



TRANSCRIPT

Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa

Two Philosophers Ponder What It Means to Act Together

Philosophers Michael E. Bratman, from Stanford University, and Margaret P. Gilbert, from UC Irvine, are this year's recipients of the Lebowitz Prize for Philosophical Achievement and Contribution, presented by the Phi Beta Kappa Society and the American Philosophical Association. In their respective work, each has expanded on the question of "What is it to act together?" based on sometimes divergent philosophical underpinnings of how two or more individuals interact in a collaborative effort.

**Note: This text is based on the podcast that was edited for form and length by the Key Connections production staff from the full interview/discussion.*

Musical Interlude

Fred Lawrence: This podcast episode was generously funded by two anonymous donors. If you would like to support the podcast in similar ways, please contact Hadley Kelly at hkelly@pbk.org. Thanks for listening.

Musical Interlude

Thank you for joining us for Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa. I'm Fred Lawrence, Secretary and CEO of the Phi Beta Kappa Society. On our podcast, we welcome leading thinkers, visionaries, and artists who shape our collective understanding of some of today's most pressing and consequential matters. Many of them are Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholars, who travel the country for us, visiting campuses and presenting free lectures that we invite you to attend. For the Visiting Scholars' schedule, please visit pbk.org.

Today, I welcome two extraordinary philosophers, Dr. Michael E. Bratman and Dr. Margaret P. Gilbert. Michael Bratman is the U.G. and Abbie Birch Durfee Professor in the School of Humanities and Sciences at Stanford University. Margaret Gilbert holds the Abraham I. Melden Chair in Moral Philosophy and is a Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at the University of California at Irvine.

These two scholars are this year's recipients of the Lebowitz Prize for Philosophical Achievement and Contribution awarded by the Phi Beta Kappa Society in conjunction with the American Philosophical Association, the APA, for recognition of their outstanding achievement in the field of philosophy.

Each year, the Lebowitz award is presented to a pair of philosophers who hold contrasting views on an important philosophical question. This year's topic that the two will discuss, "What does it mean to act together?" focuses on their respective views of the philosophical underpinnings of how two or more individuals come together in a collaborative effort. They will present their work in April 2020 at the APA Pacific Division Meeting in San Francisco, and we are thrilled to have them sit down with us today in the studio to talk about their respective viewpoints on this topic. Welcome, Professors Bratman and Gilbert.

Michael Bratman: Terrific to be here, Fred.

Margaret Gilbert: Great to be here.

Lawrence: Michael, you were an undergraduate of Haverford College, where I'm pleased to say you were a member of Phi Beta Kappa, and then pursued a Ph.D. in philosophy at Rockefeller University in New York. Now, I normally think of Rockefeller University as a place for the study of the sciences, natural sciences at the highest level. How does one wind up going from Haverford to study philosophy at Rockefeller University?

Bratman: Well, that's a great question, Fred. I went to college thinking I would be a mathematician. I was very interested in mathematics and physics. And I went to Rockefeller in part because I thought of myself as pursuing that interest at the same time as pursuing the interest in philosophy that had been emerging in my life. I thought I could somehow try to put together the precision and elegance and power of mathematical thinking with focused thinking about who we are, what's important about human life, and so I looked for a graduate program that I could put the two together.

I ended up at Rockefeller, which was at that time experimenting with a new graduate program in philosophy that lasted about 10 or 12 years.

Lawrence: And Margaret, you were educated on the other side of the pond with a double first from Cambridge in Classics and Philosophy before going on to Oxford for Doctor of Philosophy, D. Phil, at Oxford. But was there a moment before that that you read something and said, "This is elegant. This is interesting. I could do this. I could be a philosopher?"

Gilbert: I think I've always been a pretty ruminative person, liking to think a lot. I went to Cambridge, actually, to study Classics, but I really enjoyed studying Classics, which involves the literature and the philosophy and the history of the ancient world, the

Greeks and Romans. When I finished two years of that, I felt that I would like to switch to one of the topics, like philosophy or history or literature or something else. And I thought quite a bit about which.

One of the things I remember reading, lying on the grass in my college, on the college lawn, was I read Descartes' *Meditations*. It's a very short book and a beautiful book. And I did think, "Wow, this is really cool." That was one of the steps on the road to being a philosopher.

Lawrence: Do you remember what it was about it that struck you as really cool?

Gilbert: Well, you know, Descartes thinks about, "Is there anything I can be certain of at all?" and starts with the external world that we all think of. I mean, the chairs and tables that we're all so familiar with and take for granted, but he says, "Well, what if I could be dreaming? Maybe I can't be so sure of those things, but what could I be sure of? Well, even if I'm doubting about the existence of the chairs and tables, that means I exist because I'm doubting. And basically what's most famous is "I think, I'm thinking, so I exist."

