

Igor Cvejić

## The Forms of Social Engagement Regarding the Subject of Import

**Abstract** My aim is to draw attention to the different forms of social engagement regarding the subject of import. The concept of import was introduced in the theory of action by Bennet Helm. It denotes an intentional characteristic of an object, to be viewed as worthy of pursuit or avoidance. However, according to Helm, the subject of import could be: either an individual person, the other or plural agent. Using this division in the context of social engagement, I propose to distinguish three forms of social engagement: (1) personal social engagement, (2) social engagement for the sake of others and (3) social engagement as togetherness. Social engagement as togetherness (plural agent) should not be confused with plural action with the same goal-directedness (which is part of personal social engagement). This argumentative step was enabled by Helm's complex theory about "us" as a subject of import, contrary to some contemporary theorists who dispute the possibility of plural agents.

**Keywords:** engagement, import, action, plural agents, we-intentions

332

The purpose of this text is to draw attention to certain distinctions that I find pivotal both for our (self)understanding and for the exercise of social engagement. I argue that these distinctions are engendered by the different constitutions of the import of an object. The concept of 'import' is borrowed from Bennet W. Helm. It denotes an intentional characteristic of an object or an event, to be viewed as worthy of pursuit or avoidance, or having some significance for us (Helm 2001: 21). An import could be constituted in three ways according to the qualitative differences of the subject of import: on a personal level, by sharing the import *of* others, together *with* others. This would lead to distinctions in the phenomenological structure of the import. In line with this, I argue, we have to distinguish three forms of social engagement: (1) *personal* social engagement, (2) social engagement *for the sake of* others and (3) social engagement *as togetherness*.

### Social Engagement and the Problem of Import

The term *social* engagement (chosen among other candidates<sup>1</sup>) refers to activities and actions undertaken in a social sphere, community or group. As such, it underlines an absence of emphatically private individual actions, that are not societal in any significant way.

---

1 Similar terms are public engagement, civic engagement and community engagement. *Public engagement* is today mostly used to refer to interaction of experts with

Helm's notion of import seems very important for understanding rational actions in general. The so-called belief/desire model for explanation and justification of rational action, introduced by Donald Davidson (Davidson 1963), is still standard today. This model explains reason-based actions as necessarily having two basic components: (1) a conative component, goal-directedness or desire (so-called world-to-mind direction of fit); and (2) a cognitive component, a belief concerning the type of activity that would lead to the realization of goals (mind-to-world direction of fit). An action, according to this model, could be rationally explained and justified if both the goal of this particular action and the appropriate belief that this action would lead to the stated goal could be denoted. However, Helm argues that there is a discrepancy between goal-directedness and our usual commitment to some goals and objects of our actions, which he calls the problem of import. Here is his example about the difference between goal-directedness of a computer to win a game of chess and commitment to realization of goals usual for a desiring person:

333

“To characterize the computer as playing chess is to articulate a goal around which the computer's behavior is organized: its outputs are intelligible as nonrandom legal moves that make some sense as attempts to win. For all practical purposes, this ability requires that the computer be able to apply at least a rudimentary form of instrumental rationality [...]. However, does the computer *desire* to win? For this to be so, winning itself must be intelligible as worth pursuing for the computer. Yet the appeal to instrumental rationality so far simply presupposes the worthiness of winning and cannot on its own provide an account of it. Because we cannot make sense of winning as worth pursuing by the computer's lights, the best we can say is that the computer exhibits rationally mediated goal-directedness rather than a genuine desire.

