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Divine Action and Collective Intentionality

DOI: 10.35070/ztp.v145i2.4043

Abstract: Over the past decades, the majority of research on divine action has been devoted to identifying a causal joint for divine action in the world – the precise location where some sort of divine causal influence and the causal structure of the world interlock. In this article, I discuss several objections to the necessity of identifying such a causal joint. I then introduce the concept of “collective intentionality” to formulate an alternative approach to divine action. Collective intentionality allows ascribing a single action to more than one agent if they share the same intention to act. The theory of collective intentionality offers an alternative to causal joint theories of divine action, since it does not aim to squeeze some form of divine causality into an otherwise causally closed system but rather locates divine action in God’s communicative interaction with human beings, enabling them to share God’s intentions of action.

Keywords: causal joint, collective agency, divine action, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, shared intentionality, special divine action

In recent years, the debates on (special) divine action have settled for a stalemate.¹ On the one hand, there still is a lot of ongoing and very nitty-gritty work in figuring out whether there are any “causal gaps” in the physical world which would help theologians to identify the so-called “causal joint” for divine influence in the world. On the other hand, there has been a call for the deconstruction of the metaphysical premises which ground this debate, since it is doubtful whether the attempts to locate a causal joint for special divine action in certain gaps of indetermination in the natural world can really account for a personal interaction of God and creation.

This situation is quite unfortunate for theologians and philosophers of religion, since a compelling concept of special divine action is of crucial

¹ I would like to express my gratitude to two anonymous reviewers from ZTP for many insightful suggestions which helped to improve the paper.

importance for a theistic interpretation of the world. On the one hand, the belief in an acting God is an indispensable part of the Christian tradition: Central theological treatises such as the theology of creation, soteriology, or eschatology operate under the implicit assumption that God has the capacity to perform actions in the world. Even the core notion of incarnation, of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ, is difficult to comprehend without the assumption of a God capable of specific actions. Many aspects of liturgy, the efficacy of sacraments, and even the basic practice of petitionary prayer depend on this notion as well. On the other hand, however, in view of the rise of a scientific worldview and the moral catastrophes of the twentieth century, belief in a God who acts is in a deep crisis. Answering the question of whether and how God acts in the world thus proves to be the key to many current fields of research in systematic theology as well as philosophy of religion:

Divine agency has become the topic that hurts most or, to put it into more friendly terms, reveals what we truly think about the concept of God and the relationship between God and the world. It is apparent that you cannot have a concept of divine action without getting your concept of God affected.²

Considering both, the impasse of the current divine action debate and the pressure to provide a theologically compelling account of special divine action, I will suggest an alternative approach to a theological reflection of divine action in this paper. I will argue that the obsession with a causal joint, which determines the exact location where a causal divine power and a world governed by natural laws interlock, is an implicit affirmation of scientism, because it tacitly affirms the assumption that any form of action can be described in causal terminology. If this argument succeeds, and the search for a causal joint for special divine action is misguided, it becomes necessary to develop an alternative approach to divine action. I suggest that the concept of "collective" or "shared intentionality", which has been explored in philosophy of action over the last years, offers such an alternative. A concept based on collective intentionality regards divine action as communicative interaction between God and his creatures, allowing for shared intentions of action between both of them.

It is important to note that "communicative interaction" does have consequences in the physical world, too. However, the level of description of communicative interaction cannot be reduced to event-causal language. The aim of this paper is not to deny that divine action may have conse-

² Thomas Schärtl, *Divine Agency*, in: *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 7 (2015), 79–104, at 79f.

quences in the physical world, but rather to show that the language of (collective) intentionality is more suitable to conceptualize divine action than looking for causal joints in an otherwise causally closed immanent sphere.³ The argument is mainly an epistemological one: Looking for causal joints of divine actions is choosing a problematic level of description because it implies that everything in the universe can ultimately be explained in causal relations. A proposal based on collective intentionality does not want to eliminate the idea that divine actions have consequences in the (physical) world. Rather, it aims at saving this idea by showing that an approach which is based on (collective) intentionality chooses a more suitable level of description for divine action than approaches which try to identify loopholes within the web of physics.⁴ At the same time, a robust account of divine action must take seriously that intentionality and causality are interlocked – when doing something intentionally, human beings (and God) change the course of the physical world as well. Thus, it is necessary to develop an account of performative causation which shows that causality is a concept which depends on (collective) intentionality.

To achieve this goal, I will first consider two central arguments against a causal model of divine action and deconstruct a central premise of the current mainstream of the divine action debate (1). If the search for a causal joint proves to be futile in the end, it is necessary to offer an alternative, since the Christian faith presupposes that God is able to interact with his creation.⁵ I will make use of the relatively young concept of “collective intentionality” to offer such an alternative account of divine action. Col-

³ This idea in itself is not really new –for the distinction between causal and intentional models, cf. Paul Gwynne, *Special Divine Action: Key Issues in the Contemporary Debate (1965–1995)*, Rome 1996. However, intentional models have so far lacked the ability to convincingly address the objection that without identifying a causal joint for divine action, they are hanging loose in the air. This objection can be refuted when turning to *collective* intentionality, as I will do in this paper.

⁴ Christian List has recently constructed a similar argument for the reality of free will. List argues that free will is real because it does not imply indeterminism on the physical level, it only implies indeterminism on the agential level. Whereas the physical world may be causally closed, it is not doing justice to the world of agents to assume the same there. Cf. Christian List, *Why Free Will is Real*, Cambridge (Mass.) 2019.