So that's something foundational and fundamental. I guess it's all very clearly done, and it's hard to get away from the self once you've got the self. That was what was most striking and of course it's extremely famous.

Lawrence: This is the I think-

Gilbert: I think therefore I am.

Lawrence: ... therefore I am, which is coming from the very personal out, but there's also an outside-in going on.

I know, Michael, you were in school, both undergraduate and particularly in your graduate work during the time that higher education in America was quite affected by the Vietnam War. I wonder how those circumstances affected your thinking and your direction, and ultimately, the projects you would consider taking on.

Bratman: Substantially. I came to be focused on the moral issues, the political issues, the issues of political obligation, the issues of justice that were raised in very poignant and forceful ways by the political events of the Vietnam War. And that turned my attention more and more to philosophy.

Lawrence: I wanted to turn to the project, the joint project, that you have that led to the Lebowitz Prize, which is precisely a project about joint action and joint intentionality and what it means to act together. The genius of the Lebowitz Prize is that it is designed to attract two philosophers working in the same area, but coming at it from different perspectives. So it is designed to have a kind of disagreement in certain ways, but agreement in the ultimate project.

And in some ways, that seems to be the whole scope of what your project is about. So, the question, what is it to act together, is a seemingly very simple question, but it is deceptively complex. Margaret, let me start with you. What does it mean to act together?

Gilbert: Oh, so I have to give my theory straight out and cold?

Lawrence: This would be the time for that.

Gilbert: So, let's say that two people are going for a walk together. That would often start with one person saying, "Shall we go for a walk?" The other would say, "Yes." And they set out and they go on their walk. And let's say it's a nice walk and they finish and everything goes well. So what was going on internally, I guess, is one way of looking at the question, what thoughts, what commitments, what beliefs are involved in the participants when they actually do this?

And my theory, basically, is that people create what I refer to, in a technical jargon, as the people make a joint commitment to espouse as a body the goal of going for a walk together, which would be cashed out as I think we do, at least in our cultural context, as we're going to be walking along for a certain period of time alongside each other, roughly, and keeping abreast and going, perhaps, for some pleasant places and then getting back to the start.

So this idea of joint commitment is central to my work. I don't think people need to explicitly enter an *agreement* to do something together. They can spontaneously jump into a boat and row together to save someone drowning in a lake, but there's something there that is, I think, the substance and the essence of an agreement, which is what I call a joint commitment of the two, which they impose on the two of them so that they have a single source of their individual actions, if you like.

Lawrence: So Michael, what does it mean to act together?

Bratman: What is this phenomenon? There's a phenomenon out there that we all agree on is fundamentally important in our lives. It's important because we care a lot about doing things with each other, and it's because we get a lot of things done that way. So then we're looking at this phenomenon, and we're looking around for conceptual, metaphysical, normative resources to theorize about this phenomenon in an illuminating way. That's what I take to be the issue, so how best to think about this phenomenon if we're going to try to understand its deep structure.

So I think Professor Gilbert and I are in agreement that that's the focus of our concern, but we end up answering that question differently. We both agree in many cases there's this kind of role for, "You have an obligation to me to play a certain role or to continue in your role in the shared activity." But, for me, that's not the absolute core of the phenomenon. So think about a string quartet. Now, of course if one of the string

players got up and left in the middle of a Mozart quartet, that would be quite annoying, right?

But if you try to think about what explains the extraordinary interpersonal coordination that's going on, and you ask yourself, "What's the deep structure of that?" That's my question. And the answer I give, frequently there are things like people owning it and have obligations to each other to continue and so on, but the deep structure is not there. The deep structure--or anyway, my proposal, and let me just say, I think philosophy is an experimental discipline.

The experiment is you try to develop systematic, articulate ways, ways of thinking about important things, and then you see if they work. If they work, great. If they don't, you've learned something. So my experiment is in the tradition of thinking that there's some striking parallel between the way we coordinate our activities over time when we say grow food in the garden, and the way we coordinate with others when we play quartets. And I try to get at that parallel by way of thinking about how we coordinate our activities over time through planning.

A powerful way of thinking about the cross temporal organization that's so striking in a human life is the role of planning in settling now on things later, and then letting those later activities that you're planning to perform shape what you do now. Travel plans are a perfect example. You plan to go to D.C. next week, and that means I've got to get on the web and get a ticket with United and so on. Okay. So I spent a lot of time in my life thinking about the deep structure of temporally extended planning agency.