By contrast, a dog can desire to go out on a walk. This means not merely that the dog is able to behave in ways that are instrumental to its going on a walk by, for example, bringing its leash to its master or scratching at the back door, but also that the dog cares about going on walks: this is something that matters or has significance or importance to it, as is clear in part from its frustration or anger at not being let out and its joy when it finally is.” (Helm 2001: 31–32)

---

wider public. In Great Britain it is even defined by NCCPE (*National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement*) and HEFCE (*The Higher Education Funding Council for England*) as: “the myriad of ways in which the activity and benefits of higher education and research can be shared with the public“ (NCCPE, internet). Defined thus, this term is too narrow for my purposes. *Civic engagement* mainly refers to participation of citizens in some political activities and institutions. In liberal-democratic societies it mostly refers to participation of individuals in elections, volunteering etc. *Community engagement* is the term used to denote collective, ‘bottom-up’ actions in local communities. Although all of these terms are potentially applicable, the term *social engagement* seems the least polluted and much broader than others.

The point of this example is that we need to distinguish between goal-directedness and desires, in the sense that desires involve some significance that objects/actions have for us, as being worthy of pursuit. This enables Helm to easily introduce the concept of import:

“I shall use ‘import’ to denote any such worthiness imparted by a subject’s concern for something. As such, import provides a non-instrumental reason for the dog’s pursuit of the walk and therefore makes intelligible the idea that the dog desires it and finds it worth pursuing. Consequently, the dog is intelligible as a qualitatively different kind of thing than a chess-playing computer: the dog is a potential subject of import and as such has a ‘stake’ in the outcome in a way that is simply unintelligible for the computer.” (Helm 2001: 32)

334

I will now link the problem of import with social engagement. We may say that many activities we have, activities that can be understood as social, do not necessarily involve our commitment to their goals. These could be dull administrative or military services, or jobs we do only to get paid (for example, a person who works ‘for’ terrorists in an illegal weapon factory to secure means for a numerous and starving family, against or regardless of his moral sentiments), etc. This is what Kant referred to as the private use of reason, the limited use of reason, where objectives are not to be questioned:

“I call ‘private use’ that use which a man makes of his reason in a civic post that has been entrusted to him. In some affairs affecting the interest of the community a certain [governmental] mechanism is necessary in which some members of the community remain passive. This creates an artificial unanimity which will serve the fulfillment of public objectives (*Zwecken*), or at least keep these objectives from being destroyed. Here arguing is not permitted: one must obey.” (WA, AA 08: 37)

In contrast to these types of social activities, social engagement presupposes certain activities, certain commitments to goals one sets to achieve. In this sense, a possible definition of social engagement, as the participation in social activities, would be all too broad. Many social activities we partake in have some kind of rational goal-directed pattern, but we are not committed to the objectives of actions in all of them. This is exactly where import, as defined by Helm, comes in. Therefore, I suggest that we should understand social engagement as the social activity with a commitment to the objectives of this activity, i.e. a social activity undertaken by someone who is the subject of import. It should be noted that this definition is in itself also broad, because it involves what can be understood as social engagement only tentatively (for example, a person protests, all by himself, in front of the Parliament). (1) Social engagement usually presupposes commitment exercised *with* another person or a group of persons, whereas individual social actions could be based only on a limited (private) single evaluative perspective. (2) Thus, following Helm, we could differentiate between actions

mentioned above and actions that are not based on a single evaluative perspective *per simpliciter*, but relative to the other(s) as a subject of import. Helm names these actions *engaged actions* (Helm 2009: 93). (3) We could also make a further step, and introduce a case where an import is not relative only to a single evaluative perspective or to the others as the subject of import, but where the group or a community itself becomes the subject of import. Helm's term for the latter is *plural robust agency* (Helm 2009: 266) – in the context of social engagement I chose to use the term 'social engagement as togetherness'.

## 1. Personal Social Engagement

By personal social engagement, I refer to those social activities in which import is relative only to a single evaluative perspective. People have a variety of reasons for their actions, different goals and different imports; different objects have significance for them, and each and every one of us has specific evaluative perspective. Many, if not all our actions compel us to engage in different kinds of social activities, be they the simplest collective actions, or battles with others for social status, or, ultimately, common engagement to obtain the best possible system in which to live. They include not only desires and private interests, but also attitudes and personal views on how our social structure should be arranged. As persons, we are not mere subjects of desires and needs; we are also capable to evaluate those desires and needs and to constitute our own rational goals (Helm 2009: 97).