⁵ In the recent divine action debate, it is quite common to speak of divine action “in the world” when it is intended to say that God is able to perform specific actions beyond general divine action. However, this notion may prove to be terracentric since it is not only the world which may be open to divine action. Conceptually, it would make more sense to speak of divine action in creation or in the cosmos. However, I will adapt to the common terminology and speak of divine action in the world, thereby referring, however, to divine action in creation. For a critique of terracentric conceptions of God, cf. Saskia Wendel, *Embodied Conscious Life: The Idea of an Incarnated God and the Precarious Metaphor of the Cosmic Body of Christ*, in: eadem / Aurica Jax (eds.), *Envisioning the Cosmic Body of Christ. Embodiment, Plurality, and Incarnation*, London 2020, 93–100.

lective intentionality is a concept which was developed in philosophy of action. It aims at a description of actions which have more than one agent (2). I will then apply this concept to a model of divine action (3), especially with regard to a “we-mode” of divine and human action (3.1), and to the effects of a collective agency approach on the “causality debate” by showing that a performative notion of causality may overcome the unproductive stalemate between causal and intentional approaches to divine action (3.2). I conclude that divine action may be conceptualized as communicative action and that the theory of collective intentionality may be a very useful tool in the divine action debate (4).

1 Causal Joints for Divine Action?

Over the last decades, there has been a bulk of scholarship on the question where divine action and the causal structure of the world may interlock. Some theologians and physicists, such as John Polkinghorne, assumed that an ontological interpretation of the indeterminacy of chaos theory may provide such a location.⁶ Others have regarded quantum theory as the most promising place for locating the causal joint, claiming that the indeterministic quantum processes provide God with an opportunity to determine the outcome of these processes at a microphysical level.⁷ Those who were not satisfied with this bottom-up approach, such as Philip Clayton or Arthur Peacocke, suggested a top-down concept of divine interference with the world, mainly drawing on the philosophical notion of emergence and claiming that God provides a higher-level form of causality which determines the outcome of singular causal events within the world.⁸

⁶ Cf. John Polkinghorne, *The Metaphysics of Divine Action*, in: F. Leron Shults / Nancey Murphy / Robert J. Russell (eds.), *Philosophy, Science and Divine Action*, Leiden 2009, 97–109; idem, *Theology in the Context of Science*, London 2008.

⁷ Cf. Nancey Murphy, *Divine Action in the Natural Order: Buridan's Ass and Schrödinger's Cat*, in: Shults/Murphy/Russell (eds.), *Philosophy, Science and Divine Action*, 263–303; Robert J. Russell, *Divine Action and Quantum Mechanics: A Fresh Assessment*, in: Shults/Murphy/Russell (eds.), *Philosophy, Science and Divine Action*, 351–403; Thomas F. Tracy, *Special Divine Action and Natural Science*, in: *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 7 (2015), 131–149. The views of Murphy, Russell and Tracy have been developed in the “Divine Action Project”, which was a collaboration between the Vatican Observatory and the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences from 1988 to 2003 and produced a vast amount of literature. As a first overview, cf. Wesley J. Wildman, *The Divine Action Project, 1988–2003*, in: *TSc* 2 (2004), 31–74.

⁸ Cf. Arthur Peacocke, *All that is: A Naturalistic Faith for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Philip Clayton, Minneapolis (Minn.) 2007; idem, *Paths from Science towards God: The End of All our Exploring*, New York 2001; Philip Clayton, *Adventures in the Spirit: God, World, and Divine Action*, Minneapolis (Minn.) 2008; idem, *The Impossible Possibility: Divine Causes in the World of Nature*, in: Ted Peters / Muzaffar Iqbal / Syed Nomanul Haq (eds.), *God, Life, and the Cosmos*:

I will not discuss the particular advantages and problems of each of these approaches.⁹ Rather, I would like to point out that all these different approaches share a basic commitment to figuring out a way to find gaps for some form of influx of divine causality into an otherwise causally determined universe. This basic commitment, however, faces several difficulties from an epistemological standpoint. The main problem of the search for causal joints of divine action is that the description of the personal interaction of God and the world is carried out in impersonal terms. It is a very contentious assumption that concepts of human freedom, of intentional action, or of communicative interaction may come into view at all when taking the observer's perspective of empirical sciences. If Kant is right in his *Critique of Practical Reason*, it rather is the case that these concepts are postulates of our practical reason which are only accessible from a participant's perspective.¹⁰ Therefore, it is questionable whether such a strong focus on causal joints for divine action is theologically promising. In this Kantian spirit, Wesley Wildman questions the basic assumption of the mainstream of the recent divine action debate: "One of his [Kant's; M.B.] deepest and most compelling insights is that categories of freedom and categories of causation do not mesh. [...] The quest for causal joints, whether for human action or divine action, will fail, if Kant is right about freedom and causation."¹¹ Causality may fall short of being a conceptual category which enables an adequate understanding of freedom and intentionality, at least if it is understood as efficient causality (we will see later how a broader concept of causation may help to overcome the dichotomy between causal and intentional models).¹² This does not mean that freedom and intentionality are of no interest to the natural sciences. The Kantian insight just claims that natural sciences will not be able to provide exhaustive analyses of these phenomena.

Christian and Islamic Perspectives, Aldershot 2002, 249–280.

⁹ For a discussion of these concepts, cf. Martin Breul, *Gottes Geschichte: Eine theologische Hermeneutik der Rede vom Handeln Gottes* (RaFi 79), Regensburg 2022. Cf. also the excellent work of Sarah Lane Ritchie, *Divine Action and the Human Mind*, Cambridge 2019.

¹⁰ Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, in: idem, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Berlin 1900ff. (= AA), vol. 5, 1–163, at 110–148.

¹¹ Wesley J. Wildman, *Further Reflections on "The Divine Action Project"*, in: TSc 3 (2005), 71–83, at 79f.

¹² A similar idea is defended in Michael Dodds, *Unlocking Divine Action: Contemporary Science and Thomas Aquinas*, Washington 2012. I agree with Dodds that many accounts of special divine action display an impoverished account of causation. However, I take the collective-intentionality approach to be the more promising way to overcome this shortcoming of the current debate than resorting to a modified version of the primary/secondary-cause model.