And then my thought was to take that theory and see if it can be used as the basic resource for thinking about the underlying structure of doing things together. And that led me to a view about the underlying structure of being at the bottom was what I call shared intention. It says, "We share an intention to play the quartet together," which is to some respect similar to professor Gilbert's idea of joint commitment but doesn't presuppose a structure of obligations each to the other, but rather the ways in which the planning of each involve the other in ways that seem distinctive of playing the quartet together rather than four string players often in separate corners playing their parts separately.

Lawrence: So how is that different from the notion of a joint commitment among the four of them that they will each play their parts? That they will each make this music come out?

Bratman: I think of shared intentions as a complicated construction of the intentions in planning attitudes of the individuals when they're hooked up in the right way. And I can say more about what that means. Okay. The norms that are crucial to that are norms of rationality. So, the idea is individual planning agency over time, these planning attitudes in the individual case have a rational dynamics. Then I'm going to

hook them up with the other person's planning attitudes in a complicated way that we could talk about.

I call that a construction of shared intention. Then I'm going to see if that gives me the resources to get at the basic phenomenon of acting together, whereas the... So Professor Gilbert will speak to this, but whereas the idea of joint commitment brings in at the ground level, as I understand it, the idea that I have an obligation to you, and you have an obligation to me. I owe it to you to play my part. You owe it to me to play my part.

That should be a lemma, not a--If it's true at all, that should be a lemma, not a basic theorem as it were.

Gilbert: So I don't think the notion of joint commitment is mysterious. And I was thinking actually in relation to our coming here today, it's always another chance to think about these things, that I'm not sure whether Michael and I--I mean, Michael is a really grand expert on intention and I'm not, but I have feelings about--- views, that is---about intentions and decisions, and that what we do when we make an intention or decision, and certainly we introduce a norm into the world.

But one way of thinking of it is, like, if I decide to do something, I've laid a norm on myself, I've made it the case that now I ought to do something, which was not the case before, so I've made a difference to the normative landscape of my life. It's not a moral matter, but it's a matter that I will now make a mistake if I don't do what I decided to do. I think Michael has something along those lines, but it's sort of delicate as to how we describe it.

If I can introduce the possibility of error into my world by making a decision, so that's one thing I think is true at personal level. And then at the joint level, or the level of two people, I think *we* can introduce the possibility of *both* making errors by this process, which an agreement is the most familiar version of it. But I think we don't have to do this explicitly. So we impose on the two of us now *as one*, I put it, that each of us is now open to making errors in action.

So it's like--there's a strong analogy with a decision or an intention in the individual case versus what happens in the joint case. But I just want to say one more thing in following up on Michael. None of that refers to obligation yet. We can introduce the notion of joint commitment as an analog of individual commitment with a normative impact, and then the obligations are things we can sort of see or derive from the fact that we've done this to one another.

And actually, I just brought out a book called *Rights and Demands*, and I pretty much take the whole book to argue two things. First of all, that if you jointly commit with somebody, then you do have obligations to one another to conform. And secondly, I don't think there's any other ground of obligations to one another than a joint commitment.

So a joint commitment is a way we can commit the two of us together as one, analogously to an individual intention or decision. And as a result of what we've done, we can explain how, to put it in another way, each of us has the standing to demand conformity of the other one to that commitment. It's sort of a bundle of ideas that fit together tightly, but the obligations really come second.

Bratman: So this is great because I think it really is showing exactly where the fissures are between us. Without going into too much detail, so in shared intention, according to me, the construction, this is a constructivist methodology. We're building up from the intentions and plans of individuals to the shared intention. Now, shared intention, take the shared intention to play a quartet together. So according to me, that consists in the basic case, each of us intends that we play the quartet, and each of us intends that we play the quartet in part by way of the other's intentions that we play the quartet and by way of sub plans that mesh.

Okay, there's more there, but that's the basic idea.

Lawrence: And I can't play the quartet by myself. It would require that--

Bratman: Right. So now there's a commonality of view here because if I share the intention with the other three to play the quartet, and I put down my violin, and I continue to participate in the shared intention to play the quartet, then there's a rational failure on my part, this means/ends failure because I intend that we play, and I'm failing to intend the means. But similarly, if I intend that we play the quartet and you dropped your bow, there's going to be rational pressure to me to help you pick it up.

After all, what I intend is we play the quartet, and a means to that is you have to have your bow, so there's rational pressure. So the rationality constraints that play the role in the rational dynamics of individual planning agency grab on to the sociality-- we're playing the quartet by way of sub plans that mesh by way of each of our intentions to play, and impose rationality constraints, for example, for me to help you.

