G

Group Agency

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Agency is the capacity or potential to act. Agency can be approached through a number of different subfields in philosophy, including but not limited to general metaphysics, philosophy of action, and ethics. In the case of group agency, the most relevant subfield is social ontology (sometimes called social metaphysics), which examines the existence and structures of social reality. This includes groups as small as a dyadic pair and as large as the totality of humanity. When pairing this focus on groups of humans with the concept of agency, group agency scholarship examines the capacity or potential to act as a group of humans. These humans are assumed to be acting *together* in some sense, and the specifics of how that acting together occurs, and how robustly together the action is, constitute much of the debate in the relevant literatures.

This entry unfolds in the following manner. It begins with an introduction to agency in its most general sense before examining agency in the social world. Next, group agency as a research field is presented in the context of the problem of collective intentionality. Here, accounts of group intentions are presented, before moving into considerations on structure and metaphysics of group agents. Then, the features of and conditions for group agency are clarified, as well as its relation to rationality and mind. The entry closes with heterodox views of group agency and a description of group agency's lasting relevance to law and social philosophy.

What Is Agency?

Agency itself is a debated topic, and while some exploration of its contours is helpful to elucidate group agency, this entry tries to keep this exploration within reasonable limits. Agency is tied very closely to action, which introduces causality. For something to be an action, there must be some causal goings-on, i.e., something must happen. Agency, as the capacity or potential for precipitating these causal goings-on, refers to the ability of something to make something else happen. Some views of agency require these causal goings-on to be preceded by a corresponding mental state: an intention. On such a view, agency would be restricted to humans and other functional systems (perhaps an animal or computer) that are capable of forming an intention and then turning it into an action. This is what is referred to as an intentional action. In the case of group agency, scholars ask whether or not group agents are capable of forming a group-level intention, and what that group-level intention's relation to individual level intentions might be, among other questions.

Agency in the Social World

Agency in the social world is different from agency in the most general metaphysical sense, as the causal goings-on involve not only objective facts but also socially constructed ones. John Searle creates a distinction between "institutional facts," which "require human institutions for their existence" and "brute facts," which do not (although they do require a human institution, language, to be stated) (Searle 1995: 2). A social causal going-on requires involvement of an institutional fact—facts that are "only facts by human agreement" (Searle 1995: 1). This human agreement, for Searle at least, often takes the form of a "status function," whereby physical particles in fields of force are ascribed some socially agreed upon meaning. A paradigmatic example is money: A clump of particles that is called "paper" is granted a status function as a holder of economic value.

Recalling this entry's earlier definition of agency as the capacity or potential to act, and coupling that definition with the directly preceding explanation of social, causal goings-on, a definition of social agency in the case of an individual person is now in order. This will properly prepare the ground for exploring the possibility of human *group* agency. First, there must be an individual human who is immersed in the social world. Second, that human must have the potential to contribute to some causal goings-on, i.e., they must have the capacity to serve as a cause to an effect. Third, some element of that causal goings-on must include an institutional fact/ socially constructed fact. Finally, and perhaps optionally, this human ought to have formed an intention that led to the carrying out of this action. The general consensus is that an appropriate intention is required. If an individual were to accidentally contribute to some social, causal goings-on, one could contest that this individual actually *caused* the event in a meaningful way.

Group Agency: An Introduction

In the case of group agency, the potential or capacity to act is ascribed to a *group* of potential actors rather than a single potential actor. The literature on group agency vacillates between terms such as *joint* agency, *collective* agency, and *shared* agency, in addition to this entry's focus on *group* agency. Joint agency often refers to smaller group agents, and collective agency often refers to larger group agents. This entry focuses on *group* agency, as it is the most widely encompassing term. In most cases, the group in question is a group of humans. There are some who do not make this restriction, but this entry only briefly touches on this, as it is a relatively fringe view. These groups of humans can range from a two-person dyad to groups potentially as large as nation-states, although larger group size often makes it more difficult to satisfy the conditions of group agency (Gilbert 1989: 212). The potential for a group to be considered an agent depends less on the size of the group, or the people who make it up, and more on how the group is structured, how its members interact, and how the group actually functions. It is these sorts of concerns that have dominated the field of social ontology since its inception.

