

Interpersonal Responsibilities and Communicative Intentions

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Abstract

When people interact in everyday situations, they constantly create new fragments of social reality: they do so when they make promises or agreements, but also when they submit requests or answer questions, when they greet each other or express gratitude. This type of social reality ‘in the small,’ that we call *interpersonal reality*, is deontic in nature as all other kinds of social reality; what makes it somewhat special is that its deontology applies to the very same persons who create it through a process of intentional collaboration. Aim of this paper is to show that interpersonal reality can be accounted for in terms of a suitable concept of *interpersonal responsibility*. To this purpose we first discuss the deontology that is constitutive of interpersonal reality; then we show how such deontology can be entailed by relationships of interpersonal responsibility; and finally we argue that these relationships are created by executing suitable communicative acts, understood as actions performed with a reflexive communicative intention.

Keywords

Social reality; interpersonal reality; interpersonal responsibility; communicative intention; joint commitment.

1. Introduction

When they interact in everyday situations, people constantly create new fragments of social reality. They do so when they make promises or agreements, but also when they submit requests or answer questions, when they greet each other or express gratitude. Often pieces of social reality are created without uttering a word, like for example when one keeps a door open for somebody while smiling to mean, “After you, please.” As we have argued elsewhere (Carassa & Colombetti, 2013), this type of social reality ‘in the small,’ which we call *interpersonal reality*, is deontic in nature and thus, in this respect, does not differ from other kinds of social reality. What makes interpersonal reality somewhat special is that its deontology is, so to speak, contractual, because it applies to the very same persons who create it through a process of intentional collaboration. This is not the case with other types of social reality, like for example the world of politeness, whose deontology is understood, by those who endorse it, as being binding also for those who do not participate in its creation.

Interpersonal reality is so pervasive in our everyday lives that understanding how people actually create and manage it is an important issue. Two main points deserve clarification. First, what is the nature of its deontology? And second, how is such deontology concretely created in everyday interactions? In our past work (Carassa & Colombetti 2009a, 2009b, 2011, 2013) we submitted that interpersonal reality can be adequately understood in terms of Margaret Gilbert’s concept of *joint commitment* (1989, 1996, 2000, 2006), which appeared to be suitable to explain the contractual

deontology of everyday life.¹ Joint commitments seemed to us to account well for interpersonal reality for two reasons: first, because they can entail the deontic relationships that constitute interpersonal reality; and second, because Gilbert's conditions for the creation of joint commitments (i.e., that the relevant parties mutually express their readiness to be jointly committed, in conditions of common knowledge) lie in the range of possibilities for people engaged in ordinary communicative interactions.

In furthering our analysis we partially revised our position. More precisely, we now think that the concept of joint commitment, which satisfactorily accounts for the deontology of joint activities, should not be stretched to cover all cases of interpersonal reality. There are types of situations, like those deriving from unilateral promises or from agreements involving independent individual activities, that Gilbert would regard as cases of joint commitment, but we prefer to view in terms of a more general concept, to wit, the concept of *interpersonal responsibility*. Basing the analysis of interpersonal reality on this concept marks a shift of focus from the idea of two or more agents doing something together, to the idea of an agent being answerable to someone for something. Interpersonal responsibility is strictly more general than joint commitment because joint activities entail answerability, but not *vice versa*. Even if they are not equivalent to joint commitments, however, interpersonal responsibilities are sufficient to entail the deontic relationships that are constitutive of interpersonal reality, and can be brought about in everyday communicative interactions.

Aim of this paper is to introduce the concept of interpersonal responsibility and to show how it accounts for interpersonal reality. To this purpose, we shall first discuss the deontology that is constitutive of interpersonal reality; then we shall suggest that such deontology is entailed by relationships of interpersonal responsibility; and finally we shall argue that these relationships are created intentionally in informal conversational interactions. Along the way we shall also discuss the relationship between interpersonal responsibility and joint commitments; in particular we shall try to show that interpersonal responsibilities share the same fundamental logical properties of joint commitments, and that Gilbert's conditions for the creation of joint commitments also apply to interpersonal responsibility, provided that certain technical terms (like "express" and "readiness") are suitably construed.

The paper is structured as follows. In Section 2 we clarify our idea of interpersonal reality, and discuss the pros and cons of explaining it in terms of joint commitments. In Section 3 we suggest that interpersonal reality is better analysed in terms of relationships of interpersonal responsibility. In Section 4 we discuss how such relationships can be brought about through the performance of communicative acts. Finally, in Section 5 we draw some conclusions and delineate directions for future work.

