ‘The book was written by Kirk’, or ‘Kirk wrote the book’, that he did not write it together with Ernie. Recall that there is a qualification though. Other agents might have causally contributed to the book’s being written. What is excluded is that there were co-agents who stood in the same agency relation to the writing of the book as Kirk. Hence, ‘Kirk wrote the book’ would be true even if he dictated the book to a typist who entered the text into a computer file. I will assume this qualification of the sole agency requirement in the discussion that follows. Recall also that Ludwig introduces a collective analogue of the sole agency requirement in the logical form of plural action sentences. In

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16 Davidson makes the following observation about “writing the word ‘action’”: “Some temporal segments of this action are themselves actions: for example, first I write the letter ‘a.’” (1980/2001, p. 88) This suggests that he takes at least some composites of primitive actions to be actions.
what follows, I will only discuss Ludwig’s treatment of individual action sentences and the sole agency requirement, but I take it that the critical points I make in both this and the next section also apply straightforwardly to his analysis of collective action sentences and the collective analogue of the sole agency requirement.

Note that the inclusion of the sole agency clause in Ludwig’s account of the logical form of individual action sentences amounts to a claim about how we describe agency and actions using natural languages such as English or Swedish. It does not amount to a claim about the nature of individual agency or intention. After all, Ludwig thinks that several individuals can be agents of the same event, even primitive agents (as in the Siamese twins case).

Following Robert Harnish (1976), I argue that the sole agency clause is not entailed by an individual action sentence. Rather, in most contexts, an assumption of sole agency is typically pragmatically implicated by an individual action sentence. It is thus misleading, but not strictly false, to say that ‘Kirk wrote the book’ if he wrote it together with Ernie. The clearest evidence that some implicature account must be correct is the fact that the sole agency assumption can be cancelled or defeated given the right context. Arguably, I do not contradict myself when I say, ‘Kirk wrote the book, but he didn’t write it on his own’, nor when I say, ‘Kirk wrote the book. He wrote it with his co-authors’. Or imagine the following conversation:

\[ A: \text{Why did you not go to the morning meeting?} \\
 B: \text{I prepared the lunch.} \\
 A: \text{Did you do that on your own?} \\
 B: \text{No, C and I prepared the lunch together.} \]

If the sole agency requirement is part of the logical form of individual action sentences, then \( B \) is speaking falsely when he says that he prepared the lunch. It would then also be appropriate for \( A \) to continue the conversation by criticising \( B \) for contradicting himself. However, I feel no temptation at all to say that \( B \) is not speaking the truth here, nor would \( B \) be contradicting himself. This suggests that an implicature view of the sole agency assumption, rather than a logical form view, is correct.

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17 “In English, ‘it was done by \( x \)’ implies that \( x \) was the sole agent of it.” (Ludwig 2016, p. 25)
18 Thanks to Mattias Gunnemyr for suggesting this conversational exchange.
It is one thing to show by appeal to example that an implicature account is correct, but it is more difficult to give a general account of how—by appeal to what principles and maxims—an audience might calculate and infer the sole agency assumption in various conversational contexts. I do not have the space to discuss proposals for such accounts here, nor do I think anyone has (yet) provided a satisfactory account.¹⁹ Note, though, that Ludwig will need such a satisfactory account too. This is because he thinks that, when it comes to collective action sentences that are constructed with the adverbial ‘with others’, it is just a pragmatic implicature that the event does not have any additional co-agents beyond the ones mentioned (Ludwig 2016, p. 163, n. 24). Thus, the sentence ‘Kirk wrote the book with Ernie’ does not entail that Marija was not also a co-author. That she was not is merely pragmatically implicated in most circumstances. As far as I can see, any problems that are raised for an account of how sole-agency implicatures are calculated will also turn out to be problems for an account of how such implicatures about limited co-agency are calculated.

Ludwig does not directly criticise the implicature account of the sole agency assumption. However, there is an important indirect criticism. If a collective action sentence is made true by there being one event with several agents, then a collective action sentence entails that, for any of those agents, there is an event (that one event) of which he is an agent. Assuming that the multiple agents account is true, this means that, without the sole agency requirement, a collective reading of a plural action sentence—that is, a collective action sentence—would entail the distributive reading of that sentence. This gives rise to three related challenges for the implicature account (the labels are mine, not Ludwig’s):

- **The extreme hubris challenge**: Consider the collective reading of ‘We built the Great Wall of China’. Without the sole agency requirement, the sentence entails that, for each of the agents of the building of it, he or she should be able to truly say, ‘I built the Great Wall of China’. But according to Ludwig: “There is no sense in which someone who lays a single brick in the Great Wall of China can truly say, ‘I built the Great Wall of China.’” (Ludwig 2017b, p. 801)

