

MUTUAL RECOGNITION, COMMON KNOWLEDGE, AND JOINT ATTENTION

Margaret Gilbert

Department of Philosophy
University of California, Irvine

Margaret.gilbert@uci.edu

Introduction

In this paper I discuss three important, distinct phenomena. In my terminology, one is *common knowledge of co-presence*. Another is *mutual recognition*. I shall spend the most time on that. The third phenomenon is *joint attention*. As we shall see, common knowledge of co-presence is essential to mutual recognition; this, in turn, is essential to joint attention.¹

There is reason to say that only with mutual recognition do we arrive at genuine *sociality*. And one can argue that such recognition constitutes the simplest form of existence of a *social group* in an important, central sense. Whether or not these points are correct, the occurrence of mutual recognition is of great practical, and theoretical, significance.

I start with three preliminary points. First, the phrases “common knowledge”, “mutual recognition”, and “joint attention” have all been

¹ It is a great pleasure to contribute a paper to a Festschrift in honor of Wlodek Rabinowicz. We first “mutually recognized” each other in Leipzig some years back. More recently we jointly attended to many matters in Uppsala as fellows of SCASSS in the spring of 2004.

defined differently by different authors. I am not concerned to argue that one or another definition is better than another. I believe that the phenomena I characterize through my own definitions are important and want, simply, to focus on them.

Second, the phrase “mutual recognition” is often associated with Hegel. So it is worth saying at the outset that my discussion will not attempt to engage with his work. I shall have something to say about some important passages in the work of Charles Taylor, passages which had a significant impact on my own thinking.² He was himself an interpreter of Hegel and was, I imagine, influenced by Hegel as he understood him.

Third, this discussion is not intended to be highly fine-grained. It is more of a sketch. My aim is roughly to specify the phenomena in question, to emphasize their distinctness and to discuss some of the relations between them.

I Common knowledge of co-presence

I start with common knowledge of co-presence. Consider this---very humdrum---situation.

Two women find themselves briefly walking alongside one another on the pavement in a certain town. There has been no communication, by word or gesture, between them, nor is there any

² See Margaret Gilbert (1989) *On Social Facts*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. ix.

in what follows. One is walking faster and soon draws ahead of the other.

This is the kind of situation in which all of the following conditions are satisfied, the participants being here referred to as “A” and “B”:

- (1) A and B are physically close to one another. For the sake of a label I shall say that A and B are *co-present*.
- (2) It is entirely out in the open between A and B that (1) is true.
- (3) A and B both realize that (1) and (2) are true.

Of central interest here is condition (2). What is it for something to be “entirely out in the open” between A and B? This is not the place to investigate all of the possible developments of this idea. So, for now, the following may suffice.³

First, it is reasonable to assume that, in the situation described, A and B both have enough evidence from experience to be sure that A and B are co-

³ There is a longer, more detailed discussion in *Social Facts*. The classic philosophical sources on this topic are David K. Lewis (1969) *Convention: A Philosophical Study*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, and Steven Schiffer (1972) *Meaning*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. In economics see the independent discussion of Aumann (1976). For a recent overview of the considerable and often highly technical literature on the topic see Peter Vanderschraaf and Giacomo Sillari (2005) “Common Knowledge”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/common-knowledge>.

present. Of course neither need know “who the other is”, in terms of his name, station in life, and so on, but each has evidence that justifies his certainty that he and the other person, *whoever that person is*, are co-present.⁴

In addition, each has enough evidence to be sure that each has the evidence just noted. And so on, without limit. Note that I do not say that either A or B reasons through an enormous number of steps, or that each contemplates an enormous number of propositions about what each has evidence for, let alone an infinite number of such propositions. Rather, roughly, *each has enough evidence to infer that any one of these propositions is true*, given the principles of reasoning to which he adheres.

According to condition (3), each must *realize* that it is entirely out in the open between A and B that they are co-present. He need not have expressed the point in words. He must, one might say, have “a sense” of the openness. And if it were explained to him in such terms as mine, he will be justified on the basis of experience in agreeing it is there.

