Chapter 2

Collective Reasoning and Coalescing Reasoning

ABSTRACT

In this chapter, we consider in some detail the nature of collective reasoning and the existing approaches to supporting the collective reasoning that reasoning communities undertake. In approaching the development of technologies to support the functioning of reasoning communities, it is important to be clear on the nature of the tasks involved in collective reasoning. In Chapter 1, we have outlined the main tasks of collective reasoning as: individual reasoning, reasoning communication, and the coalescing of reasoning. However, it is important to identify the ways in which collective reasoning is indeed cognitive cooperation and to what extent there is a case that it is mutually beneficial cooperation as well as being beneficial in its outcomes.

People who are not prepared to allow fairness to bend, soften, or demote their moral concerns command our respect. We often call them, with approval, “principled.” But people who are prepared to relax their principles to some extent in order to achieve cooperation on a basis all can accept also command our respect. We call them, with approval, “reasonable.”

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Collective reasoning is one way in which we might expect a reasoning community to operate. It is not the only way, because different communities operate in different ways and the product of their operation can be different in form. For example, the Australian Refugee Review Tribunal (RRT) determinations are decisions made by individuals but yet the decision makers collectively form a reasoning community.

What is meant by collective reasoning? Does an ordinary meeting in most organizations where
Collective Reasoning and Coalescing Reasoning

decisions are made involve what we might think collective reasoning to be? Does the democratic election of a political party to office involve collective reasoning? Does the decision of a jury in a criminal trial involve collective reasoning? Does the decision of a group of physicians considering treatment of a patient involve collective reasoning?

These questions provoke the realization that there are many different contexts for collective decision-making and the possibility of collective reasoning. It is well understood that if commitment to a decision by the group is important - so that there can be agreeable and supportive participation in the actions, then participation in the decision-making and acceptance of the decision is a key element (O’Brien, 2002). If the parties can deliberate to a consensus on a course of action, they would be able to understand the outcome as guided by reason and the group cooperation as a whole to be guided by reason. This process of community or group deliberation is worthy of some consideration. Firstly, the group nature implies a shared nature in the deliberation. So what are people or agents doing when they deliberate together? McMahon (2001) calls “cooperation to achieve epistemic goals,” cognitive cooperation. One aspect of this cooperation is the gathering of facts or fact finding. This fact finding is an important stage that works to provide evidence relevant to the issue being considered. The other aspect that we might more clearly identify as collective reasoning is the cooperative construction and understanding of the rational force behind a decision. This process aspect of the activity would entail the development of the reasoning to decisions in some mutual way as well as a mutual understanding of the strength of this reasoning. Therefore, the process would involve the identification of evidence, grounds and facts as well as the reasoning that connects these to the conclusion and provides the force of the justification for a decision based on the facts and reasons. However, this still does not seem to make clear what collective reasoning is. We need to ask what the product of collective reasoning would be. That is, what it is that those engaged in collective reasoning produce and how is it of benefit?

As we have introduced it in Chapter 1, collective reasoning as undertaken by a reasoning community involves individual reasoning, communication of reasoning and a cooperative effort in coalescing reasoning to better support individual reasoning and reach a decision or answer a question on some particular issue that is a concern for the reasoning group. For reasoning communities or groups, each participant in the group is interested in obtaining a decision or solution that could not be obtained, or obtained with the same level of quality, by reasoning alone as a sole reasoning agent. It is in this sense that collective reasoning can be regarded as being mutually beneficial. The benefit that each individual agent seeks is a well justified or well reasoned decision. There can be a dual benefit here as the individual may adopt modifications and improvements to their own individual reasoning, but of course, the overall improvement in group reasoning and decision-making is also a reason for participation. By well justified, in this context we mean a decision that is well supported by relevant reasons that are structured as a cogent and forceful argument. This avoids the issue of whether this is the correct or ‘true’ decision as it sets its evaluative framework and priorities with those that we attribute to a reasoning community, namely that the decision is the one that is most strongly justified by the strength of the reasons that the group accepts support it. The approach of viewing justification as being connected with or being a route to truth has some backing (see Bonjour (1985) pp. 7-8). However, in our notion of collective reasoning within a reasoning community each participant expects to obtain a justified decision. This decision should also be one that has undergone a broad consideration of the relevant factors from many different perspectives as well as reasons and selected as the decision that is most forcefully and convincingly supported by the relevant reasons.
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