2. Interpersonal reality

In two successful books, John Searle (1995, 2010) has argued that social reality is a matter of collectively accepting or recognising positive and negative deontic powers, which are understood as relationships of directed obligation, right, entitlement, and the like. We have analysed elsewhere the possible forms that such deontic relationships may take (Carassa & Colombetti,

¹ Gilbert's joint commitment may well be the only concept extensively discussed in the literature that can serve this function: writing about a related topic (i.e., the general concept of right), Leif Wenar (2005/2011) remarks that «the contractual approach to the justification of rights has received surprisingly little scholarly attention» and refers the reader to Gilbert's paper on promisees' rights (2004).

2013), adopting a standpoint inspired by Hohfeld's treatment of legal relationships (1923), and dealing with both basic relationships (like right and obligation) and non-basic ones (like authority and liability). For the goals of this paper, however, it is important to take a closer look to the roles of the different subjects that partake in a deontic relationship. As all such relationships share a similar logical structure, it will suffice to discuss one of them, like for example obligation.

An obligation involves two subjects,² that we call the *parties* of the obligation. In a typical obligation one of the two parties (that we call the *debtor*) owes the execution of an action of a certain type to another subject (that we call the *creditor*); for example, if Ann promises to Bob to bring him a bottle of Brunello from Italy, and her promise is accepted, then an obligation is created, with Ann as the debtor and Bob as the creditor, to the effect that Ann will bring to Bob a bottle of Brunello from Italy.

It is important not to confuse the creditor of an obligation with a possible *beneficiary* of the action that is due by the debtor. In a slightly different example, Ann may promise to Bob to bring a bottle of Brunello to his sister Claire, whom they both know to be fond of Tuscan wines. In such a case, Ann will be obligated *to Bob* to the effect that she brings a bottle of Brunello *to Claire*: in other words, Ann is the debtor and Bob is the creditor of an obligation to perform an action that will mainly benefit a third subject, Claire. Being a beneficiary of an action is different from being the creditor of an obligation to perform the action: even if the person who will mainly benefit from Ann's action is Claire, Ann's promise is a promise to Bob, not to Claire; therefore, if Ann fails to keep her promise, then she violates a deontic relationship that binds her to Bob, not to Claire. This distinction can easily be overlooked because it often happens that the creditor of an obligation is also a beneficiary of the action (although not necessarily the only one): this is typical, for example, of promissory obligations.

Human beings are bound by different types of deontic relationships, which may be qualified as legal, moral, social, political, and so on. Such deontic relationships differ in many respects, and in particular in the process through which they are brought about. It seems that *interpersonal obligations* (like the ones arising from promises and agreements) are somewhat different from other types of obligations, like social or moral ones. The difference has to do with a concept that was already present in Roman legal thought, that is, the distinction between the deontic relationships that are *inter partes*, in that they hold between certain well-identified parties, and those that are *erga omnes*, in that they are directed to everybody. For example, while the rights deriving from a contract are *inter partes*, the rights of property owners recognised by most legal systems are *erga omnes*.

In general, we say that a deontic relationship is *interpersonal* if it concerns certain specific agents, who are at the same time those who collectively recognise the deontic relationship and those who are liable to it. For example, if Ann and Bob decide to go dancing together next Saturday night, the two of them are both the agents who collectively recognise the binding force of their agreement, and those who are bound by the agreement. Most importantly, Ann and Bob are bound by the agreement just because they intend to be bound by it, and have manifested their respective intentions to each other in the appropriate way. On the contrary, other types of deontic relationships are typically purported, by those who collectively recognise them, to bind a wider set of agents, whether or not these intend to be so bound. This appears to be typical of social, legal, and moral rules, to which people are considered to be liable even if they do not recognise them.

² For the sake of simplicity, throughout this paper we confine to situations involving two agents; however, nothing seems to prevent a generalisation to larger groups.