Apart from the relationship between freedom and causation, it is also the relationship between science and metaphysics which is problematic in the mainstream divine action debate. A dialogue between theology and the natural sciences is undoubtedly useful, but the assumption that a causal entailment of divine action within contexts of natural causation is *necessary* owes much to the conceptual framework of scientism. Indeed, this necessity arises only if one believes in scientism, that is in the idea that ultimately the natural sciences determine what there is in truth and in reality. The proof of the physical possibility of unmediated causal effects of God only becomes necessary if one shares the scientistic assumption that the empirical sciences provide *the only valid access* to reality and thus become the ultimate arbiters of what there is and what there is not in the world. In such a scientistic approach, there is exactly one true description of an event, so that every event must be considered *either* a natural event *or* an event caused by God. This approach does not allow for multiple descriptions of reality which simply highlight different aspects of it. If there is *only one true* description of reality, event-causal and divinely caused processes must necessarily be in a relationship of *causal competition*.

It is important to note that this argument does not show that causal competition actually exists. It rather aims to show that if one shares the assumption that there is only one true description of reality, it is hard to evade the problem of causal competition. The argument here is an epistemological, not an ontological one. Hence, the quest for a causal joint makes our understanding of divine action entirely dependent on the progress of science. As Taede Smedes notes in his discussion of the recent divine action debate:

Scientism reduces what is possible to what is physically possible. Consequently, God's action is defined in terms of physical (im)possibility, which results in a theological struggle to rescue divine action from scientism's razor. Because of the pervasive influence of scientism in our Western culture and its influence on our thinking, theology has grown blind to possibilities other than physical ones.¹³

This (basically Kantian) insight finds an interesting ally in American (Neo-) Pragmatism. In his critique of metaphysical realism, Hilary Putnam, for example, argues for a pragmatic pluralism of equally legitimate descriptions of reality. It is misconceived to assume that the empirical sciences depict and explain the world as it really is, since there is no God's eye point of view

¹³ Taede A. Smedes, *Chaos, Complexity, and God: Divine Action and Scientism*, Leuven 2004, 230.

which would allow any human being to have direct access to the furniture of reality. Therefore, it is a scientific overgeneralization to think that the empirical sciences provide an “objective view” of reality while other views, such as a theistic interpretation of reality, are merely subjective views. In the words of Putnam:

It is because we are too realistic about physics, because we see physics (or some hypothetical future physics) as the One True Theory, and not simply as a rationally acceptable description suited for certain problems and purposes, that we tend to be subjectivistic about descriptions we cannot “reduce” to physics.¹⁴

Putnam rejects the view that human beings can have a single objective description of all of reality (which is usually said to be provided by the sciences), since the linguistic categories and mental concepts which are employed by language users influence the way human beings conceptualize reality. This does not in any way imply that the empirical sciences are useless. It is merely a critique of the unjustified scientific assumption that it is *only* the empirical sciences which provide a valid view of the world. Putnam therefore calls for a “pragmatic pluralism” which allows for different perspectives on reality:

In place of Ontology (note the capital “O”), I shall be defending what one might call pragmatic pluralism, the recognition that it is no accident that in everyday language we employ many different kinds of discourses, discourses subject to different standards and possessing different sorts of applications, with different logical and grammatical features – no accident because it is an illusion that there could be just one sort of language game which could be sufficient for the description of all of reality.¹⁵

¹⁴ Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, Cambridge 1981, 143.

¹⁵ Hilary Putnam, *Ethics without Ontology*, Cambridge (Mass.) 2004, 21f. This insight is consistent with recent developments in the philosophy of science. Andreas Hüttemann, for example, argues for a pragmatic pluralism when it comes to the question which level of description must be given ontological priority, since there is no single super-science which may claim such authority: “There are many kinds of systems, microphysical, many-particle-physical, chemical, biological, etc. These systems are autonomous in the modest sense of instantiating their own laws. What kind of system we consider as a compound and a fortiori what kind of description can be considered to be adequate depends on pragmatic factors” (Andreas Hüttemann, *What’s Wrong with Microphysicalism?*, London 2014, 126). Even if the ontological unity of reality is not in question, any conception of this unified reality is possible only within the framework of a “pragmatic pluralism”. Ultimately, pragmatic (that is contextual and practical) considerations lead us to select a particular level of description as basic for a certain purpose. Proponents of a model of divine action which relies on quantum theoretical indeterminacy thus presuppose a microphysical reductionism which says that macrophysical objects behave as their microphysical constituents prescribe. The idea of an asymmetry between micro- and macro-level, however, is implausible since it implies a form of reductionism. The consequences of such a “pragmatic pluralism” for theology in general are illustrated by Sami Pihlström, *Pragmatic Pluralism and the Problem of God*, New York 2013.

Sarah Lane Ritchie has taken up these pragmatic intuitions and has applied them to the divine action debate. She sustainably criticized the divine action debate, since the “standard divine action theorists are seeking scientific answers to theological questions”¹⁶. According to Lane Ritchie, it is misguided to make empirical sciences – which do not work unless they make the assumption of a methodological atheism anyway – the arbiter when it comes to the rationality of a theistic interpretation of the world which sees traces of divine action in many aspects of reality.