- **The collective predicate challenge**: Consider the sentence ‘We gathered in the park’ or ‘We pair-danced on the ice’. It makes no sense to say of each person that he or she

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¹⁹ See Harnish (1976), who suggests two different accounts. For critical discussion of both, see Lasersohn (1995, pp. 72-73, 79). Ludwig (2016) refers to this discussion in passing (p. 148 n. 2). See also Atlas & Levinson (1981, p. 46), who point out problems with and a possible remedy for one of Harnish’s proposals.
gathered in the park or pair-danced. However, this would be entailed by the sentences without the sole agency requirement (see Ludwig 2016, p. 142 n. 18, p. 148, n. 2).

- The institutional action challenge: Consider the sentence ‘The court found the defendant guilty’, concerning a court with three judges that uses a premise-driven collective decision procedure (see List and Pettit 2011). Without the sole agency requirement, this sentence entails that each member of the court found the defendant guilty, but we know from discussions of the so-called “discursive dilemma” that this is not entailed (Himmelreich 2017). Indeed, as in the case of ‘gathered in the park’, it is not even possible for a single judge to find the defendant guilty; only the institution of the court can do so (Ludwig 2017b, sect. 3).

These are serious challenges. Indeed, in light of the institutional action challenge, I think that either the implicature account of the sole agency assumption must be rejected or else the multiple agent account cannot be the right account for sentences about institutional action. With respect to sentences about institutional action, I am much more inclined than Ludwig to think that a group agent account might be correct. Now, if the sentence ‘The court found the defendant guilty’ is about what an institutional group agent is doing, then there is no entailment that each part of that group agent is doing that same thing (to think otherwise would be to commit a fallacy of decomposition). Hence, I take it that this challenge for the implicature account can be turned on its head into a challenge for a fully general multiple agents account.

However, this response does not work in the case of collective predicates such as gather or pair-dance. Here there is clearly no additional (group) agent besides the individuals involved. So, a defender of an implicature account like myself is forced to give sentences with such collective predicates a different treatment than sentences with distributive predicates like write, lift, build, etc. This is certainly an unhappy consequence, but it is not clear whether it shows that the implicature account is mistaken or that the scope of the multiple agents account is more limited than Ludwig takes it to be.20

Finally, what about the extreme hubris challenge? Contrary to what Ludwig claims, there is a sense in which someone who contributed to the building of the Great Wall of China can

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20 What about my example of the figure skaters’ joint movement? Here, I take it that each of them can truthfully say ‘I did it’, even though neither can say ‘I pair-danced’, except where this is elliptical for ‘I pair-danced with the other’.
truthfully say ‘I built the Great Wall of China’. For sure, it would be an extremely hubristic thing to say by someone who merely laid a brick, or even by someone who laid bricks in it all his life. It would also be an extremely misleading thing to say if the audience were such that it might be led to believe that the speaker built the whole wall himself. However, it would be just as extremely hubristic and misleading of Kirk to say ‘I built the Great Wall of China with Ernie,’ if he and Ernie had each laid a single brick in the Great Wall of China. According to Ludwig’s treatment of the adverbial ‘with others’, it would nevertheless be true that he did this with Ernie. Plausibly, this is also the case when someone says ‘I built the Great Wall of China’.

My conclusion is that an implicature account of the sole agency assumption such as that suggested by Harnish (1976) is at the very least still a live theoretical option. The challenges that Ludwig raises for this type of account can all be turned on their heads, becoming challenges to Ludwig’s own account.

As I mentioned in the introduction, Ludwig not only argues for the sole agency requirement in his analysis of individual action sentences, he also argues that a similar requirement is part of the content of intentions to perform individual actions. I turn to this requirement in the next and final section. This requirement for the content of intentions does not follow from Ludwig’s sole-agency requirement, but the requirements are clearly related.

4. I-intentions can be satisfied by collective actions

Suppose that I intend to make dinner tonight. What I intend, it seems to me, would normally be compatible with my both making dinner on my own or making it together with someone else. If Kirk shows up to join me, I do not have to rescind my earlier intention to make dinner. Rather, I can just fill in and elaborate my intention to make dinner, to include Kirk as my co-agent. What I intend is a composite intentional action. In many cases, it will not be important to me whether I perform all component actions myself or leave some of them for others to perform.