As we have just remarked, to create interpersonal reality two or more parties must intend to do so, and manifest their intentions in the appropriate way. But what does such an appropriate way consist in? And why should this be sufficient to create interpersonal reality, understood as a network of deontic relationships? Before we can try to answer these two questions it is necessary to understand better what collective acceptance amounts to in the case of interpersonal reality. Searle (1995, 2010) suggests that the type of acceptance required for the construction of the social world is a form of collective intentionality, which is not reducible to personal intentionality even in conditions of common belief: Searle has defended this position in many writings, at least since his paper on collective intentions and actions (1990). In *Making the Social World*, however, Searle clearly distinguishes between a stronger form of collective intentionality, that he calls *cooperation*, and a weaker form, that he calls *collective recognition*:

«For example, in an actual transaction when I buy something from somebody and put money in their hands, which they accept, we have full-blown cooperation. But in addition to this intentionality, we have prior to the transaction and continuing after the transaction an attitude toward the pieces of paper of the type that I am placing in the hands of the seller, that we both recognize or accept the pieces of paper as money, and indeed, we accept the general institution of money as well as the institution of commerce. As a general point, institutional structures require *collective recognition* by the participants in the institution in order to function, but particular transactions within the institution require *cooperation* of the sort that I have been describing.» (Searle 2010: 56–57)

The point that Searle is making here is that creating a new piece of social reality involves more than what is required to recognise social reality which has been created elsewhere.

At this point it seems that we have identified three crucial features of interpersonal reality. First, interpersonal reality consists of deontic relationships; second, these deontic relationships are *inter partes*, in the sense that they concern certain specific individuals (the parties of the relationships); and third, the deontic relationships are not only recognised, but intentionally and cooperatively constructed by the parties. In view of these features, Margaret Gilbert's concept of a joint commitment (Gilbert 1989, 1996, 2000, 2006) appears as a promising candidate for understanding the special type of contractual relationships that constitute interpersonal reality. The main reasons are that joint commitments entail the deontic relationships that one would expect in cases of interpersonal reality (like directed obligations, rights, and the like), and that to create them nothing more is required from the parties than the expression, in suitable conditions, of certain psychological attitudes.

However, joint commitment brings with it a strong idea of *doing something together* that does not fit every kind of interpersonal reality. To clarify this point let us consider three different examples, that we shall use as paradigmatic scenarios in the following discussion:

1. Ann has always disapproved of Bob's sedentary lifestyle. One day Bob says to Ann, "From tomorrow I'll be running for an hour every morning, I promise." To which Ann answers, "This is a very good idea, Bob!"
2. Ann says to Bob, "If you do the laundry, I'll make dinner," and Bob accepts (see Gilbert 2000: 50).
3. Ann and Bob are spending a few days in Buenos Aires. They enter a dancing hall: "Shall we tango?" asks Bob; "Oh yes, I'd love to," answers Ann.

These examples have something in common: in all cases Ann and Bob agree on a course of action (at least in some sense of "agreeing"). But there are also differences: in case 1, running is an activity that Bob is going to carry out by himself; in case 2, Ann and Bob are supposed to

carry out two independent courses of action in parallel; and in case 3, there is one collective activity for Ann and Bob to perform, each of them doing their own part. How are we going to make sense of these examples? In her works on plural subject theory, Gilbert argues that all cases like the ones we have described can be analysed in terms of joint commitments. It is important to note that, in Gilbert's view, joint commitment always involves the creation of a plural subject of doing something as a body:

«Quite generally, if [two subjects] are jointly committed, they are jointly committed to doing something as a body or, if you like, as a single unit, or "person." Doing something as a body, in the relevant sense, is not a matter of "all doing it" but rather of "all acting in a way as to constitute a body that does it.» (Gilbert 2000: 54)

Now, it may seem odd to view all our examples as cases of "doing something as a body." This formula may sound natural when it is applied to Ann and Bob dancing tango together,³ but what about Bob's unilateral promise of running for an hour every morning? In this case it appears that Ann and Bob are *not* going to do something together. Concerning unilateral promises, however, Gilbert suggests that what the two agents jointly commit to do as a body is not *carrying out the promised action* (which is obviously not the case), but rather *upholding the joint decision* which constitutes the promise:

«There is some reason, therefore, to see a typical promise as a joint decision of the promisor and promisee to the effect that the promisor is to act in a certain way. According to the account of joint decisions just given, promises would then be joint commitments to uphold as a body the decision that one party (the so-called promisor) is to do a certain thing.» (Gilbert 2006: 221)

Analogously, example 2 (which like example 1 does not involve a joint activity) would be understood in terms of Ann and Bob's joint commitment to uphold as a body the decision that each party is to do a certain thing.

It seems to us, however, that cases like 1 and 2 are far from the sense of doing something together that is present in joint activities like dancing, playing a duet, or rowing a double kayak. In fact, the only way to view our examples 1 to 3 as cases of doing something together is to shift focus from the activities that the parties are to carry out (running, doing the laundry, making dinner, dancing), to the fact that the parties are supposed *to uphold as a body their joint decision*. But what does this exactly mean? It does not seem to us that plural subject theory provides a clear answer.