It is important to see that such an insistence on the boundaries of scientific knowledge in no way devalues scientific research. This insistence merely questions the basic scientific tenor of the divine action debate, according to which the natural sciences are ultimately given a *theological authority* to decide whether there is room for divine action or whether there is not. Lane Ritchie points out the irony in standard divine action theory which starts out as a defense of a strong concept of special divine action (SDA) and ends up in affirming scientism:

Noninterventionist SDA theories give science significant theological authority, insofar as science is given the power to say where and how divine action can or cannot occur. [...] There is more than a hint of irony in noninterventionist positions: SDA theorists generally defend a strong theological affirmation of traditional theistic notions of divine activity in the world, but do this by making current science the final determinant of whether and how this activity occurs.¹⁷

If we grant, for the sake of the argument, that these considerations on the implicit scientism of the recent divine action debate are correct, they make a *prima facie* case for the need to articulate an alternative approach to divine action. It would be crucial to have an approach to divine action which is not in the chokehold of a metaphysical concept of causation but rather embraces a pragmatic pluralism of legitimate descriptions of reality. Paradigmatically, Wesley Wildman calls for such a turn in his summary of the “Divine Action Project”:

We will have to pull out of the intellectually suicidal dive that speculative metaphysics takes us on: we will have to relax the constraints that maximize traction between metaphysics and science or else collide with the immovable fact that we can never argue from categories of causality to categories of freedom.¹⁸

¹⁶ Lane Ritchie, *Divine Action and the Human Mind*, 26.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 43f.

¹⁸ Wildman, *The Divine Action Project*, 59.

As a tentative conclusion to this part of the argument, it can be stated that the focus on the identification of possible causal joints for the influx of a divine causal power into the world is misguided. It lures theology into an unfortunate dependency on the results of empirical sciences. Thereby, it implicitly affirms a metaphysical view of the universe which is scientific in that it embraces the ontological priority of scientific explanations over hermeneutical understanding, making concepts such as freedom or intentionality dependent on their empirical analysis.¹⁹ In the following, I will suggest an alternative approach to divine action which does not offer yet another attempt at locating the causal joint of divine interaction with the world. Rather, I will argue that a recently discovered concept in the philosophy of action provides the divine action debate with a conceptual tool to tackle the challenge of articulating a compelling concept of special divine action without getting tangled up in the search for a causal joint for divine action: the concept of shared intentionality.

2 Collective Intentionality: An Alternative Approach

In philosophical action theory, the ability to have shared intentions to act has only recently become an object of study.²⁰ Previously, the main object of study within action theory was the analysis of *a single action* performed by *a single, individual agent*. In contrast, a theory of action built on the capacity of collective intentionality assumes that *multiple* agents can perform *a single action*. Such a concept is not only interesting for the rather abstract reflections of action theory, but proves useful for other disciplines as well – for example, the groundbreaking works of Michael Tomasello in evolutionary anthropology rely heavily on a concept of collective intentionality which he borrows from John Searle, Michael Bratman and others.²¹ In the

¹⁹ A further problem may consist in giving the third-person perspective of an observer an epistemological privilege over the first-person perspective of a participant in certain social and historical contexts and discourses. Usually, theology is taken to be bound to a participant's perspective, since it is not part of the empirical sciences but rather of hermeneutics, trying to make sense of our existence in a complex universe. On this basis, the Swiss theologian Reinhold Bernhardt argues against ontological theories of divine action which squeeze in God into scientific theories: "Ultimately, theology is tied to the first-person perspective. Thus, I am hesitant to develop an ontological theory of divine action based on the theory of special relativity or other scientific theories, because this would tend to objectify God's activity" (Reinhold Bernhardt, *Timeless Action? Temporality and/or Eternity in God's Being and Acting*, in: Christian Tapp / Edmund Runggaldier (eds.), *God, Eternity, and Time*, Farnham 2011, 127–142, at 141).

²⁰ Cf. Hans B. Schmid / David P. Schweikard, *Collective Intentionality*, in: Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2013 Edition), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2013/entries/collective-intentionality>, accessed on 17 Feb 2023.

²¹ Cf. Michael Tomasello, *Becoming Human: A Theory of Ontogeny*, Cambridge (Mass.) 2019;

upcoming sections I will show how the concept of collective intentionality may be a useful tool to conceptualize special divine action.

A conceptual clarification is necessary right at the beginning: The concept of collective intentionality is a philosophical term that represents the capacity for shared reference to something in the world, that is, the ability to collectively refer to facts, persons or objects: “Collective intentionality is the power of minds to be jointly directed at objects, matters of fact, states of affairs, goals or values.”²² The ability to have intentions to act is a part of intentionality, but intentionality goes far beyond that. I will circumvent this conceptual difficulty – owed to the similarity of the expressions “intentionality” and “intention” – by explicitly narrowing the expression of collective intentionality to the capacity of intersubjectively sharing intentions to act. At the same time, this conceptual confinement merely mirrors the philosophical debate of recent years which is mostly focused on shared intentions.²³

The basic idea of collective intentionality may be elucidated by an example.²⁴ Imagine that you see two pedestrians walking across a street and disappearing into a bar. You may describe this event in two very different ways: Either the two pedestrians have never talked to each other beforehand, and they may not even know each other at all. They just *accidentally happened* to go to the same bar at the same time and thus each of them realized an individual intention to act. Or the two pedestrians do know each other, they have arranged to meet beforehand, and they plan to go into a bar together. Under this description, they were *deliberately walking together* in order to realize a shared intention to act – for example, to watch some football in the bar together.

Both cases seem to be clearly different from each other – in one case there is a coincidental parallelism of individual actions, in the other case there is a shared intention to perform a collective action. While in the first case two people *accidentally* happen to intend the same action individually, in the second case two people *deliberately* intend the same action. At the same time, these cases cannot be distinguished from an observer’s point of view: In both cases, two people walk down the street and disappear into a bar. So why are these two cases different?

idem, *A Natural History of Human Thinking*, Cambridge (Mass.) 2013.

²² Schmid/Schweikard, *Collective Intentionality*, 1.

²³ Ibid., 3: “The paradigm of collective intentionality in the recent debate is joint intention.”