335

Before I offer a definition of personal social engagement, I want to draw attention to a specific kind of limitation linked to this concept. It refers to the limitation of a single evaluative perspective that constitutes the import. I find it important because it is contrasted to the one commonly held prejudice that the only relevant distinction is the one between private goals (e.g. to get better income) and public goals (e.g. to improve the educational system for the good of society). This is a distinction in goal-directedness: I could program a computer to exercise a rational pattern that would provide me with better income, or I could program a computer to work for the development of the educational system. However, apart from goal-directedness, persons also have desires, objects have some significance to them to which they are receptive, i.e., they are the subjects of import. Moreover, they evaluate their goals and by doing so they constitute what it is that has an import for them.

Hence, personal social engagement refers to social activities where the subject of import is the individual person confined to his/her own single evaluative perspective. Different goal-directedness does not denote a difference in the subject of import, which will be clarified below. Engaging for the sake of my own private interest or for certain public goals can be based on a single evaluative perspective.

### Plural personal social engagement

There is another difference between actions that I undertake *alone* (on my own) and those actions that I do *with others*. The most common case of acting in concert (actions with others) relies on the proper matching of goal-directedness: there are many people who have the same goals and they may act collectively to realize these goals. This could also be called *plural intentional system* (Helm 2009: 252). However, as Searle has already argued, we have to intuitively make a distinction between matching individual intentions (I-intentions) and “collective intentional behavior that cannot be analyzed as just the summation of individual intentional behavior” (We-intentions) (Searle 1990). The same goal-directedness of many ‘personal’ actors does not implicate a qualitative distinction regarding the subject of import. Therefore, plural intentional systems are not to be misread as *plural agents* who themselves are the subjects of import.

336

Thus, by plural personal social engagement I refer to all kinds of social activities undertaken by many persons who have the same goal-directedness, and where the subject of import is relative only to his/her own single individual evaluative perspective. For example, if a policy has a negative effect on the unemployed, they all may realize (from a single evaluative perspective) the damage that could be inflicted on their well-being and engage to restrict this policy; the same can be said about anti-capitalist activists (who from their own single evaluative perspective have a personal view on how our social structure should be arranged) who engage in the same activities as the unemployed, but for different reasons (due to their political discontent with new neoliberal policies). There could be, evidently, cases where the main objectives (focuses) are not the same, but the target of action is (in the previous example, the unemployed and activists have the same target, but different focuses).

## 2. Social Engagement for the Sake of Others

In order to introduce qualitative differences regarding the subject of import, I will once again refer to one important conceptual division elaborated in Helm’s theory of action. He introduces the terms *social action* (Helm 2002: 206) and *engaged action* (Helm 2009: 93) to explain actions undertaken for the sake of others, as caring for others for their own sake.

There are, of course, many actions that we do for the sake of others. Some of them could be explained as egoistic through instrumental reasons (e.g. I care about someone because I will have an indirect benefit from it). However, the challenge is to understand non-instrumental (non-egoistic) reasons that we could have to care about others. Of course, there are those who would claim that in the final instance every imaginable reason could be

reduced to egoism. Even if probably no objective criteria exist to guarantee that an action is *not* based on egoistic reasons, we can follow Helm in his pursuit to explain the specific differences in the (phenomenological) structure of those actions that are based on non-egoistic reasons.

For Helm, the notion of caring is practically identical to that of import, because to care about something is for it to be a focus of a rationally constituted import (Helm 2009: 75; Helm 2002: 195). Helm states that there are different ways of caring about someone. (1) We could care about someone for some instrumental reason (instrumental caring), or (2) we could care about one's well-being (to care about someone as such), while a distinct part of this second sense would be (3) to care about others as agents. I will focus on the third case.