The shared intention has introduced, I forget exactly how Margaret put it, but introduced forms of certain rational standards that involve us.

Lawrence: Right. Who sets these standards?

Bratman: The standard's being set by us because we are--

Lawrence: As individuals or before the quartet, these standards that preexist the moment we sit down to play the quartet?

Bratman: There are two moments. There are the rationality norms that pre-exists the sharing that apply to the individual planning agency. But then they grab on to the content of the shared intention and tell me that I'm under rational pressure to promote

the joint action of playing the quartet because I'm one of the participants in the shared intention, but there wouldn't be a shared intention without the other three.

Lawrence: Right. So would you say the implied prerequisite becomes membership in this group?

Bratman: If by prerequisite, you mean under the rational pressures that the shared intention imposes, the answer is yes.

Lawrence: So, Margaret suggested that, but for the commitment that I make to another, there were no other source of obligations.

Gilbert: It's not just obligations because the word "obligation" is pretty ambiguous, but obligations to others that actually pair, inextricably really, with the standing to make demands of others to act in certain ways. That's what I'm suggesting requires joint commitment. Not that you might not be morally required perhaps to help somebody, but that they can't demand of you that you help them, without a joint commitment.

Lawrence: It might be a responsibility I have, but it does not vest a right in somebody to expect them to exercise that responsibility.

Gilbert: That's another way of putting it.

Lawrence: Mike, does that make sense?

Bratman: I think this is actually the crucial moment. If I don't help you pick up your bow when you drop it, but I participate in this Bratman-constructed shared intention, I'm rationally criticizable, because I've violated a rationality norm that says 'If you will the end, will the means.' But the end I'm willing is part of the shared willing of our play in the quartet, and the rationality norm has implications by virtue of the shared intention. So, in that sense, we're setting it.

We can now explain why if Margaret's playing the cello, and I'm playing the violin and I put my violin down, but I continue to participate in the shared intention to play the quartet, Margaret can say, "Michael, you're being irrational," and she'd be right. That's a form of criticism. Does she have standing to *demand* that I play the violin? It doesn't follow from what I've said that she has standing to demand.

She has standing to *criticize*, but demand is a different idea than criticize. Demand is *owed to her*. This story of the rationality norms and the way they are engaged by the shared intention gets us criticism of my failure. If we want to get standing to demand, we need to go to something further.

Gilbert: I think of the acting together, and it's something we do---it is very primitive, I'm sure, from the point of view of human life, and maybe it even predates moral thinking. Yes, I mean, I might have the standing to demand that you continue to engage with me

in this egregiously immoral act, but it would actually also be wrong for me to do so. So I agree with that. I'm trying to think what Michael is saying now about, sort of, the core of the issue where...

I mean, he has this idea of this structure, *complex* structure, of what I call personal intentions. I have an intention. You have an intention. The other two people in the quartet have an intention. And we all intend that we play the quartet, so there's a bunch of personal intentions and there's a bunch of rationality norms. And then Michael wants to say, "And that's the core of our acting together, and our having the standing to make demands of one another to sort of keep on track is sort of extra."

And it might be added by our *agreeing* to do this, and then we've got the---the *preliminary* sets up the obligations to one another---or then he suggests it might come in some other way. Now, I think it's hard to come in in any ways. As I said---I don't want to repeat myself, but I would just say one more time---it's not clear to me that without a joint commitment, you can actually get that stuff at all.

I don't agree with a whole lot of literature about promissory obligation for instance, which understands it all in terms of moral requirements. The promiser, the person who makes the promise, is obligated to the promisee by virtue of their creation of a joint commitment. I think that makes for a good theory of promising. Anyway, so the issue seems to be that we've reached right now in talking this through, like, what's the core phenomenon?

Michael is saying it's a structure of personal intentions. I'm saying, "Well, when we set up or get into doing something with another person what we do is establish a joint commitment." I'd like to throw this open in a sense and say: I'm not sure quite how we might solve this problem: is it a case of each person being possibly right about a different thing? Are we truly disagreeing?

So I'm throwing that out to Michael. These are different accounts of acting together. One last quick addition to that: if we *have* jointly committed to, one might say, intend or endorse as a body this goal and then act accordingly, in order to conform to our joint commitment, we have to act precisely the way that Michael's quartet players have to act or Michael's walkers together have to act.

The proper conduct of those who have entered a joint commitment of the relevant kind is going to involve, actually, a lot of these sorts of intentions, intentionally acting in meshing ways, helping each other, you know, maybe even picking one of the people up and helping them keep on the hike by carrying them along. Who knows? But that's an interesting fact. I mean, given the joint commitment, you get a whole lot of stuff with it. You don't just have a joint commitment, then everyone sits back and goes to sleep.