Let us suppose that a situation accords with the three conditions just sketched. I shall say, here, that there is then *common knowledge* between A and B that A and B are co-present. So much, for now, on the phenomenon I shall call *common knowledge of co-presence*. Clearly there are essentially similar cases with different elements. A and B might hear one another but not be able see one another, and so on.

⁴ I assume here only a non-technical concept of “person”, such as the participants in such a humdrum situation might apply.

II Charles Taylor on what is “*entre nous*”

Some while ago now Charles Taylor argued in various places for the existence of a type of situation that goes beyond common knowledge.⁵ His focus is not common knowledge of co-presence, but more general. For instance, he considers common knowledge of the fact that the day is a hot one, or the fact that one of the parties is not enjoying the opera.

The central example in one of Taylor’s discussions involves two strangers traveling on a train on a hot day. One turns to the other and says “Whew, it’s hot!” This, Taylor says, does not tell the other anything he did not know. Previously each knew it was hot, knew the other was hot, knew that the other must know that he was hot, and so on and on. To invoke the French phrase Taylor prefers for what is achieved by the speaker’s utterance, the fact that it is hot in the train compartment is now *entre nous*.⁶ Alternatively, in terms of other locutions he uses, the fact that it is hot today is now “in public space”, “for *us*”, within the purview of a “common vantage point”.

What is it, thought for something to be “*entre nous*”, “in public space”, and so on?

⁵ I have in mind, in particular, Charles Taylor (1980) “Critical notice: Jonathan Bennett’s *Linguistic Behavior*”, *Dialogue*, vol. 19, and Charles Taylor (1985) *Human Agency and Language*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, ch. 10, sec. 3. 1.

⁶ See e.g. Taylor, *Agency*, p. 265: “the crucial distinction between what is *entre nous* and what is not”.

What precisely is achieved, in the example, by the one character's saying to the other "Whew! It's hot!"?

Taylor himself explicitly rejects an answer in terms of communication, where this is conceived of as the transmission or attempted transmission of states of knowledge or belief and where nothing but individual knowers and believers are involved. I don't think Taylor wishes to deny that such transmission is or may be part of the story when such scenarios occur. What he wants to emphasize is that something else goes on.⁷

⁷ The writer-reader relationship, incidentally, would seem to be a version of the situation on which Taylor focuses. The writer purports, implicitly or explicitly, to "address" the reader with his words. The reader is supposed to "get" what he is saying: but more than this. This is not just the transmission of information, the intended provocation of a belief or knowledge, or pretend belief or knowledge (cf. Saul Kripke on fiction in the *John Locke Lectures* 1973 (as yet unpublished). It is more like a conversation --- it is a pretend or (perhaps better) a *would-be* conversation --- in which one by one certain things are made "*entre nous*". (It is of course a one-sided conversation; the reader may have no way to say anything to the writer, as each will understand. The writer may be long dead.) So there is a style in which one might write "Now that we are agreed that...", "Now we have seen that..." "Now it has been established [between us] that...", and a style in which one writes "You, dear reader..." and so on. And one can speak of a writer "drawing his reader's attention" to something. The flavor of such locutions is, I take it, to invoke something more like the creation of a common focus than the transmission of information from one mind to another. Or so I say to whoever reads this, conjuring the creation of a new public space, hoping that by reading what I write, he or she will, as far as is possible, join me in that space.

As Taylor sees it, and as he emphasizes several times, an exchange like that in his example not only *places* certain matters before *us*, in public space.⁸ It *founds* or *constitutes* that space---or a particular part of that space. In his conception, then, public space is constructed, not discovered. To say is still not to explain what public space is.

In the discussion on which I am drawing, Taylor focuses on the power of *language* to “found public space” or to “place certain matters before *us*”. And, clearly, a linguistic act may perform the transformation---whatever precisely it is---that Taylor wishes to place before his readers. He allows, however, that this transformation may occur through any mode of “expression”---where expression need not be linguistic. Thus one party might turn to the other and, catching his eye, ostentatiously---as we say---wipe the perspiration off his face.⁹ These points, though helpful, also leave open the question as to what it is for something to be *entre nous*, in public space.