What does it mean to care about others as agents? It means that we take others to have their own preferences, desires, focuses, their own cares and evaluative perspectives, i.e. that the other is also a subject of import. To care about others as agents means that their objectives, also have import for me, or that I share their import and care for those things that have import for them. Thus, caring about someone as an agent involves that you care not only for his/her well-being, but also for the things he or she cares about:

“Thus, if someone I care about cares about raising prize-winning Malamutes, he fares as his dogs fare, and so in caring about him I ought to attend and act on behalf of his success and failures in this aspect of life. [...] I ought to feel joyful when he (and his dogs) win a competition, sad or disappointed when he loses, frustrated with and angry at the judge who rates his dogs much lower than they deserve because of internal politics of the American Kennel Association, etc. In this way, his frustrations, joys, fears, hopes, desires etc. are in an important sense mine as well, for I care about his raising prize-winning Malamutes as a part of caring about him.” (Helm 2002: 199)

Caring about others as agents also produces a distinctive phenomenological structure which could not be reduced to a single evaluative perspective. Import (that things have for us) could be understood as an intentional characteristic of being viewed as worthy of pursuit or avoidance. Helm explains this phenomenological structure by using some concepts from the theory of emotions:<sup>2</sup> those of focus, target and formal intentional object of an emotion (Helm 2002: 191).<sup>3</sup> The formal object of emotion is the kind of import that defines an emotion as the kind of emotion it is, e.g. fear, anger etc.; the target of an emotion is that which the emotion is directed

2 This is understandable since Helm's use of the concept of import is very close to that of an emotion: emotions are intentional feelings of import (Helm 2002: 192).

3 These concepts were first introduced by Ronald De Sousa (De Sousa 1987: 115-123)

at; the focus of an emotion is the background object having import to which a target is related in such a way as to make intelligible the target's having the property defined by the formal object. Perhaps an example would make this point clearer:

“I might be afraid as the neighbor kid throws a ball that comes perilously close to smashing a vase. Here the target of my fear is the ball, which the emotion presents as having a formal object – as being dangerous; the focus of my fear is the vase, for it is in virtue of both the import the vase has for me and the relation the ball has to it (as potentially smashing it) that the ball is intelligible as a danger.” (Helm 2002: 192)

338

However, the whole structure changes if we care about others as agents. To care about someone presupposes that that someone has import to us, i.e. that the person itself is the focus of our emotions. If we care about someone as an agent, it presupposes that he/she is the subject of import, or that he/she has his/her own focuses, to which we are subfocused and accordingly have a target related to those subfocuses. In other words, it presupposes dynamical intentionality toward someone else and his/her evaluative perspective, in relation to which we constitute our subfocuses, and consequently targets related to those subfocuses. Practically, it means that what primarily has import to someone else, has import to me, through the fact that he/she, as a subject of import, has import for me.

“When I get a paper rejected because of an undeservedly negative referee report, my anger consists in the feeling of the import of my scholarship as such impressing itself on me in the present circumstances in such a way that I am pained by the offense that rejection presents [...]. Such anger differs from the anger I would feel on behalf of a colleague I care about in similar circumstances [...]. Thus in being angry on her behalf, the pain I feel consists in part in the feeling not only of the import she (the focus) has to me but also of the import her scholarship (the subfocus) has to her, so that the rejection feels bad because of its bearing on the well-being of both her scholarship and her; in this respect my anger on her behalf differs phenomenologically from my anger at my own paper's rejection” (Helm 2009: 89)

Taking this under consideration, in *the social engagement for the sake of others* I would include those social activities in which someone else is the subject of import and those who are engaged share his/her import. Let us provide an example. Suppose that I find helping the Roma population worth pursuing and I am really engaged in some activities (e.g. helping them to find a job and ensure basic income). However, after some time spent with a Roma family, I realize that those things that I found important are actually trivial for them, and that they find some other things, which I find irrelevant, worth pursuing. Suddenly, my own perspective is changed, and I am not only engaged in helping the Roma family, but I also share

the import they have, and I find some things worth pursuing only because it is worthy of pursuit for them, i.e. I am socially engaged for them as the subjects of import.<sup>4</sup>