The fact that Gilbert's definition of a joint commitment seems to be somewhat problematic is not sufficient reason to abandon the concept altogether. As we have already remarked, joint commitments provide a very natural account of certain cases of interpersonal reality; perhaps, even if the idea of "doing something as a body" does not adequately characterise interpersonal reality in all circumstances, it is possible to work out a more general idea that serves the purpose. In the next section we shall argue that an appropriate understanding of interpersonal reality can be achieved if we replace Gilbert's notion of "doing something as a body" with a concept of

³ Even in this case, in fact, we doubt that the "as a body" qualification does justice to what actually happens. True, two good tango dancers may reach an ideal flow of coordination, and this will give an observer the impression that the couple form a unit. But this is a third-person view of what is going on: from the point of view of the two dancers, the experience of being two to dance seems to us at least as crucial as the flow of coordination: from the first-person and second-person perspectives, what the two dancers are doing is not likely to appear as something that is done by a single person or body. We plan to develop this point further in our future works.

interpersonal responsibility. This move corresponds to a shift of focus from we-ness to answerability, which we regard as more suitable to account for the nature of interpersonal reality.

3. Interpersonal responsibility

As interpersonal reality (like all social reality) is understood as consisting of deontic normativity, the ontology of deontic relationships is a major issue. The problem is, what does it actually mean for a person to have an obligation (or a right, an entitlement, etc.) directed to someone else? There seems to be no universally accepted answer to this question. Margaret Gilbert (1999, 2006) follows Hart (1955) in conceiving an obligation as a case of owing an action to someone, but this conception of obligation seems highly metaphoric: after all, it may be more sensible to go the other way around, and define “owing” in terms of certain types of obligations. John Searle (1995), on the other hand, does not even try to define obligation, which he takes as a primitive concept. There is nothing wrong, we believe, in recognising that the definition of deontic relationships require the introduction of some special primitive, in that they cannot be completely reduced to non-deontic concepts. But the choice of obligation as a primitive appears to be arbitrary. The point is that all deontic relationships (like obligation, right, permission, prohibition, etc.) can be defined in terms of each other, so why should one of them be taken as a primitive? It would be preferable to find out what all deontic relationships have in common, and then take this as a primitive concept.

An interesting attempt in this direction is the reduction of deontic concepts to the notion of *violation*, developed for the first time by Anderson (1958) in the field of deontic logic. According to this reduction, an action is: *obligatory* if failing to perform it necessarily leads to a violation; *forbidden* if performing it necessarily leads to a violation; and so on. In general, logical treatments are agnostic as to what counts as a violation, provided that one understands it as a state of affairs which is somehow bad and, at least in principle, avoidable.⁴ According to the context, we can think of it as the violation of a social rule, a law, a moral principle, or some other type of normativity. In the context of interpersonal reality, as we conceive of it, it appears that the relevant type of violation is the violation of a contractual relationship, intentionally accepted by two parties. For example, if Ann has promised to Bob to look after his cat while he is away, and Bob has accepted her promise, Ann and Bob are bound by a relationship that will be violated if Ann does not live up to her promise. We think that the best way to describe this situation is to say that the relationship in question makes Ann answerable, or responsible, to Bob for the well-being of his cat. This suggests that the most basic deontic notion involved in interpersonal reality may be a suitable notion of *responsibility*.

The concept of responsibility is extensively analysed in the literature (see for example Franken Paul et al. 1999; Cane 2002). A crucial distinction is between *historic* (or backward-looking) and *prospective* (or forward-looking) responsibility. Historic responsibility concerns the allocation of blame for something that happened in the past; for example, if one says that parents are responsible for the misconduct of their children, what is at stake is historic responsibility. On the contrary, prospective responsibility has to do with future courses of events; for example, saying that parents are responsible for the safeness of their children concerns prospective responsibility. Of course, there are strict relationships between the two forms of responsibility; in particular, attributing to an agent historic responsibility for some event *X* presupposes that the agent was prospectively responsible for preventing *X* from taking place.

⁴ The term “violation,” now usual in deontic logic to describe this type of reduction, does not appear in Anderson’s paper, who instead refers to «a state-of-affairs \mathcal{P} which is “bad,” but avoidable» (1958: 103).

According to Cane (2002), responsibilities serve four different functions: the ontological, the explanatory, the evaluative, and the deontic. In particular the deontic function, which consists in specifying how people ought to behave in the future, is characteristic of prospective responsibility. As in this paper we are only concerned with the deontic function of responsibility, we shall limit our interest to prospective responsibility, which, for the sake of brevity, from now on we shall simply call “responsibility.”