⁸ I say “exchange” though only one party seems to have spoken. It is best to construe Taylor’s case as involving some form of acknowledgement on the part of the person spoken too. Something like a brief “Yes, indeed”, or some concurring facial expression would suffice. If the other person was looking in the other direction and apparently deaf to the utterance, I take it that nothing would have been achieved --- or, better, there would have been a failed attempt to achieve what the case with acknowledgement does achieve.

⁹ Taylor’s example (p. 264) has one party both saying “Whew!” and also mopping his brow. It seems unnecessary, though, that any words be uttered in such a scenario. I doubt that Taylor would deny this.

Taylor's discussion is an important one. It is necessary to go beyond it, however, to get a better grasp of what is at issue. Taylor makes both a negative and a positive point. The negative point is clear enough. If we want to understand what "Whew, it's hot!" achieves we must go beyond the idea that its being hot, or the speaker's being hot is common knowledge between the speakers. As he puts it in one place, here alluding to *our awareness* of some fact:

We completely miss the point if we remain with the monological model of the subject, and think of all states of awareness, knowledge, belief, attending to, as ultimately explicable as states of individuals. So that our being aware of X is always analyzable without remainder into my being aware of X and your being aware of X. The first person plural is seen here as an abbreviated version of a truth-functional connective.

What I am arguing here is that this analysis is terribly mistaken; that it misses the crucial distinction between what is *entre nous* and what is not.

It is the positive point--the introduction of "what is *entre nous*"--that demands further clarification. Indeed, unless and until it is clarified and seen to be correct the negative point may, of course, seem more problematic.

I return to Taylor's discussion shortly. I first introduce the phenomenon I refer to as *mutual recognition*.

III Mutual recognition

i. An example

I start with an example from my book *On Social Facts*---the Merton Street Library case---a very humdrum story.¹⁰

I was sitting at a table in the library, looking down at a book. I noticed that someone had come to my table and had sat down opposite me. It took it that it was now common knowledge between this person and myself that he and I were sitting at this very table. However, we had not yet acknowledged each other's presence in any way. At a certain point, I looked up, looked somewhat fixedly at the person in question, until he too looked up. I caught his eye (as we say); we looked at each other. I nodded and smiled briefly; he did also. We then returned to our respective concerns and had no further interaction.

What went on here?

ii. Mutual recognition defined

¹⁰ See Gilbert, *Social Facts*: 217-8. This is a more or less verbatim quotation. The following discussion draws on *Social Facts* 217-9.

One thing that happened, I propose, is as follows:

This man and I made it the case that we were jointly committed to recognize as a body that he and I were co-present.

When two or more people are in this situation I shall say that have *mutually recognized* one another. This may not be the most felicitous label---I say something about that shortly.

In further explanation of my proposal, something must be said, briefly, about *joint commitment*.¹¹ One who invokes *joint* commitment in the sense I have in mind allows that, just as an individual can commit himself, by forming a decision, for instance, so two or more individual can commit themselves *as one*. In order that this come about, something must be expressed by each of the would-be parties, and that is precisely his *personal readiness* to be *jointly committed* with the other in the relevant way. Suffice it to say that this can be done in various ways.

My proposal about the Merton Street Library case is that, crucially, it fulfilled this condition with respect to the joint commitment referred to. In addition, it was common knowledge between the participants that these expressions had taken place. Thus they fulfilled another condition for the creation of a joint commitment. I propose, indeed, that they fulfilled all of the conditions necessary for them to be jointly committed in the way in question.

¹¹ I have written at length on this elsewhere. For a recent discussion see Margaret Gilbert (2006) *A Theory of Political Obligation*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, ch. 7.

A final note on mutual recognition as I have defined it here. When I say that A and B are jointly committed to recognize that p *as a body*, I mean something like this: they are jointly committed to constitute as far as is possible a single body that recognizes that p. Thus each must attempt appropriately to coordinate his or her behavior with that of the other, in order to fulfill the joint commitment.