There may be some readers who question how the existence and functioning of group agents can be a topic for scholarly debate in the first place. Human groups acting together may seem to be ubiquitous in our social world. There are married couples with joint bank accounts who share responsibility for household tasks or the raising of children. Football teams perform highly coordinated maneuvers that they have practiced for months at a time. Corporations can buy another corporation, and nation-states are often said to go to war with each other. Are not these all groups of humans that are acting together?

Assumptions of Analytic Philosophy

In analytic philosophy, there are certain base assumptions that make arguing for these groups' existence as group agents challenging. The first of these assumptions is the importance of intentionality in relation to agency. This view holds that an individual is not causally responsible for an action's outcome unless it was an *intentional* action, meaning that the action was not accidental and instead was the result of a mental state that

prompted the planning and carrying out of that action. According to Tollefsen, "intentions are what distinguish actions — things that I do — from mere happenings — things that happen to me" (2015: 27). This requirement is closely tied to historical legal traditions. Scholars of group agency are mostly in agreement that if there is to be a group agent, there must be a corresponding group intention, although some, such as Christian List and Philip Pettit, argue that a group agent can be created without a joint intention, given certain circumstances (2011: 32). The centrality of intentionality creates a rather large hurdle for those who argue in favor of group agency, as this would then require the possibility of a *group* intention.

Thus comes a second assumption in analytic philosophy that militates against the possibility of arguing in favor of the existence of group agents. This second assumption is that mental states are not able to be shared by two or more individuals. Analytic philosophy typically assumes that the mind and mental states are located within the brain. As such, a shared mental state, such as an intention, would need to somehow be shared between two or more minds, of which the boundaries are the brain of a human. It is hard to imagine, from the individualist assumptions of analytic philosophy, how a mental state could be in two or more minds at once and thus be shared by a group.

The individualist assumptions of traditional analytic philosophy may strike some as strange, given that group agency has been examined by other intellectual traditions throughout history. However, social ontology's goal, as a field, to describe the possibility of group agents from those assumptions has had the key benefit of forcing conceptual clarity in philosophical writing on group agents, whereas those traditions biased toward holism have not always been so rigorous in examining the conditions for and features of group agency. Those conditions and features comprise much of the current scholarship in group agency.

The Problem of Collective Intentionality

In response to this challenge emerged a literature often referred to as "collective intentionality." The

main issue, as framed by David Schweikard and Hans Bernard Schmid, is the tension between two "widely accepted claims": the "irreducibility claim" and the "individual ownership claim" (2021). The first, the irreducibility claim, holds that if there are such things as collective, shared, or group mental states (e.g., intentions), for these to be truly *collective*, *shared*, or *group* level, they must not ultimately reduce to individual mental states (i.e., individual intentions). In other words, these group intentions cannot simply be a "simple summation, aggregate, or distributive pattern of individual intentionality" (Schweikard and Schmid 2021). There must be some group-level intention that exists in a way that cannot be properly explained by mere reference to the groups' individual members.

The second claim, about individual ownership, runs against this. This position holds that the intention must belong to all "participating individuals" and that the intention is "their own" (Schweikard and Schmid 2021). In other words, a group intention's existence still relies on its existence at the individual level, although the exact nature of this relationship is a matter of debate. This position prima facie seems to be in conflict with the first claim (irreducibility). How exactly does a group intention exist both at the group and individual level without overly privileging one or the other? This problem serves as a catalyst for the literature on collective intentionality and plays a major role in debates about group agency.

Accounts of Group-Level Intentions

Various attempts have been made to solve the problem of collective intentionality introduced above. Deborah Tollefsen (2015) offers a helpful taxonomy of accounts of group intention. First come "goal accounts," which focus on shared goals or ends rather than shared intentions (Tollefsen 2015: 28–29). This view rejects the importance of a group intention for group agency. Seamus Miller (2001) suggests that group intentions cannot exist, writing that he "reserve[s] the notion of an intention for mental states directed to

a state of affairs that the agent believes he can realize, and realize by acting alone" (66). Instead, Miller argues that a "joint action" occurs when two or more agents intentionally perform an action "with the true belief that by doing so the agents will jointly realize an end that each of them has" (2001: 65).