²⁴ This example is a modified version of similar examples in Michael E. Bratman, *Shared Agency: A Planning Theory of Acting Together*, New York 2014, 4–39.

The difference between the two cases comes into sight when the latter case is described with reference to the concept of collective or shared intentionality. The hypothesis of collective intentionality assumes that *several* actors have a common, shared intention to act and can translate this intention into *one* action. The point of collective intentionality is that this common or “shared” intention to act is not simply the sum of several individual intentions to act, but it is a shared intention to act which is not reducible to the aggregate of individual intentions. Of course, it is also conceivable that different individuals each pursue the same goal and also know that the respective others pursue the same goal. Nevertheless, collective intentionality only exists when different individuals cooperate with each other and in this way constitute a *we-intention*:

The notion of a *we-intention*, of collective intentionality, implies the notion of *cooperation*. [...] There is a form of collective intentionality that is not the product of some mysterious group mind and at the same time is not reducible to individual intentions.²⁵

The *single* intention of *several* actors to act is thus constituted by the fact that it is *shared* by several actors, without these actors thereby losing their status as individual subjects. Rather, shared intention can be defined, according to Bratman, as an intersubjective and relational phenomenon: “Shared intention consists primarily of attitudes of individuals and their interrelations.”²⁶ Therefore, the point of collective intentionality is the performative and communicative inclusion of the respective other in the own intention to act. It is constitutive for this intention to be a *shared* intention, so that any form of collective agency relies on a reciprocal relationship between the different agents.

It is important to see that shared intentions to act remain intentions of individual actors, so as not to slip into metaphysically dubious assumptions on ontological fusions of agents into a single *we-subject*. At the same time, the individual agents can only be understood as intersubjectively connected agents, which is why their shared intentions consist of a public, interlocking network of the intentions of individuals.²⁷ Therefore, as a basic definition of collective intentionality, it can be stated:

²⁵ John Searle, *Collective Intentions and Actions*, in: Philip R. Cohen / Jerry Morgan / Martha E. Pollack (eds.), *Intentions in Communication*, Cambridge (Mass.) 1990, 401–415, at 406.

²⁶ Michael E. Bratman, *Faces of Intention: Selected Essays on Intention and Agency*, Cambridge 1999, 129.

²⁷ This rejection of an ontologization of the collective actor into a “*we-subject*” is not entirely uncontroversial in the debate about collective intentionality. For example, Hans Bernhard

Shared intentionality represents the ability of human individuals to come together interdependently to act as single agent [...] maintaining their individuality throughout, and coordinating the process with new forms of cooperative communication, thereby creating a fundamentally new form of sociality.²⁸

Coming back to the example we started out with – there are two people walking down a street, and it is unclear whether these two individuals just happen to accidentally walk past each other or whether they agreed to walk together – the concept of shared intentionality provides the conceptual tools to understand the difference in both cases: In the first case of random summation of individual intentions to act, there is *no common reference* – both persons can explain their actions without having to refer to the actions of the respective other in any way. In the second case, the individual action is derived from a common intention and is explicable *only by reference to the intention of action shared with the other agent*. While in the first case the second person can simply be *eliminated* from the description without changing anything in the action analysis, the second person is a *constitutive* component of the action analysis in the second case.²⁹

So far, we have formulated problems for the standard causal joint approaches to divine action, and we have analyzed a rather new conceptual tool in contemporary theory of action. The decisive question, which will be dealt with in the next section, is this: Does the notion of collective intentionality help to formulate a model of divine action which does not fall into the same traps as the causal joint models?

3 Collective Intentionality and Special Divine Action

The particular strength of the concept of collective intentionality for the divine action debate comes into play when divine action is conceptualized

Schmid defends the existence of a collective subject. Cf. Hans B. Schmid, *The Subject of "We intend"*, in: *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 17 (2018), 231–243. However, I would argue that the ontologization of a collective mode of action into a collective subject of action is metaphysically dubious and politically questionable. Therefore, John Searle is correct when he states: "We do not have to postulate some mysterious type of thought processes existing outside of individual minds. All intentionality, collective or individual, exists in individual minds. But at the same time, we can grant that the strong forms of collective intentionality [...] are irreducible to I-intentionality" (John Searle, *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization*, New York 2010, 60).

²⁸ Tomasello, *Becoming Human*, 342.

²⁹ Such an analysis of collective intentionality resonates not only with the theory of communicative action but also with Critical Theory or contemporary feminist research. For an overview of the references to critical and feminist theory, cf. Barbara Fultner, *Collective Agency and Intentionality: A Critical Theory Perspective*, in: Michael J. Thompson (ed.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Theory*, New York 2017, 523–546.

in terms of the personal interaction between God and his creatures. In such a “personal model”, divine action is understood as communicative action. If God’s essence is love, he can only employ the means of love to attract human beings. Otherwise, the relationship between God and human beings would not be a reciprocal one since human beings could never be sure about the next point in time when God would push them to do something they do not intend, eradicate their autonomous decisions or destabilize the natural environment of autonomous actions. Thus, God acts in and through human beings who, due to the communicative interaction between them, act according to God’s will. In the words of Klaus von Stosch:

The relationship between God and man is understood as dialogical and free. In this relationship, it is imagined, God tries to win man’s love by means of love alone. From this perspective, God’s ultimate goal of creation and the focus of his action consist in his intention to win “co-lovers”. [...] That is, he must act by setting mankind free and showing them love, without manipulating them into loving him but rather just affirming and encouraging it.³⁰

Such a “personal model” of divine action faces a twofold challenge: On the one hand, divine action must not be *entirely replaced* by human action, since this would essentially wipe out any meaningful talk of special divine action. On the other hand, divine action should not be conceived of as *causally intervening in the minds and brains of human beings* since this would eliminate creaturely freedom, which would make a reciprocal relationship of love between God and human beings impossible. Vincent Brümmer accurately formulates this challenge for any theory of special divine action which attempts to relate divine and human action:

If God were to bring about our actions, do we not thereby cease to be the personal agents of these actions and become rather the impersonal tools used by God to exercise his agency? If on the other hand human persons were to remain the originators of their own actions (as they must if these are to be ascribed to them), how can these actions then also be ascribed to God as

³⁰ Klaus von Stosch, *God’s Action in History*, in: *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 7 (2015), 187–207, at 190f. This insight into the necessity of interpreting divine action in terms of concepts of personal and communicative agency is also widely shared within Protestant theologues. In the words of Christoph Schwöbel: “The interpretation of God’s activity in terms of the model of personal agency is [...] necessary since the internal relation of creation, revelation and inspiration discloses the purpose of God’s action in revelation and inspires believers to find the orientation of their actions in doing the will of the creator so that their purposes are defined by God’s purpose for his creation” (Christoph Schwöbel, *God: Action and Revelation* [StPT 3], Kampen 1992, 37).

though they were his? In brief, does it make sense to ascribe the same action to two different agents?³¹

I will argue in the following that the concept of collective intentionality offers promising conceptual tools to tackle this challenge.³²

3.1 Divine and Human Action: A “We-Mode” of Action

First of all, a caveat should be made: It should be obvious that the theory of collective intentionality *cannot be univocally applied* to the relationship of God and the world. The central collective-intentional category of *mutual perspective-taking* among members of a social group does not seem transferable to the relationship between a creator and his creatures. While it seems *prima facie* unproblematic for God to take the perspective of one of his creatures, it would be presumptuous for a creature to claim to have taken the perspective of God. Moreover, the ontological asymmetry between creator and creature speaks against the assumption that both could cooperate and share intentions of action just like two human individuals. Therefore, God and human beings cannot act collectively in a way which is identical to how two or more human beings act collectively. Despite this limitation, a concept of collective intentionality is still valuable because it allows for an *analogous* ascription of collective agency between God and human beings.

The core of a collective-intentional model of divine action in the world regards a coincidence of divine and human intentions for action as an action of God through and with human beings. God does not force humans to act in a certain way, but communicatively solicits human insight into the credibility of God’s promise of salvation, which human beings are at the same time supposed to partly realize within inner-worldly structures. Human beings let the will of God happen by placing themselves in an interpretive reference to divine intentions of action, seeking to realize the love of God in the world. The autonomy of human actions remains preserved, because humans can freely qualify their action as corresponding to the divine will (or not). If God and human beings share an intention to act, a we-mode of acting can therefore be stated in an analogous way, since both do not merely *happen to intend the same thing*, but God and man share

³¹ Vincent Brümmer, *Speaking of a Personal God: An Essay in Philosophical Theology*, Cambridge 1992, 110.

³² As far as I can see, this option is rather uncharted territory for the divine action debate. An exception is Adonis Vidu’s assessment of collective agency as a conceptual tool for a Social-Trinitarian framework, cf. Adonis Vidu, *Opera Trinitatis ad Extra and Collective Agency*, in: *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 7 (2015), 27–47.

the same intention to act in a *deliberate* way. The concept of collective intentionality allows for the attribution of a *single* action to both a human and a divine agent.³³

In such a concept, neither the actions of human beings replace the actions of God, nor is human action annihilated by acting according to the intentions of God.³⁴ Such a preservation of the balance between the autonomy of God's action in the world and the autonomy of human action is only possible when we ascribe a single action to both God and one or several human actors: *God* acts in the world when human beings place him as co-actor and thus as ultimate reality in and behind their actions. This ultimate reality is unavailable to human beings and cannot be brought about by human actions alone, so that the presumptuous notion of a realization of the kingdom of God by human beings alone must be denied. God always has the initiative in that he invites humans to a particular action. An action of God, realized through a shared intention of action with his creatures, points to a greater reality which is the all-encompassing horizon of a human action. The kingdom of God cannot be fully achieved by his creatures in their everyday practice, but they can assert, in the inner-worldly concretization of the divine promise of salvation, a reality of action that

³³ At first glance, this model may seem to resemble Kaufman's and Wiles's account of divine action. However, there are important and crucial differences between their approach and the model of collective divine agency. The basic idea of Kaufman and Wiles says that there is a master-act of God, namely the divine action of creation. This act of creation would be misunderstood if it implied that this divine act would be finished at some point. Rather, the divine action of creation is an action stretched out in time, which forms the background noise of creation as a whole in the sense of a *creatio continua*: "The whole process of the bringing into being of the world, which is still going on, needs to be seen as one action of God" (Maurice Wiles, *God's Action in the World: The Bampton Lectures for 1986*, London 1986, 29). Within this continuous master-act of God there could be a multiplicity of sub-acts by his creatures but not by God himself. According to Kaufman and Wiles, both the freedom of man and the transcendence of God make the assumption of inner-worldly sub-acts of God impossible. The collective-intentional model differs in decisive aspects from the master-act/sub-act-model by Kaufman and Wiles: Their position boils down to a form of deism, in which there is no special divine action but only a general master-act of God in keeping the creation as a whole in existence. God is not regarded as someone with whom you can interact but rather as the abstract principle of existence. In the collective-intentionality-model, however, God is seen as a personal agent who communicates with his creatures and tries to convince them to act in accordance with his intentions. Thus, there is a collective action of God and man, not a neatly separated area of divine master-acts and creaturely sub-acts. For a critical discussion of Wiles and Kaufman, also cf. Klaus von Stosch, *Gott – Macht – Geschichte: Versuch einer theodizeesensiblen Rede von Gottes Handeln in der Welt*, Freiburg i. Br. 2006, 91–97.