Considered under the aspect of their deontic function, responsibilities are akin to obligations. A first difference is that an obligation, as it is normally understood, is an obligation *to do something*. Therefore the typical content of an obligation is the description of an action type: for example, one may have an obligation to complete a paper by a given deadline, or to make dinner on Sundays. On the contrary, the typical content of a responsibility is the description of a type of states of affairs: for example, when babysitting little Diana Bob is responsible for Diana’s safety. This difference of grammar between obligation and responsibility reflects a deep logical difference: while obligations tend to specify what actions have to be taken, responsibilities tend to set standards that have to be achieved or maintained. This implies that responsibilities function as situation-dependent generators of obligations: for example, if little Diana runs the risk of hurting herself, Bob responsibility concerning her safety generates an obligation to do something to prevent it. But there is no way, in general, to list in advance all obligations that a specific responsibility may generate. The generative power of responsibility is situation-dependent: as Richardson (1999: 221) puts it, an «essential aspect of taking responsibility for something, prospectively, is undertaking to cope with surprises.» In other words, responsibility thematises the open-endedness of the future.

Human beings typically accrue responsibilities of different kinds (social, legal, moral, and so on), which come from different sources (social rules, laws, moral principles, etc.). A responsibility, however, may hold between certain specific persons just because they have intentionally agreed so: this type of responsibility we call *interpersonal responsibility*. The main distinctive feature of interpersonal responsibility is that it is intrinsically collective, in the sense that agent *A* cannot be the debtor⁵ of an interpersonal responsibility toward *B* unless *B* regards himself as the creditor of the same interpersonal responsibility. How does all this compare to Gilbert’s conception of joint commitment? We believe that the main difference is that interpersonal responsibility does not bring with it the requirement of “doing something as a body.” To clarify this point, we shall now discuss the three examples presented in the previous section.

In case 1, Bob promises to Ann that he will run for an hour every morning since the following day, and Ann accepts the promise. We regard an act of promising to do *X* as an offer, made by the promisor to the promisee, to the effect that the promisor takes prospective responsibility that he will do *X*, on condition that the promisee accepts the role of the creditor of this responsibility; this implies that a promise succeeds only if the promisee accepts it. In case 1 a relationship of responsibility of Bob to Ann is successfully created; while the resulting situation is irreducibly collective (as we have argued before), no requirement of “doing something as a body” is involved.

It is often said that even with unilateral promises, like the one of our example, the promisee is not completely ‘passive,’ but is required to do certain things, or at least to abstain from doing certain things; for example, the promisee is supposed not to actively hinder the promisor’s attempts to fulfil his promise. While this is a reasonable remark, we think that it does not turn

⁵ We extend the use of the terms “debtor” and “creditor” from directed obligations to interpersonal responsibility.

the promisor's unilateral action into an instance of doing something together with the promisee: abstaining from getting in the way of the promisor is not something that the two agents are going to do together.

Example 2 can be analysed in similar terms. In this case, however, the interaction between Ann and Bob creates two relationships of interpersonal responsibility which are in a sense 'interlocked':

- (i) the responsibility of Ann to Bob, to the effect that Ann will make dinner, on condition that Bob lives up to (ii); and
- (ii) the responsibility of Bob to Ann, to the effect that Bob will do the laundry, on condition that Ann lives up to (i).

We call *mutual responsibilities* two relationships of interpersonal responsibility which are interlocked by conditions of the form of (i) and (ii) above; that is, we say that agents A and B have mutual responsibilities to achieve X and Y (respectively) if, and only if:

- (i) A is responsible to B to the effect that X is achieved, on condition that B lives up to (ii); and
- (ii) B is responsible to A to the effect that Y is achieved, on condition that B lives up to (i).

As our example shows, there can be a situation of mutual responsibility even when there is no collective activity that A and B are supposed to do together; in other words there may be no activity X such that Ann and Bob could reasonably describe what they are doing by saying, "We are doing X ."

Finally, in example 3 A and B are *jointly responsible* for achieving some state of affairs X . More precisely, we say that A and B have joint responsibility to achieve X when they are mutually responsible (in the sense defined above) for achieving X , by each of them giving an appropriate contribution; that is, when

- (i) A is responsible to B , to the effect that X is achieved, with A giving an appropriate contribution, on condition that B lives up to (ii); and
- (ii) B is responsible to A , to the effect that X is achieved, with B giving an appropriate contribution, on condition that A lives up to (i).