In what follows I am going to assume that mutual recognition as I have defined it is a regular occurrence---to put it mildly---and that the Merton Street Library case is an example of such mutual recognition. I now say more about mutual recognition in this sense.

iii Taylor's *entre nous*

I first briefly return to Charles Taylor's references to what is *entre nous*, in public space, and so on. As I now explain, mutual recognition as I have defined it is a plausible context for talk---in French---of *nous*, and, therefore, of what is *entre nous*.

I have argued at length elsewhere that when people speak of what *we* are doing, thinking, or feeling this is best construed as referring to a joint commitment of an appropriate kind. Here I have in mind those cases in which it is not appropriate to construe what is being said in terms of what *we both*, or *we all*, are doing. When it is clear that is *not* intended, a joint commitment interpretation recommends itself.

Those who are jointly committed to recognize as a body the co-presence of the parties, then, would very naturally describe their situation as follows: "We recognize that you and I are co-present". This will not mean that you,

on the one hand, recognize that you and I are co-present, and that I, on the other hand, recognize this. More generally, it cannot be broken down in terms of the way things are for me and the way things are for you, because it is not about me, on the one hand, and you, on the other. It is about something else.

In saying “something else” I do not mean something whose existence is somehow independent of you and me. Of course it isn’t. That “something else” is constituted by *you and me in a particular relationship*: that of joint commitment. This unifies us. It makes us *us*. For this particular kind of thing I have used the label “plural subject”. According to my technical definition, those who are jointly committed to do X as a body constitute the *plural subject* of X-ing.¹²

The same point about *nous* can be made about a joint commitment to recognize as a body that it is hot in here. Generalizing, if you and I are jointly committed to recognize as a body that such-and-such is the case, then the fact that such-and-such can plausibly be referred to as *entre nous*, in public space, and so on.

iv. Mutual recognition and social groups

I argued in *On Social Facts* that social groups, in a central sense of the

¹² I have come to think that this phrase may have been unfortunate. It seems to suggest to some people something metaphysically suspect, whereas I do not believe there is anything suspect in the idea of a number of jointly committed persons, which is all that the idea of a plural subject (in my sense) amounts to.

term, are a matter of joint commitment: those who are jointly committed with one another constitute a social group. If so, then those who mutually recognize one another constitute a social group---albeit one without any aims, values, or, in a word, character. Indeed, they constitute a fundamental kind of social group. Once people have mutually recognized one another, they have begun to pave the way for the creation of groups *with* character.

v Pure and mixed cases of mutual recognition

The Merton Street Library case is what one might think of as a pure or simple case of mutual recognition. I take it, however, that mutual recognition is often achieved as part and parcel of a wider achievement.

Thus someone who is approaching another on a town street might call out “Nice day!”, and the other return “Yes, indeed!” Here two things may be achieved at one and the same time. First, they jointly commit to accepting as a body that the two of them are co-present. Second, at one and the same time, they jointly commit to believing as a body that it’s a nice day.

There may, then, be both pure and (shall we say) mixed cases of mutual recognition. In the mixed cases mutual recognition is brought about at the same time that some other joint commitment is created for the parties.

vi Presuppositions of mutual recognition

What is presupposed by mutual recognition? One pertinent issue concerns the relationship of mutual recognition to previously established social

conventions, norms, practices and so on.¹³ In the Merton Street Library case, each person nods and smiles. Such nodding and smiling are conventional moves. They follow what might be referred to as a socially established procedure for creating an instance of mutual recognition.

How fundamental, then, can mutual recognition be? Can it take place between those who are not already parties to a social convention---total strangers who meet on a desert island, for instance?

This at least is clear: what one needs is some way of attracting the other person's attention, and then, or at the same time, engaging in whatever behavior will communicate one's readiness jointly to commit with the other to recognize as a body that you and he are co-present. It is not obvious that such behavior must follow socially established procedures or engage with previously established conventions.

It is plausible to argue, indeed, that social conventions themselves arise, in many cases at least, on a basis that involves mutual recognition. For instance, many conventions are set up by verbal agreement. The establishment of the language in which the agreement was made may well have involved mutual recognition---and other things as well.