### 3. Social Engagement as Togetherness

In the previous paragraphs I have tried to explain one specific distinction that could be made among social actions regarding the subject of import, if someone else is the subject of import. I claimed that we need to distinguish social engagement relative only to a single evaluative perspective, on the one hand, and social engagement for the sake of other(s), on the other. Could we make one simple step further and say that we sometimes care about *us*? I have already singled out actions which are themselves plural, but in which the subject of import is relative only to a single evaluative perspective. Matching personal goals constitutes only a plural intentional system, not a plural agent. In order to appear as plural agency, there has to be a specific subject of import – a “we” – and some things that have import for “us”. In other words, they will have import for me, only in relation to “us”. But, what do we mean by “us”? Does the “we” have its own preferences, its own mind and evaluations? With this we approach the core of the problem if we do not want to deny the fact that all actions are undertaken, and intended, by the individuals and not by some mysterious “we”. As Searle wrote:

339

“I find this talk [of ‘group minds, the collective unconscious, and so on’] at best mysterious and at worst incoherent. [...] Since society consists entirely of individuals, there cannot be a group mind or group consciousness. All consciousness is in individual minds, in individual brains.” (Searle 1990: 404–406)

Bratman shares this idea:


“shared intention is not an attitude in the mind of some superagent consisting literally of some fusion of the two agents. There is no single mind which is the fusion of your mind and mine.” (Bratman 1999: 111)

Certainly, it would be hard to claim that there is an additional mind over and above individual minds. However, we have some intuitions and language use that indicate some kind of existence of a ‘we’, if ‘we do something’ or if ‘someone belongs to us’ – belonging here presupposes an expectation that

---

4 Certainly, care for other as an agent does not have to go only in one direction. People often mutually care for each other, which is called solidarity on a societal level (see also Vasiljević in this volume). Moreover, sometimes a degree of caring for someone is appropriate to the care that another gives to me, such is reciprocity in mutual caring. Although I do not believe that this requires a specific explanation, I wanted to point to one more possible modification of social engagement for the sake of others.



an individual would act differently than from a single evaluative perspective. The solution could be to say that there is an agreement among members, who are then obligated to an agreed evaluative perspective (to the import that some final goal has for us) (Gilbert 2000),  that there is some primitive background sense of belonging, which is not rationally explainable and functions as a background of our motivation. Although this could be taken as an explanation for some of our actions, I argue that it could not account for social engagement – because social engagement assumes activity that precludes one's being a passive subject of some unexplainable intimacy or more dynamics or just being a subject governed by obligations of an agreement<sup>5</sup>.

340

What does it mean that a 'we' is the subject of import? It means that things have import *for us*. The crucial question here is not *whether* we care about something, but *how* we care? Namely, this situation presupposes that I care about something only in the way in which *we* care about something. Analogous to the previous situation of caring about others, to care about something we care about is to care about us, and not only about our well-being, but about us as an agent. It means that 'we' as a subject of import is my focus, and related to this focus are my subfocuses and targets. It differs from caring about others insofar as the focus is not someone else, but 'us' to whom I belong as being the part of the 'we'. Furthermore, this implies another difference, because someone else exists as a subject of import independently of those who care about him/her, while some 'we' exists only insofar as there are members of the 'we' that care about 'us' as the subject of import.

One possible objection to this argument is its seeming circularity: I should be focused on 'us' to constitute 'us', who had not existed before it has been constituted, but to focus on 'us' as an agent implies that the group should already be a plural agent. However, what I think we can infer from this is that the linear causal language is inappropriate here. Caring about us and 'being us' as an agent are not two contiguous events separated in time; they rather occur simultaneously (Helm 2009: 282). In that sense, the idea of *social engagement as togetherness* refers to those social activities in which the subject of import is 'us', or to social activities that consist in caring about 'us' as an agent.

This idea does not evoke a completely different and separable collective brain which is somewhere above or beyond your or my brain. However, it does in a sense involve an idea of a phenomenologically distinct 'collective' mind irreducible to a single evaluative perspective, i.e. to your and my focus on our relationship that constitutes 'us' as the subject of import.