Second are "mode accounts," and these posit that group intentions are the result of a change in "mind set," where group members "think and act in a way that keeps in mind the group of which we are a part..." (Tollefsen 2015: 31). Rather than thinking in the "I-mode," where an individual "I" forms an intention, those in the "we-mode" form "we-intentions" (Tuomela and Miller 1988). These we-intentions are the basis on which individual intentions are then formed.

Third, Tollefsen introduces "shared accounts," where Michael Bratman is the paradigmatic example. Bratman argues that shared intentions mostly serve to structure plans between individual agents and, further, that these intentions do not have to "match" but only "mesh" (1993: 99: 104–106). This is a more individualistic view than mode accounts.

Finally in Tollefsen's survey comes "commitment accounts," where a "joint commitment" is said to bind individuals together into a single agent that intends and acts as an individual would (Tollefsen 2015: 44). This sort of account is represented by Margaret Gilbert, who believes that individuals "join forces" to create a "plural subject" which acts as one (Gilbert 1990: 7–8).

While Tollefsen's taxonomy is a helpful introduction, there are some accounts of group intentions that are left undiscussed. One such view is Frank Hindriks' "status account," which focuses on "corporate agents" that are created by "status rules" and their conditions/functions specified by "constitutive rules" (2008: 119–120). Hindriks is also notable for his endorsement of an "externalist" view of group agents, where the perspective of the group's nonmembers is the "point of departure," rather than an "internalist" view, where the members' perspectives are privileged, e.g., in "mode" or "commitment" accounts (Hindriks 2008: 119). Further, Hindriks disputes the centrality of rationality, stating that he

hopes to "investigate the conditions for ordinary collective agency, not for its more demanding relatives," such as those group agents that require "a procedure for forming rational judgements" (2008: 125).

J. David Velleman (1997) attempts to combine Searle's (1995) view of intentions as located in individual human minds and Gilbert's view of plural subjects (29). However, Velleman believes that Searle's account of intention is confused and that Gilbert's plural subjects are too close to "group minds or superagents" (30). Velleman's first move is to question the insistence that intentions are mental states, positing instead that commitments to action can also occur through speech or writing (1997: 37). Second, Velleman argues that these written or spoken commitments are then "shared" by being made public (1997: 38). Gilbert's (1989) "pooling of wills" happens when "two spoken decisions... combine to form one spoken decision..." (Velleman 1997: 47). In sum, Velleman's account strikes a balance between analytic philosophy's individualist assumptions and social ontology's belief in group intentions and actions.

Carol Rovane's account of group agency stands somewhat apart from other accounts surveyed thus far. Rovane argues that groups can meet the standard of rationality and "qualify as individual agents in their own rights" (2014: 1665). However, she posits that, when a group does qualify as a rational agent, its members experience "rational fragmentation" as some of their points of view have become those of the group itself (1665). This position stems from Rovane's Lockean account of personhood (1998), which leads her to deny the existence of natural persons, instead arguing that the existence of an agent is dependent upon "effort and will," i.e., never a metaphysical given, and its rationality dependent on "deliberation" (2014: 1678–1682). Rovane's solution to the problem of collective intentionality is to place greater emphasis on the group, but only given strict stipulations and only in light of her commitments to a heterodox (relative to social ontology in general) view of personhood.

Types of Groups and Group Size

Tollefsen takes an "ecumenical" position toward these varying accounts, writing that "given the variety of different groups, we might… say that group intentions and beliefs could be formed in multiple ways depending on the sorts of subjects and groups involved" (2015: 47). Thus, Tollefsen posits three types of groups, this time defined by the structure of the agent/the relationship between members of the group. These three types are "aggregative groups," "corporate groups," and "plural groups" (Tollefsen 2015: 47). An aggregative group is a "mere collection of individuals that share a common property"; corporate groups have a structure/organization, decision-making process, and do not change identity when their members change; plural groups are like those seen above from Gilbert (Tollefsen 2015: 47).

