

Radical Embodiment and the Relation Between Individual and Joint Action: A Level-Neutral Approach

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Abstract

A common assumption in the philosophical literature on joint action is that individual-level action is both ontologically and explanatorily prior to collective action: in this view, joint action emerges from and is therefore best explained in terms of individual-level mental (intentional, propositional) states. This leads to the awkward position of attributing individual-like minds to groups. But assigning priority to the collective level is equally unsatisfactory. Here I draw from radical embodied cognitive science to offer a level-neutral alternative. Whether individual or joint, successful action is properly understood as the soft-assembly of a synergistic system, i.e., a higher-order control system exhibiting dimensional compression and reciprocal compensation. This level-neutral lens of synergistic dynamics helps elucidate the circular relation between individual and collective action: joint action recruits individual-level motor/cognitive mechanisms, yet individual-level mechanisms only emerge through development in social settings resulting in a nested, self-reinforcing coordinative structure for action, both individual and collective.