When it's ideally, when it's working properly, then we'll get tons and tons of intentions, which will move people along. One question is, "How do we decide between these two views?" I'm not quite sure.

Bratman: Okay. I'm not sure I can give a general answer, but let me say something about those ideas that came up at the end. I think it might be helpful. Remember, my idea is you have this theory of the intentions and plans as structuring cross-temporal organization. Then you give them distinctive contents. We play the quartet. We play the quartet in part by way of your intention to play the quartet. We play the quartet in part by way of meshing sub plans.

Our intentions are interdependent in following through with our intentions. There's mutual responsiveness. These are all part of the construction.

Lawrence: Right.

Bratman. Okay. And that construction though is an individualistic construction. You're using as the building blocks for the construction the planning structures that were introduced to think about time, and now you use them to think about sociality. Now, it's kind of straightforward that when we have a shared intention, in my sense, that people are under rational pressure to form subsidiary intentions.

That's just the rational dynamics of intentions and plans, because if I have an intention that we play the quartet, and the necessary means to that is my playing the violin, then the rational dynamic... Remember, I said rational is playing a dual role. It's a standard of criticism, and it's part of the explanatory story. There's a rational dynamics that explains the story. So, as clear as anything in this area, that if things go properly, that is to say in accordance with the rationality norms, I will be set to pick up my violin and start playing.

And since I intend that we do it by way of meshing sub-plans, I'll be set to be responsive to the tempo you take it at, and so on.

Lawrence: Right.

Bratman: Okay. And since my intention will be according to the construction interdependent with yours, if you go off, that intention, my intention will normally just drop out. A lot of the dynamics come straight out of the planning theory once you give it the contents of our planning the quartet.

Gilbert: Yeah.

Lawrence: The whole point of the Lebowitz Prize was to create a context for this kind of discussion. I know it will continue in San Francisco with the two of you. I want to, as we conclude, take us to an even more abstract direction, and end with this. This is the big question for each of you: So to what extent do you think acting together, and you

have different accounts of what acting together means, although there's some strong similarities or overlap at some level, but to what extent does acting together tell us about the very nature of what it means to be human?

Is there something about humanness that requires acting together? Does it tell us something about who we are and maybe even how it distinguishes us from other primates? I told you it was a big question. Michael, what do you-

Bratman: Do I have to go first?

Lawrence: I think you have to go first.

Bratman: Okay. I'm quite sure that the phenomenon of acting together plays an absolutely central role in our lives. As I was saying before, both we value it intrinsically, and we value it instrumentally. It's hard to imagine how our human lives could proceed without acting together. And in fact, it's a striking fact about social science that it hasn't really fully come to terms with that in many contexts--with real acting together as opposed to strategic interaction when you're not bumping into each other.

So I certainly agree with the spirit of that comment. Whether it's distinctive of humans is an empirical question, so I, as a philosopher, I'm listening. I'm all ears of whether it's distinctive of humans, but whether it's important, central in our lives seems to me clear and the first step of philosophical reflection.

Gilbert: I just want to emphasize that how could this not be one of the most important topics to think about, because doing things with other people is not only one of the things that we---something that's sort of ubiquitous in every life, we're always doing things with other people, but it's also terribly important to us, and it's something that I think makes us happy and makes us feel bonded and together.

And so we should try to plumb the depths of it because it's absolutely crucial to being human, even if it's also crucial to being something else.

Lawrence: Well, I think it's particularly appropriate for the Lebowitz Prize, which is based on the work of two people coming together to talk about different angles on the same problem, so how appropriate that we should be talking to the Lebowitz Prize winners about acting together. Thank you both for joining me in the studio.

Bratman: Thank you.

Gilbert: Thank you very much.

Musical interlude.

Lawrence: This podcast is produced by Lantigua-Williams & Co. Paula Mardo is our sound designer. Hadley Kelly is the PBK producer on the show. Emma Forbes is our

assistant producer. Our theme song is “Back to Back” by Yan Perchuk. To learn more about the work of the Phi Beta Kappa Society and our Visiting Scholar Program, please visit pbk.org. Thanks for listening. I'm Fred Lawrence. Until next time.

Editor's Note: This episode and transcript represent an abridged and edited version of the original conversation.

CITATION:

Lawrence, Fred, host. “Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa: Two Philosophers Ponder What It Means to Act Together.” *Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa*, The Phi Beta Kappa Society, November 1, 2019. www.pbk.org.

Produced by

**Lantigua
Williams
& Co.**