Tollefsen's list of features in corporate groups highlights other concerns about group structure beyond this tripartite distinction of group types. In fact, one need not accept Tollefsen's distinction at all—plural groups may turn out to have similar categories of features that need to be clarified. One such feature is group size. There are potentially consequential differences between a dyad, "a social group with a special character" (Gilbert 1990: 12), and a large corporation. Group size impacts the way that group members interact with one another. In a smaller group, one can assume more frequent and robust communication between members, such as in Gilbert's dyadic plural subject that goes on a walk together (1990). In a larger group agent, members may not even be aware of each other's existence, e.g., in a terrorist cell (List and Pettit 2011: 36).

The Ontology of Group Agents

Closely related to group size is the "durability" of the group in withstanding membership changes. That is, does a group remain the same, or become a new group, following the addition or subtraction of a member or members? The Ship of Theseus paradox is a simple parallel. List and Pettit argue that, quite similarly to Tollefsen's tripartite distinction, "mere collections" change identity with changes in membership, whereas "groups" "have an identity that can survive changes in membership" (List and Pettit 2011: 31). Hindriks (2008) states that corporate groups are distinct from their members because they retain their identity with changes in membership and, more importantly, "they have properties or powers that the individuals involved do not have" (129). Much of this concern hinges upon the type of group in question, but also of importance is what makes a member truly a *member* of the group: Is it simply holding the same group intention? Does the member need to feel responsible for helping the group, or feel appropriate emotions depending on the fate of the group? This question of membership relies on more metaphysical concerns about the relationship between wholes and their parts.

What is the relationship between a group agent and its members? Does the group *depend* on its members? Do the qualities of the group *supervene* on its members? Is the group *functionally realized* by its members? Is there a *causal* relation between group agent and members? Perhaps the group *emerges* from its members, such that the group cannot be reduced to its members. One could also consider this relation in terms of *grounding* or "anchoring," following Brian Epstein (2015). Epstein's (2015) *The Ant Trap* is perhaps the best source on group agents (and the social world generally) in more classical metaphysical terms. However, some of these issues can be sidestepped by taking a functionalist stance, as List and Pettit (2011) do. List and Pettit interpret agency based on how the (potential) agent behaves, not its physical makeup. They write that "what determines the intentional ascriptions it deserves is how it interacts with its environment" (List and Pettit 2011: 28). These metaphysical concerns about wholes and parts underlay those in the "problem of collective intentionality" but extend to debates throughout the field, such as with changes in group membership, and in the following section on authority, decision-making, and rationality.

Authority, Decision-Making, and Rationality

The structural/organizational concerns of size, member interaction, and (in)ability to withstand membership change point to a common solution to group agency issues in larger groups: authority and hierarchy. Often, according to List and Pettit, groups will authorize certain members to act on behalf of the (corporate) group agent, such as with a "proxy agent" (Ludwig 2014). List and Pettit suggest a continuum ranging from a terrorist cell (where many are authorized to act) to a dictatorship (where the group authorizes a single individual to make decisions) (2011: 35–36). Scott Shapiro (2014) argues that authority can be collaboratively set up by a group if "they could not achieve their goal, or achieve it as well, without hierarchy" (265). For Shapiro, authority is one of the main mechanisms by which "massively shared agency," such as governments, is made possible (Shapiro 2014: 258). Others, e.g., Michael Bratman, do not even consider joint activities that involve authority structures.