³⁴ This does not mean that it is only the idea of collective intentionality which may achieve this ascription. In a Thomistic framework, it may be possible to make use of Thomas's concept of secondary causation, which has been transformed into a transcendental theory of secondary causation by Karl Rahner in the twentieth century. It would go beyond the scope of this paper to flesh out the relationship between Rahner's approach to divine action and collective intentionality, but it is an interesting challenge for future research.

transcends the necessarily symbolic human action and sets a horizon of meaning in which the human effort for the good is not absurd.

At the same time, the actions of *human beings* are not extinguished by the assumption of a shared intention between them and their creator, since the free consent to the concrete implementation of the divine will of salvation is a constitutive component of a collective action. Any causal manipulation of a human being's intentions to act would reduce the human action to a mere event caused by God's causal interference. It is precisely the irreducibility of *free* and *reasoned* attunement to particular reasons for action that distinguishes an action from an event. A sublation of human action into divine action would be tantamount to an "elimination" of human freedom. God does not use human beings as puppets but recognizes their autonomy and acts communicatively in order to convince them to share God's intentions. God's mode of action is not instrumental but communicative because he does not regard human beings as tools which serve his causal interventions but as autonomous persons whose insight and conviction God aims to attract by the means of love, that is by interacting with free creatures.³⁵

3.2 Collective Intentionality and the Causality Debate

The most challenging objection against such a communicative model of divine action based on collective intentionality is that it evades the "causality question". Nicholas Saunders accuses models based solely on intentionality of exactly such an evasion:

Attempts to rely exclusively on the basis of intentional statements about God's action necessarily circumvent the issue of the relationship between divine action and scientific predictability. Thus intentional language is of use in speaking about what might constitute an action of God and of the aims which God may intend to achieve as a result of that action, however it remains that

³⁵ Eleonore Stump has made use of the concept of "joint attention" to explain how a divine perspective and a human perspective on creation could be aligned. If such a "joint attention" of divine and human perspectives is successful, it becomes understandable how humans can act in the sense of God's intention: "An omnipresent God is present to each human person, in the sense that God is able and willing to be close to him and to share attention with him if he wants to share attention with God" (Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering*, Oxford 2010, 395). This is an important clarification: Since God is omnipresent in the world, he will share his intentions with anyone who is searching for him. This is different from two (or more) human beings who share attention or intentionality: In this case, both have to invest a considerable amount of energy to keep up with their commitment. However, Stump's approach seems to regard "joint attention" as a mere surplus to a Thomistic theory of divine action. I am not certain whether a Thomistic theory of secondary causation and an approach based on collective intentionality can be combined in such a way without losing the specific strengths of the collective intentionality approach.

no coherent discussion of divine action can be given without recourse to some element of the “causality debate”.³⁶

As convincing as this call for a “recourse to some element of the causality debate” may be at first glance, it remains unclear what is exactly being targeted as long as it is unclear what is meant by causality. A sufficiently broad understanding of causality may entail insights from action theory and collective intentionality.³⁷ This becomes apparent when considering Hegel’s theory of action, which has been labelled by Charles Taylor as the “qualitative view”³⁸ on action. Hegel’s qualitative view of action is characterized by developing a comprehensive and performative notion of causation. This notion does not regard a supposedly “natural” causal structure of the world as prototypical. Rather, the changes in the physical world brought about by *actions* stand on an equal footing with the changes brought about by natural *events*.³⁹ Therefore, it is important to formulate a theory of causation that is sufficiently broad so as not to identify causation with natural explanation, but to gather both natural causation and changes in the state of the world caused by intentional action into one concept, without at the same time wanting to reduce one to the other.

Now it is precisely a collective theory of action that offers to unfold this integrated concept of performative causation. Again, it is Hegel’s theory of action which laid the groundwork here: A purely causal theory of action is criticized by Hegel as atomistic, in that it exclusively focuses on individual actors and their causally effective mental states. A theory of collective agency, however, accounts for the social reality of actions.⁴⁰ As Taylor points out with reference to Hegel:

By contrast, the qualitative view does not tie action only to the individual agent. The nature of agency becomes clear to us only when we have a clear understanding of the nature of action. This can be individual; but *it can also be the action of a community, and in a fashion that is irreducible to individual*

³⁶ Nicholas Saunders, *Divine Action and Modern Science*, Cambridge 2002, 33.

³⁷ Although I cannot provide a thorough discussion due to restrictions of space, the philosophical “reasons vs. causes-debate” looms large in the background of the following chapter (for an introduction to this debate, cf. Breul, *Gottes Geschichte*, 90–143). Hegel’s theory of action is usually not a prominent concept in this debate, but that may be why his approach is especially suitable to overcome the unproductive confrontation between intentional and causal models of action.

³⁸ Charles Taylor, *Hegel and the Philosophy of Action*, in: Arto Laitinen / Constantine Sandis (eds.), *Hegel on Action*, New York 2010, 22–41.

³⁹ For a detailed analysis of Hegel’s Philosophy of Action, cf. Michael Quante, *Hegel’s Concept of Action*, Cambridge 2004.

⁴⁰ Cf. Robert B. Pippin, *Hegel’s Social Theory of Agency: The “Inner-Outer” Problem*, in: Laitinen/Sandis (eds.), *Hegel on Action*, 59–78.

action. It can even conceivably be the *action of an agent who is not simply identical with human agency*.⁴¹

If one detaches the notion of causation from the view that there is only one adequate individuation scheme for causes which focuses on event-causal explanations of action alone, a (collective-)intentional theory of action can be reconciled with the fact that intentional actions obviously change the course of the physical world.