In particular, in case 3 we have:

- (i) Ann is responsible to Bob, to the effect that Ann and Bob dance tango together, with Ann giving an appropriate contribution, on condition that Bob lives up to (ii); and
- (ii) Bob is responsible to Ann, to the effect that Ann and Bob dance tango together, with Bob giving an appropriate contribution, on condition that Ann lives up to (i).

It should be noted that there is a substantial difference between joint responsibilities and non-joint mutual responsibilities. In example 2 (a case of non-joint mutual responsibilities), Ann is responsible to Bob for achieving success in making dinner, and Bob is responsible to Ann for achieving success in doing the laundry. On the contrary in case 3 *each of them* is responsible *to the other one* for their joint success in dancing tango. This difference has a far-reaching deontic impact. In case 2, if it turns out that there is no laundry powder left, only Bob is responsible for getting some; of course Ann may have a personal reason to help Bob to do so, but this is not entailed by their agreement. In case 3, on the contrary, if Bob has a difficulty in doing his part, their joint

responsibility is a reason for Ann to help him, because she is responsible (as is Bob) for securing success of the joint activity.⁶

There is a point in our definition of joint responsibility that may seem problematic, that is, the idea of “giving an appropriate contribution.” How is an agent going to establish if her contribution is or is not appropriate? We believe that there is no simple answer to this question. It is part of the very concept of a responsibility that it behaves as a situation-dependent generator of obligations; but there seems to be no way to explicitly specify in advance what obligations are implied by a given responsibility in a specific situation (see Richardson 1999 for a discussion of a similar problem).

As we have already pointed out, we adopt a concept of interpersonal responsibility instead of Gilbert’s joint commitment because we do not want to necessarily bring in the idea of “doing something as a body.” However, the two concepts are strictly related, and it is important to understand how. Clearly, joint commitment implies interpersonal responsibility, because when two parties are jointly committed to *X* as a body, then in particular each party is responsible to the other one to perform their part of *X*-ing (Gilbert, 1989). More precisely, joint commitments appear to correspond to the special case of interpersonal responsibility that we have called joint responsibility. However, we still have to show that interpersonal responsibilities account for the deontology of interpersonal reality.

In her writings on plural subject theory, Margaret Gilbert argues that joint commitments have a number of characteristic features, the most fundamental of which can be described as follows:

1. *Deontology*. Joint commitments entail obligations of each party towards all other parties. Such obligations are internal to the joint commitment, in the sense they do not derive from any external source (e.g., moral principles, etc.).
2. *Lack of unilateral rescindability*. Once a joint commitment is made, it is not possible for one of the parties to unilaterally rescind it without at the same time violating the joint commitment.
3. *Simultaneity*. All obligations entailed by a joint commitment come into force simultaneously, when the joint commitment is created.
4. *Interdependence*. All obligations entailed by a joint commitment are binding until all parties live up to them; if a party violates one of her obligations, then the joint commitment typically becomes voidable by the other parties.

We have contended elsewhere (Carassa & Colombetti, 2013) that these features of joint commitments are crucial to account for interpersonal reality. But as we presently rely on the more general (and thus logically weaker) concept of interpersonal responsibility, we have to show that the features do not get lost along the way. We now argue that this is not the case.

As far as deontology is concerned, we have already argued that prospective responsibilities of all types generate situation-dependent obligations; more specifically, interpersonal responsibilities

⁶ The examples discussed in this section do not exhaust all interesting patterns of distribution of interpersonal responsibilities among different agents. Another interesting type of situation arises when a group of agents collectively take responsibility for some state of affairs toward a creditor, who may in turn be a single agent or a group. For example, Emily and Farah may agree with George that the two of them would care after George’s garden; then Emily and Farah share the position of debtor in an interpersonal responsibility, whose creditor is George. It would be interesting to study how the collective responsibility of Emily-and-Farah to George entails interpersonal responsibilities of Emily to Farah and of Farah to Emily; however, we have to leave this analysis for another occasion.

generate directed obligations, whose debtor is the debtor of the responsibility, and whose creditor is the creditor of the responsibility.

The impossibility to rescind an interpersonal responsibility unilaterally is part and parcel of its being interpersonal. If Ann is the debtor of an interpersonal responsibility toward Bob, then Bob is the creditor of the same responsibility. We take it to be part of what it is to be a debtor or a creditor of a deontic relationship that one does not have the authority to alter the status of the other party without his consent: this implies that Ann cannot unilaterally give up her position, because this would imply voiding Bob's position, and *vice versa*.

