

## Introduction

When comparing firms to the market they inhabit, D. H. Robertson says “we find islands of conscious power in this ocean of unconscious co-operation like lumps of butter coagulating in a pail of buttermilk.”<sup>1</sup> This collective “conscious power” has been investigated in great detail in the last decade or so of philosophical research, largely in terms of the possibility of genuine reasoning, deliberation, and action by groups. The result has been a growing confidence in the claim that some groups—those with sufficiently sophisticated organizational structures—have agential capacities, including the capacity to act for (moral) reasons.

New work proceeds in two directions, broadly construed. Those who adopt the group agency thesis go on to explore its social, political, and moral consequences or presuppositions, for example by considering specific case studies of group action, explicating how our practices of responsibility fit with treating groups as the targets of reactive attitudes, or by highlighting the background conditions that facilitate the creation of the requisite group organizational structures. A second, less enthusiastic cohort councils caution, questioning, for example, whether positing genuine group capacities provides explanatory advantages, or whether, even if groups qualify as agents in some sense, they possess the capacities required for moral agency.

These were the themes and questions that were the focus of two fruitful and enriching workshops “Group Agency and Collective Responsibility,” which took place in Vienna May 13–14, 2019, and “Group Agency and Group Reasoning,” which took place online October 20–21, 2020. Both workshops were organized as part of the European Research Council project “Moral and Normative Foundations of Group Agency.” This special issue is comprised of descendants of papers presented at those workshops.

The first contribution to this volume is Grace Paterson’s “Spokespersons, Proxies, and the Problem of Acting for Others.” She works within the group agency paradigm to explore a prevalent type of social action in which institutions and individuals, as principals, act or speak by way of another person: a proxy agent. This is a foundational issue for group agency, since when a group acts, that action is implemented by one (or more) of its members. Paterson is interested in a particular type of proxy action—those for which the principal

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1. From R. H. Coase, “The Nature of the Firm,” *Economica* 16(4) (1937): 386–405, 388.

is responsible in just the same way as if she had performed the action herself. According to Paterson, this is the case when two conditions hold. The proxy agent must be authorized to act on the principal's behalf and must do so in a way that is coherent from the principal's perspective.

In "A Pathology of Group Agency," Matthew Rachar investigates a kind of non-standard group activity usually ruled out by the (implicit) assumption that group actions are "an exercise of complete unity between agreeable and dedicated contributors diligently working together without any interruptions, unwillingness, or outright dissent." Using the case of the participation in the Unite the Right rally by members of the Proud Boys, he aims to show that the control necessary to hold a group responsible for such activity may be found in the way groups implicitly program for their members' behavior. Responsibility for this programming need not appeal to official group decision mechanisms, but it does require that the members' actions are rationalizable and intelligible in light of the group's attitudes and that the members are acting as group members.

A pair of papers address the political dimension of corporate agency. Frank Hindriks, in "The Social Construction of Collective Moral Agency," adopts a picture of group agency according to which organizations, by way of four distinct types of procedural and social rules, are "constitutively constructed reflective agents"—group agents that can reflect on their conduct, their commitments and values. His account directs a novel focus towards the political dynamics involved in the construction of an organization's capacity for moral agency, dynamics that also play a role in whether and how likely it is for institutions like corporations to manifest moral agency in the first place. His theory thereby bridges the gap between discussions of group agency and structural accounts of social ontology.

One structural account, developed from the perspective of critical social ontology, is expounded by Carol Gould in "Where is the Structure in Structural Injustice? Individuals-in-Relations, Corporate Agents, and Institutional Transformation." She first observes that many corporate entities within capitalist systems function not only as agents, but as artifacts. The legal regimes that govern the structure of corporations, for example, place power in the hands of shareholders and upper management, posing a challenge to the claim that such groups constitute a genuinely unified locus of agency. These institutional structures, legitimized by state power, give rise to a logic of accumulation and profit-seeking that manifests and reproduces structural injustice. Given these constraints it is unclear whether corporations are or could be genuinely moral agents. Making them so, according to Gould, would require changing the underlying social structures and practices.

Another voice of restraint comes from Herlinde Pauer-Studer, who argues in “A Non-Mentalistic Account of Corporate Agency and Responsibility” that holding institutions responsible for their actions does not require a metaphysical commitment to corporate mental states. Building on her previous account of constitutive group agency, she argues that a corporation manifests agency if the organization’s decision procedures, practices and first-order normative identities give rise to a professional identity for its operative members that satisfies certain meta-principles of agency, for example consistency, coherence and self-intelligibility. According to Pauer-Studer, this allows us to attribute responsibility not only to the corporate structure, but also to relevant operative members acting in their roles.

Finally, Olle Blomberg and Björn Petersson’s “Team Reasoning and Collective Moral Obligation” explores how group identification and team reasoning may give rise to collective obligations in the face of some potential moral bad, even for a loosely organized group. What sets their account apart is their thesis that even with only these minimal assumptions about the capacities and organization of the group the resulting obligations are irreducibly collective. This allows us to make sense of practices of responsibility that target such groups that do not live up to their responsibility because of weakness of will on the part of some of the group’s potential members.

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