Though mutual recognition may not presuppose convention, it

¹³ On social conventions, which I take to be a species of social rule, see Gilbert, *Social Facts*: ch. 6. On social rules, with special reference to H. L. A. Hart's discussion in *The Concept of Law*, see Margaret Gilbert (2000) *Sociality and Responsibility: New Essays in Plural Subject Theory*, Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield. I argue that social rules as conceived of in everyday life are joint commitment phenomena.

presupposes something, for sure. It presupposes, in particular, that the parties have the concept of joint commitment. The concept of joint commitment may well be a peculiarly human one, but some humans may lack it or have it in only in an inchoate or imperfect form. Some of those who have been labeled “autistic” may be in this category.

My assumption is that most adult human beings have this concept. That is because it allows one plausibly to explain much of what human beings think and do. If this is so, it may well be common knowledge among adult human beings that by and large beings of their kind have the concept of joint commitment. Their experience will have indicated as much. When two or more mature human beings approach one another, then, it will be common knowledge that mutual recognition is a real possibility. It may not happen, but it will make sense to attempt it.

Each of those who mutually recognize one another, in my sense, has expressed his readiness to be jointly committed in a certain way with the other. Such expression presupposes at least the following: the other exists; the other is a being with the concept of joint commitment; the other is capable of joint commitment. Thus one can argue that when there is mutual recognition in my sense, the parties will be jointly committed not simply to recognizing as a body their co-presence, but to recognizing as a body their co-presence *as beings capable of joint commitment*.

vii. Mutual recognition and care, concern, and respect

To what extent, if at all, does mutual recognition promote care and concern for each other, or mutual respect, among the parties? Off the cuff, one

might think “None”. That may be a little too quick. Here are three observations that point in the other direction.

First, if we are jointly committed to recognize as a body our co-presence as beings capable of joint commitment, each of us is committed to see to it that *together* we constitute as far as possible a single body that recognizes this co-presence.¹⁴ Thus one might argue that the situation involves certain safeguards for the parties. At the least, both parties are committed not to go ahead and render the other incapable of conformity to the joint commitment.¹⁵

Second, one who has participated in an episode of mutual recognition, and then treats his opposite number in a way inappropriate to a being capable of mutual recognition in particular and joint commitment in general, has similarly failed to do what he is committed to doing. It would have to be argued, in amplification of this last point, that there are ways of treating such a being that are inappropriate to its nature, and that these are instances of uncaring, unconcerned, or disrespectful behavior.

Third, as I have argued elsewhere, the parties to any joint commitment understand that they owe one another conformity to the commitment and have a corresponding right to conformity from the other. For these things can be inferred from the existence of the joint commitment itself.¹⁶ Each is

¹⁴ This just spells out an entailment of the joint commitment in question.

¹⁵ See my 1990 essay on marital relationships---“Fusion: Sketch of a ‘Contractual’ Model”---reprinted in Margaret Gilbert (1996) *Living Together: Rationality, Sociality, and Obligation*, Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

¹⁶ See Gilbert, *Sociality*; also Gilbert, *Political Obligation*: ch: 7.

therefore not only constrained by the joint commitment, as he would be given only a standing personal decision to act in a certain way. He understands that his not so acting would be a failure to respect the right of another. It is sometimes said that simply seeing another as having rights is a matter of respecting them.¹⁷ In that case those who mutually recognize each other automatically respect one another.

There is, then, some basis for connecting this rather cognitive account of mutual recognition with behavior that is at least minimally caring, concerned and respectful of the parties concerned. That is harder to argue for the simpler situation in which there is only common knowledge of co-presence.

IV Joint attention

I turn now to my third topic: *joint attention*. In contemporary developmental psychology, there is a great deal of literature on what is called “joint attention”. One important source is the work of Michael Tomasello.¹⁸ Nonetheless, there is some question as to precisely what is going on in paradigmatic situations of joint attention, and (relatedly) as to how “joint attention” should be defined.

¹⁷ Joel Feinberg (1970) “The Nature and Value of Rights” *Journal of Value Inquiry*, suggests this in a famous discussion.

¹⁸ E.g. Michael Tomasello (2001) *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Another leading figure in these discussions is Simon Baron Cohen.