Finally, with one-sided interpersonal responsibility (like in the case of a unilateral promise), both simultaneity and interdependence derive from the fact that all obligations are entailed by one single relationship of interpersonal responsibility, and therefore hold only as far as this is in force. With mutual and joint responsibilities the situation is slightly more complex, because the obligations have multiple sources; however, the 'interlocked' logical form of mutual and joint responsibilities is such that the obligations of A to B and the obligations of B to A either stand or fall together.

But then, if interpersonal responsibilities have the same basic logical features of joint commitments, where do they differ? To repeat, the only difference is that two agents may be bound by a relationship of interpersonal responsibility without being "jointly committed to doing something as a body": it may well be that it is impossible for two agents to do something together without setting up a suitable relationships of interpersonal responsibility, but it is possible to be bound by an interpersonal responsibility even when there is nothing that the two agents do together.

We now move with the last topic of this paper, namely, to the problem of showing how relationships of interpersonal responsibility can be created in everyday interactions.

4. Interpersonal responsibility and communicative intention

We shall now argue that in order to set up a relationship of interpersonal responsibility it is necessary and sufficient to perform certain *communicative acts*; in turn, a communicative act is understood as an action performed with a specific type of intention, called a *communicative intention*.

So far we have repeatedly described interpersonal responsibility as a contractual relationship. This means that a relation of interpersonal responsibility can hold between two parties only if it is intentionally constructed by both of them. In general a successful instance of collective co-construction is realised by a sequence of two acts: the first act, performed by one of the two parties (say A) can be regarded as an *offer* to the other party (say B) to set up a relationship of interpersonal responsibility R between them; the second act, performed by B , consists in the *acceptance* of A 's offer. In what follows, we do not define the 'direction' of relationship R , whose creation A is offering to B : that is, we do not specify whether A is volunteering as R 's debtor or as R 's creditor.⁷

To make her offer, A has to perform an action, x , with a particular type of intention, I , that we shall now analyse. First, the result that A tries to achieve by doing x is to create a relationship R of interpersonal responsibility with B . It must therefore be part of A 's intention I in performing x that:

(I_1) A intends that relationship R be set up.

⁷ An example of the first case would be Ann's promise to Bob to care after his cat; an example of the second would be Ann's request to Bob to bring her a bottle of wine.

But, as we have remarked, R is a contractual relationship, and thus cannot be set up unless A 's intention I_1 becomes common knowledge of A and B . Therefore it has also to be part of

I that:

(I_2) A intends that intention I_1 become common knowledge of A and B .

Moreover, it must be part of I that also I_2 becomes common knowledge of A and B , because an apparently unintentional display of I_1 would not be regarded by B as an offer to set up a contractual relationship:

(I_3) A intends that intention I_2 become common knowledge of A and B .

This line of reasoning can be replicated up to any level n . A way to account for a similar structure is to assume that intention I is *reflexive*:

(I) A intends that relationship R be set up, and that intention I become common knowledge of A and B .

The form of intention I corresponds to a particular version of what has come to be known as a *communicative intention*, that is, as the intentional structure underlying *communicative acts*.⁸ Therefore, a successful execution of action x can be described as, “ A communicates to B that she intends to set up relationship R with B ”:⁹ this is what we have called *offering* to B that relation R is set up.

After x has been performed, it is up to B to accept or not to accept A 's offer. Considering again that interpersonal responsibility is a contractual relationship, and thus requires mutual recognition of the intentions to participate in it, to accept A 's offer B has to perform a matching communicative act that acknowledges A 's offer and at the same time expresses B 's intention to set up relation R with A (this act we call an *acceptance* of A 's offer).

This line of reasoning suggests that the performance of suitable communicative acts is necessary to set up a relationship of interpersonal responsibility. But is it also sufficient? Pretheoretically this appears to be the case: our daily experience is that we successfully create interpersonal responsibilities just by performing communicative acts; for example, we do so every time we exchange promises, make agreements, submit requests, and so on. The point, we believe, is that to create a contractual relationship like interpersonal responsibility nothing more is required than reaching certitude about the two parties' intentions to do so: and after communicating their respective intentions to each other, it is no longer possible for the two agents to deny that each of them has such an intention.