Authority systems in general can be understood as a "kind of collective decision-making mechanism" (Hindriks 2008: 125). Decision-making, of which authority is just one method, is a major focus of group agency literature. List and Pettit (2011) show, through various paradoxes that arise through majoritarian voting, that groups require sophisticated attitude aggregation techniques in order to retain the standards of rationality consistent with agency (43–48). Put simply and quickly, studies of jurisprudence have demonstrated that a group judgment can lead to different results depending on whether group members are voting on propositions or conclusions (List and Pettit 2011: 44–46). List and Pettit identify four conditions of aggregation functions (universal domain, collective rationality, anonymity, and systematicity), at least one of which must be "relaxed" in order for a group to maintain rational, agential status (2011: 49–53). While List and Pettit's aggregative approach (or those like it) to group-level belief, preference, intention, etc. formation are the norm for group agency literature, there are other views.

Carol Rovane explicitly positions her view of rational group agency against that of List and Pettit. Rovane (2014) relies instead on a view of "*reflective* rational agency," which is "agency that is exercised *from* a particular point of view, which is the site of deliberation and choice, and a site from which actions proceed" (1670, emphasis in original). This commitment leads Rovane to posit that a true group agent must be able to engage in self-criticism and engage in a holistic, deliberative approach (1671). According to Rovane, this method for the instantiation of group-level rationality means that "it is appropriate to hold [agents] responsible, because it is meaningful to ask them for an account of why they did what they did," which is something that List and Pettit's account cannot support (Rovane 2014: 1671). Regardless of this debate and others like it, what is important to note here is the importance and complexity of combining individual attitudes (such as intentions, beliefs, etc.) in group agents in ways that support some claim to "rationality."

Conditions for Group Agents

Beyond these features of group agents, and debates surrounding their existence and qualities, there are also a number of conditions for group agency posited by scholars. As seen in the preceding discussion of decision-making processes, one major condition of group agency is rationality. This condition for agency is nearly unanimously agreed upon; however, there are some who argue that rationality, while necessary, is perhaps insufficient for robust agency. In contrast to, e.g., List and Pettit's view of a group agent, the likes of which Joel Bakan (2004) would criticize as "pathological" (due to its insistence on rationality and little else), some posit elements of agency in addition to pure rationality. Bennett W. Helm (2008) argues that "standard accounts of social phenomena largely ignore a crucial dimension of our social lives — our emotional attachments to each other..." (18). For scholars like Helm, rationality fails to wholly explain why group agents come to have cares and desires that motivate action. The distinction at play here is

between "goal-directedness and agency" (Helm 2008: 19).

Another potential condition for group agency might be language. While nearly all accounts of group agency require communication between the group's members, some of these accounts surveyed above require an explicit agreement, which itself relies upon language. One such example is Velleman's suggestion that intentions, which for Searle are "mental representations" that "settle the question" about what an agent is to do, could also be oral or written representations, such as when an individual says "I will" (Velleman 1997: 37, 50). Michael Tomasello (2014, 2022) argues that group collaborative action by humans is made possible by a number of evolutionarily developed traits: the ability to understand causal and logical relations, the ability to form cognitive representations, the ability to understand the perspective of another, and so on (2014: chapters 2–4). Pettit (2011) echoes the importance of a system for representation and communication, writing that "I shall take as persons those intentional agents who can avow their intentional states and the actions they perform *in words — or in signs of some other sort —* and who can then be held to the associated expectations" (259, emphasis added).

Gilbert (1989) serves as a useful entrypoint on a set of linked concepts that serve as further conditions for group agency: quasi-readiness and the common knowledge condition (186–188). Quasi-readiness refers to "setting oneself up" to do some action, regardless if the other members of the group agent are also ready (ibid.: 185–186). Then, once the other members of the potential group agent are quasi-ready, they all become "jointly ready," meaning that the potential group agent is itself ready for action (ibid.: 186). This transition relies upon the common knowledge condition, which specifies that each member of the group must know that the other members of the group are ready, and know that the other members know that they themselves are ready, and so on (ibid.: 187). Gilbert is not alone in identifying these concepts, but other scholars may use different language to refer to them. For example, Tomasello, who mostly accepts Bratman's view of joint intentions, refers to the need for "joint attention" and "common ground" between potential collaborators (2014: 44–45). Pettit (2011) writes that "recent work on the conditions that might lead us to ascribe such joint attitudes, and to posit collective subjects, has stressed the fact that we usually expect a complex web of mutual awareness on the part of individuals involved" (254). Here Pettit cites this precondition's identification elsewhere by Gilbert (1989), Searle (1995), Tuomela (1995), and Bratman (1999). These varied considerations all indicate the importance of a group of concepts that one could variously call openness, willingness, commonality in perspective, and trust that are perhaps necessary for the creation of a group agent prior to the question of collective intentionality.