Though developmentalists focus on parent-child interactions, it could be better to focus on adult-adult interactions to begin with, in working this out, since there are issues as to what precisely children are capable of at various young ages. That said, I start with a slightly abbreviated quotation from Tomasello as to the kind of situation he has in mind.

Suppose that a child is on the floor playing with a toy, but is also perceiving many other things in the room. An adult enters...and proceeds to join the child in her play with the toy. The joint attentional scene becomes those objects and activities that the child knows are part of the attentional focus of both herself and the adult, and they both know that this is their focus (...it is not joint attention if, by accident, they are both focused on the same thing but unaware of the partner).¹⁹

He concludes:

Joint attentional scenes...gain their identity and coherence from the child's and the adult's understandings of "what we are doing".²⁰

¹⁹ Tomasello, *Cultural Origins*, p. 98. Tomasello continues to write on this topic; I use these quotations as illustrations of one stance towards the phenomenon that has been adopted, and that might be attractive initially. I thank Michael Tomasello for discussion of joint attention on several occasions in Cracow and Leipzig.

²⁰ Loc. Cit.

Before the last quoted sentence, Tomasello was anxious to distinguish a situation of joint attention to some object (say) from each one's personally focusing on that object without awareness that the other was also focusing on it. Yet the last quoted sentence suggests something that goes beyond each one's focusing with awareness that both are focusing. Indeed, it goes beyond common knowledge between the parties that each one is focusing on the object. It suggests something that, as I have argued, involves joint commitment, namely, "what we are doing".

In my analysis of acting together or, to use another common phrase "joint action", the parties are jointly committed to intend as a body to do a certain thing and they act in accordance with that joint commitment. For them to be jointly committed to intend as a body to do the thing in question is, in more familiar terms, for *them* to intend to do that thing. Or so I have argued.²¹

Now suppose that a child, Claire, and her mother, Maureen, are playing with Claire's doll Teddy. As Maureen or Claire might put it: "We are playing with Teddy". One might say, then, that their focus is Teddy.

²¹ In the form of analysis of joint action just presented I begin with an account of our *intending* to do something (in terms of our being jointly committed to intend as a body to do that thing) and add that each of us acts in accordance with this joint commitment, to make up our joint action. An alternative, perhaps better, is to say simply that we are jointly committed to do (as a body) a certain thing. Then presumably we will also be jointly committed to intend as a body to do that thing, and will act in accordance with the latter joint commitment in order to do the thing in question.

Maureen (or Claire) might put this as follows: “We are attending to Teddy”. One way of construing this, in parallel with my accounts of joint action would be this (from Maureen):

Claire and I are jointly committed to attend as a body to Teddy

What this means, as indicated earlier, is that they are jointly committed to constitute as far as possible a single body that attends to Teddy (and, in this case, plays with him).

I propose that joint attention understood in terms of a joint commitment to attend as a body to some particular in the environment of the parties is an important part of human life in society. Once we have gone beyond common knowledge of co-presence, and engaged in mutual recognition, we are ready jointly to attend to things other than ourselves, and to act upon those things together. Among other things, we are ready to create some kind of a group language, negotiating labels for particular things and kinds of things.²² In short, we are ready to live recognizably human lives.²³

²² On group languages see Gilbert, *Social Facts*: ch.3, sec.6.

²³ A version of this essay was presented at the conference on social ontology and recognitive attitudes held in Helsinki, August 29-30 2006. At the subsequent collective intentionality conference in the same place (August 31-2nd Sept), Clotilde Calabi of the University of Milan presented a paper “Joint Attention, Common Knowledge, and Ephemeral Groups” with significant points in common with this one. Calabi criticizes Christopher Peacocke’s recent account of joint attention (Christopher Peacocke (2005) “Joint Attention: Its Nature, Reflexivity,

and Relation to Common Knowledge” in *Joint Attention: Communication and Other Minds* ed. N. Eilan, C. Hoerl, T. McCormack, J. Roessler, Oxford: Oxford University Press), and draws on my published work to argue, congenially, for an approach to the topic similar to that proposed here.