It is interesting to compare our ideas on how interpersonal responsibilities are set up with what plural subject theory says about the creation of joint commitments. In Gilbert's view, to make a joint commitment it is necessary and sufficient that the relevant parties express, in conditions of common knowledge, their readiness to be so committed. Now, remember that we regard joint commitment are a special case of mutual responsibility, which in turn can be defined in terms of interlocked interpersonal responsibilities. So how would agents A and B set up a joint

⁸ Intentions of similar form were first introduced by Grice (1957) to characterise what he called *non-natural meaning*, and later interpreted by Strawson (1964), with some amendments, as the intentional structure underlying human communication. The communicative intention we specify here is reflexive, in the sense that it includes its own common recognition in its conditions of satisfaction (see Airenti et al. 1993 for a defence of the reflexive view of communicative intention).

⁹ This brings in the problem of how a communicative intention can be recognized by the addressee of a communicative act. In the current paper we cannot expand on this important issue, which is related to the general phenomenon of human intersubjectivity.

commitment to X ? According to our treatment, what is required is that each agent performs an action with the following intention:

- (I) the agent intends that a joint commitment to X be set up with the other agent, and that intention I becomes common knowledge of the two agents.

It seems that such a communicative act can be adequately described as “expressing readiness, in conditions of common knowledge, to participate in a joint commitment to X ,” provided that: “expressing p in conditions of common knowledge” is interpreted as communicating that p (according to our previous definition of communication); and the “readiness to participate in a joint commitment to X ” is interpreted as the intention that a joint commitment to X is set up with the other agent. Under this construal, when an interpersonal responsibility can be interpreted as a joint commitment our condition for the creation of interpersonal responsibilities turns out to be equivalent to Gilbert’s condition for the creation of joint commitments.

It is important to remark that, by definition, a communicative act is understood as any action performed with a communicative intention. This implies that such an act need not be linguistic (i.e., realised by uttering a sentence in a natural or artificial language). Indeed, we do not conceive of our work as supporting the deontic normativity of *language* (in the line, e.g., of Searle 2007); what we suggest is that the logical structure of communicative intentions is necessary and sufficient to create deontic normativity in the form of interpersonal responsibilities.

This view we have propounded so far has important consequences concerning the link between interpersonal normativity and communication: on the one hand, it clarifies how interpersonal normativity can be concretely created; on the other hand, it identifies a crucial function of communicative intentions, that has almost entirely been neglected so far. To the best of our knowledge, Michael Tomasello is the only author to explicitly highlight the intimate connection between the deontic dimension of human interaction and communicative intentions:

«One important function of the Gricean communicative intention—above and beyond the communicator alerting the recipient that she wants something from her—is that it essentially makes everything public, what some theorists call “wholly overt.” This means that the norms apply and cannot be avoided.» (Tomasello 2008: 214)

However, we think that Tomasello’s remark does not do justice to the main function of communicative intentions: what is really important, in our opinion, is not that such intentions make it so that «norms apply and cannot be avoided,» but rather that they are necessary and sufficient to create new deontic normativity of the interpersonal kind.

5. Conclusions

In the previous sections we have argued that interpersonal reality (i.e., the part of social reality that is collaboratively created by certain agents for themselves) consists of relationships of interpersonal responsibility, which are set up through communicative acts, understood as actions performed with a communicative intention. By giving a central role to interpersonal responsibility, we have departed to a certain extent from our previous treatment of interpersonal reality in terms of joint commitments (Carassa & Colombetti, 2013); even so, we are deeply indebted to Gilbert for her innovative and rich account of the collective dimension of human interaction and for the conceptual tools of plural subject theory, that we have somewhat generalised to fit our goals.

We believe that this paper gives two main contributions. The first concerns the introduction of the concept of interpersonal responsibility as the key deontic relationship underlying interpersonal reality. Interpersonal responsibilities have the same crucial properties of Gilbert’s

joint commitments, but do not presuppose that the agents who are so related do something together in any strong sense. In our view, this is a considerable advantage if one looks for a general analysis of interpersonal reality.

The second contribution is that we bring to the light an important connection between deontology and communication. More precisely, we suggest that the successful performance of certain communicative acts is both necessary and sufficient to create deontology of the interpersonal kind. This view may have an important impact on the theories of human communication. As of today, in fact, there is a sharp separation between two types of approaches: *naturalistic theories*, based on a Gricean approach, which completely neglect the deontic side of communicative interactions; and *normativistic theories*, like Alston's version of speech act theory (2000) and Kukla and Lance's pragmatism (2009), which crucially rely on deontic normativity in the analysis of communicative acts, and consider the underlying intentions as irrelevant or at least marginal. If we are right, however, a unified approach to communication becomes possible: the key to a successful integration of the two types of theories is to recognise the essential role played by communicative intentions in the creation of interpersonal normativity.

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