---

5 Helm describes Gilbert's account as an account of coordinated we-commitments, rather than plural subjects (Helm 2009: 266).

Without a doubt, disagreements between us are possible or even probable (a single individual person also evaluates his/her own conflicting views) and debate about them, as well as the process of their resolution, are a part of the constitution of 'us' as an agent.

### Radical social engagement

Persons have a possibility to evaluate their own goals and by doing so they constitute their own import. Similarly, the members of some groups (or a society as a whole) could discuss what has import to them, as a group. From a certain perspective it could be said that disagreement about what a 'we' means, what has import for us, demonstrates that a 'we' does not exist. I believe, quite to the contrary, that striving to remain adamantly in a discussion about what has import for us shows that 'us' has a higher degree of import for those of us engaged in the discussion than disagreements that may arise (see Zaharijević in this volume). Indeed, that usually happens in friendship and love relationships. A high degree of import is one thing that makes a social engagement radical. There is also another one. 'We' could be friends, lovers, engaged groups, and, from a global perspective, society as a whole. In that sense, the most radical form of social engagement, according to this enquiry, would refer to those social activities in which the subject of import is society as a whole, which has a high degree of import for persons that belong to that society.

341

### References

- Bratman, Michael E. (1999), "Shared Intention", in: *Faces of Intention: Selected Essays on Intention and Agency*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 109–129.
- Davidson, Donald (1963), "Actions, Reasons and Causes", *The Journal of Philosophy* 60(23), p. 685–700.
- De Sousa, Ronald (1987), *The Rationality of Emotion*, Cambridge/London: MIT Press
- Gilbert, Margaret (2000), "Obligation and Joint community", in: *Sociality and Responsibility: New Essays in Plural Subject Theory*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield
- Helm, Bennet W. (2002), "Action for the sake of...: Caring and the Rationality of (Social) Action", *Analyse & Kritik* 24: 189–208
- Helm, Bennet W. (2001), *Emotional Reason: Deliberation, Motivation and the Nature of Value*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Helm, Bennet W. (2009), *Love, Friendship & the Self. Intimacy, Identification and the Social Nature of Persons*, Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Kant, Immanuel (1900-), (WA) "Was heißt Aufklären", in: *Kants gesammelte Schriften* (Königlich Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Ed.). Berlin: G. Reimer [later Walter de Gruyter]
- NCCPE, "What is Public Engagement?" (internet), url: <http://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/explore-it/what-public-engagement> (accessed 29.3.2016)
- Searle, John R. (1990), "Collective Intentions and Actions", in: Philip R. Cohen, Jerry Morgan and Martha E. Pollack (Ed.), *Intentions in Communication*, Cambridge/London: MIT Press

## Igor Cvejić

### Oblici društvenog angažmana s obzirom na subjekat importa

#### Rezime

Namera ovog rada je da se ukaže na različite forme društvenog angažmana s obzirom na subjekat importa. Import je pojam koji je u teoriju delanja uveo Benet Helm, a koji označava intencionalnu karakteristiku objekta, da je percipiran kao vredan zalaganja ili izbegavanja. Međutim, prema Helmu subjekat importa može biti individualna osoba, drugi ili grupa (*plural agent*). Sledeći ovu podelu možemo razlikovati tri osnovne forme društvenog angažmana: (1) lični društveni angažman, (2) društveni angažman za drugog-e i (3) društveni angažman kao zajedništvo. Društveni angažman kao zajedništvo, prema tome, ne treba pobrkati sa akcijama mnoštva koje deli usmerenost ka cilju (a koje pripadaju ličnom društvenom angažmanu). Ovaj argumentativni korak omogućen je kompleksnom Helmovom teorijom o „nama“ kao subjektu importa, nasuprot nekim savremenim teoretičarima koji poriču mogućnost pluralnog agenta.

**Ključne reči:** angažman, import, grupe, delanje, mi-intencije