So, collective intentionality does not offer yet another attempt to locate a causal joint of divine action within a closed system of natural causes. It rather aims at a broad and performative concept of “causation” which does not regard event causation as primary ontological category. It claims that the communicative and personal interaction between God and human beings which may lead to shared intentions of action cannot be exhaustively described in the terminology of event causation at all. The charge that the “how” of divine action remains unintelligible when abstaining from identifying a causal joint feeds on the problematic presupposition that such a “how” would have to be accounted for within an ultimately scientific notion of causality. However, if one gives up the search for a *causal joint* – not in favor of its mystification as in the theory of double agency⁴², but in favor of a qualified intentional theory of action – it becomes possible to rethink the “how” of God’s action in the world: not as a divine cause competing with natural causes, but as changes in the course of the world that are due to *communicative actions justified by reasons*. Thus, the collective-intentional model has the potential to overcome the dichotomization of personal and causal models of God’s action by integrating a broad, performative notion of causation without becoming entangled in the pitfalls of scientism. In other words, by introducing a *comprehensive and performative notion of causation* which dwells on certain insights from action theory, especially from shared intentionality, the controversy between causal and personal models of divine action may be overcome. Performativity is the key to understanding changes in the world, so that any type of causation – be it by natural causes, be it by intentional actions – is part of a performative view of the world.

⁴¹ Taylor, *Hegel and the Philosophy of Action*, 38 (emphases M.B.). Taylor does not claim that the collective is an agent itself, but rather that there are collective actions by two or several agents which are not simply the sum of each individual action.

⁴² The term *causal joint* was coined by Austin Farrer who proposed a “theory of double agency”. This theory basically claimed that there must be a causal joint for divine action, but that it is futile to look for it as it will always remain a mystery for human beings. Cf. Austin Farrer, *Faith and Speculation: An Essay in Philosophical Theology*, London 1962.

Therefore, a theory of divine action based on the concept of collective agency may help to deepen our understanding of divine action in and through human beings. God's creatures can share divine intentions of action. They are not the instruments of divine *causes of action* but rather *addressees* of God's communicative interaction. Therefore, divine action is not to be sought in the unambiguous *identification* of a causal relation between divine causes of action and their execution by human beings, but in the ambiguous *interpretation* of intentions of action. From the perspective of an uninvolved observer, divine action within human action necessarily remains hidden *as* divine action. From the perspective of a participant, one's own action can be placed in the context of an intersubjective relationship of recognition between God and human beings and can thus be interpreted as participation in the dialogical and responsive love of God with whom one might share intentions to realize his love within the world.⁴³

4 Conclusion

In this paper, I analyzed whether the notion of collective agency may be a useful tool to conceptualize divine action in an innovative way. This analysis is motivated by a certain frustration about the obsession with identifying causal joints for divine action. I argued that a theology of divine action should insist on the legitimacy of different descriptions of reality rather than trying to squeeze in divine action into a reductionist framework which is not even plausible from a philosophical standpoint, let alone from a theological one.

I argued that a possible alternative to causal joint models of divine action consists in the theological reception of the concept of collective intentionality, which states that persons have the capacity to form a "we-mode" of action, since they are not merely individuals who *happen to intend* the same thing, but enter into an intersubjective relationship that enables them to *deliberately and cooperatively* intend the same thing. This concept proves to be very useful for a new perspective on the divine action debate. God and his creatures find, as it were, a *we-mode of action* in which human beings autonomously decide to act on God's will of salvation. Such a collective-intentional model of God's action also proved to be a way to overcome a

⁴³ It is an open question whether this approach may be able to come up with a good theory of divine action within natural processes, which *prima facie* do not display intentionality in the same way conscious creatures do. For further reflections on this thorny problem for every intentional model of divine action, cf. Breul, *Gottes Geschichte*, 388–400.

too rigid dichotomy between causal and personal terminology: The collective-intentional model implies a performative notion of causation which is not identical with a scientific notion of event causality.

The paradigm case for divine action therefore becomes the collective action of God and human beings. However, it must be emphasized that this is not to say that there may be no other modes of divine action. It is not metaphysically impossible that God may find ways to dialogically interact with the natural world, for example; and it would be an interesting endeavor to analyze the consequences of innovative philosophical approaches such as “New Materialism” for an account of divine action. For now, all I want to stress is that when it comes to divine action in and through human beings, it makes a lot of sense to conceptualize this divine action within a framework of collective intentionality.

To conclude, it can be said that God acts in the world communicatively, soliciting the free consent of human beings to share his intentions for action and thus to become co-subjects of divine action. The mutual recognition between God and human beings enables the mutual sharing of intentions, so that it becomes possible to attribute a single action to two equally involved agents: God and human beings.

Zusammenfassung: In den letzten Jahrzehnten war der Großteil der Forschung über das Handeln Gottes der Identifizierung eines kausalen Bezugspunkts für göttliches Handeln in der Welt gewidmet – also dem genauen Ort, an dem eine Art göttlicher kausaler Einflussnahme und die kausale Struktur der Welt sich berühren. In diesem Artikel diskutiere und verteidige ich mehrere Einwände gegen die Notwendigkeit, einen solchen kausalen Bezugspunkt zu identifizieren. Anschließend führe ich das Konzept der „kollektiven Intentionalität“ ein, um einen alternativen Ansatz für göttliches Handeln zu formulieren. Die kollektive Intentionalität erlaubt es, eine einzelne Handlung mehreren Akteuren zuzuschreiben, wenn diese die gleiche Handlungsabsicht haben. Die Theorie der kollektiven Intentionalität bietet daher eine Alternative zu den Kausalverknüpfungstheorien göttlichen Handelns, da sie nicht darauf abzielt, irgendeine Form göttlicher Kausalität in ein ansonsten kausal geschlossenes System zu pressen, sondern göttliches Handeln in der kommunikativen Interaktion Gottes mit den Menschen verortet, wodurch diese in die Lage versetzt werden, Gottes Handlungsabsichten zu teilen.

Schlagwörter: Handeln Gottes, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, kausaler Bezugspunkt, kollektive Intentionalität