Ludwig disagrees. In a discussion of a case with “two assassins each of whom administers a fatal dose of poison to their victim’s soup, though each is unaware of the other”, he writes:
Here there is a temptation to say that they were both successful, for one wants to say that nothing went wrong with their plans. Yet, though each intended that he poison the victim, in point of fact they poisoned the victim together, if not intentionally. Neither gets to claim that he did it, that is, is the sole agent of the event in the relevant way. It is not their individual plans that go awry. It is rather that whereas each intends to be the agent of the death by way of the victim’s consuming poisoned soup, neither is. […] (This is not to say that it would necessarily matter to either of [them] to have had some unanticipated help were [they] to discover the facts of the matter.)

Ludwig 2016, p. 105

In this overdetermination case, each assassin is an agent of the victim’s death. But according to Ludwig, each nevertheless fails to do what they intended. I think that the temptation to say that both assassins were successful should not be resisted.

The reason why Ludwig thinks that I-intentions exclude that there are co-agents involved is presumably the following: The infinitival complement ‘to X’ arguably implicitly represents the proposition that I will X, that is, that there will be a time in the future when it will be true that ‘I X-ed’. Now, assume the sole agency requirement. Furthermore, assume that people’s reports on what they intend to do typically make the content of their intentions more or less explicit. Given these two assumptions, intentions that people report by saying things like ‘I intend to X’ or ‘I will X’ will typically be such that they exclude the participation of other (co-)agents of their X-ing. At any rate, this is what Ludwig thinks so, sadly, he thinks that my intention to make dinner tonight excludes that we do it together. If I were to have an intention that didn’t exclude him as a co-participant that I reported on accurately, I would say something like: ‘I intend to either make dinner or make dinner together with Kirk tonight’.

Suppose, first, that we hold fixed an agent’s intention and causal contribution to an intended outcome. We then replace the causal contributions made by other agents who intend to bring about the same outcome with similar non-agential causal contributions. Here, I think it would be odd to say that the agent failed in doing what he intended before the replacement, but that he succeeded after it. If the agent succeeded after the replacement, then he arguably did so before the replacement as well.

21 Overdeterminers are causes (see e.g. Schaffer 2003).
Imagine a variation of Ludwig’s case with the two assassins. Suppose that there is only one assassin, plus a somewhat clumsy soup chef. The assassin adds poison to the victim’s chanterelle soup and, as a matter of bad luck, the chef accidentally and unknowingly adds a small piece of the death cap mushroom to the soup, thus also poisoning the victim. The assassin and the chef are each an agent of the victim’s death. According to Ludwig, the assassin would still fail to do what he intended here, since he is not the agent of the poisoning of the victim.

Now, imagine a second variation of the case where the assassin is the only agent involved. However, an unlikely spontaneous chemical reaction occurs in the soup, creating another fatal dose of poison. The occurrence of the spontaneous chemical reaction is completely independent of the poison added by the assassin: the reaction would have occurred even if no such poison were added. The assassin’s poison and the spontaneously generated poison are each a cause of the victim’s death. Here, unlike in the first variation, the assassin would presumably succeed in doing what he intended according to Ludwig.

But why should there be this difference between the second variation on the one hand and the first variation and the original case on the other? Arguably, the assassin succeeds in doing what he intended in all three cases. If it mattered to the assassin that he and only he poisoned the victim, then he might of course fail in the first two cases. But in that case, if the assassin were to state in a detailed and explicit way what he intended to do, he would say that he intended to poison the victim and do so alone, without anyone else also being an agent of the poisoning of the victim. Since a sole agency assumption is typically pragmatically implicated, in most contexts he could, however, simply rely on his audience to infer that the content of his intention includes a sole agency requirement.

5. Conclusions

In this commentary, I have argued that there are several ways in which Ludwig exaggerates the differences between individual and collective agency: Just as there are individual primitive actions, there are collective primitive actions, and just as individual composite actions are actions in a primary and non-derivative sense of the term ‘action’, so are collective composite actions. Furthermore, the sentences we use to talk about collective
action and individual action are not mutually exclusive—sentences about individual action can be made true by an individual’s participation in a collective action. Similarly, intentions can be satisfied not only by actions of which the intender is the sole agent, but also by collective actions.

I have also tentatively defended a pragmatic implicature account of the sole agency assumption, which suggests that a multiple agents account will fail for some kinds of collective action sentences, such as sentences about the actions of institutions. This suggests that Ludwig has underestimated the differences between small-scale non-institutional collective action (joint or shared agency) and large-scale institutional collective action (group agency).

References