Agency's Relation to Mind

As seen with the relationship between intention and action, as well as the challenges associated with positing some group-level or collective intention, any conception of agency that focuses on *intentional* action, rather than just any action, requires some connection to theories of mind. This is because intentions are typically understood to be the "primary reason" that an agent performs such action, where "reason" refers to a desire, belief, attitude, conviction, etc. (Davidson 1963: 685–686). These sorts of states are typically only ascribed to human minds. Some philosophers of mind would deny that even the most intelligent animal has what can be properly described as a mind (although said animal would have a brain). The distinction between minds and brains is often made by reference to consciousness, where minds are conscious and brains are not necessarily so, but this is a gross simplification and the subject of great debate. That said, mindedness is often only granted to individual, living humans, and from this it follows that intentions are often only granted to individual, living humans.

For those theorists of group agency who do not wish to posit a group agent that simply reduces to

its individual members, recourse to the possibility of a group mind can sidestep a number of complicated metaphysical issues (although there are other ways to solve this issue, e.g., as attempted by Velleman 1997). However, positing the possibility or existence of a group mind also brings with it a lot of metaphysical baggage. Pettit (2011) argues that, on the basis of the jurisprudential paradox mentioned above, "there is a type of organization found in certain collectivities that makes them into subjects in their own right, giving them a way of being minded that is starkly discontinuous with the mentality of their members" (242). This is because the group-level decision can vary depending on whether its decision-making process aggregates from the members' votes on premises or conclusions. Thus, in some sense, the group's "mind" differs from the minds of its members. Pettit is careful to not suggest that this group mind exists over and above the minds of its members, but there are some who posit the possibility or existence of such minds (Theiner and O'Connor 2010; Theiner 2018).

Heterodox Views

There are less orthodox views of group agency, often extending beyond the field of "social ontology" proper, that loosen the stipulations seen here, specifically when it comes to agency's relation to mind, rationality, and the other potential preconditions for group agency surveyed above (language, mutual awareness, etc.). Perhaps the least heterodox of these is to extend group agency to living creatures that are not human, such as a pack of wolves hunting the same prey in a coordinated hunting strategy. This may seem intuitively like a good candidate for a group agent, assuming one can let go of the assumptions of analytic philosophy. Some might be tempted to push the boundary even further, for example, by viewing a beehive as a group agent—a possibility that List and Pettit (2011: 33) even allow for. One could continue to move down the "great chain of being" to less "animate" living beings, such as when examining the complex networks that trees are said to form with one another (Wohlleben

2016). There are some who would continue to expand the category of group agents to include nonliving things, often by reference to the way nonliving things become part of the functional system of human minds as posited by 4E cognitive science (Clark and Chalmers 1998; Malafouris 2013). All of these views, however, require a serious challenge to the anthropocentric assumptions of traditional philosophy.

Conclusion

Group agency is more than an interesting topic of scholarly research and debate. Positing the existence of group agents has a long history, particularly from early legal traditions, religious texts, and theories of the body politic (Oakeshott 1975; Runciman 1997; Schneewind 2010). Arguing that group agents can and do exist has important implications for the attribution of duties/responsibility or the reward/punishment of social realities based on their behavior (Feinberg 1970; Collins 2013, 2017). Examining group agency can also lead to a better understanding of other social phenomena, such as the intrinsically social nature of knowledge (Fuller 2002) and the functioning of institutions (Guala 2016). Ultimately, for anyone who has an interest in understanding social reality and in finding ways to improve its functioning, the group agency literature's conceptual resources provide a solid foundation.

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