

# Book Review

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Christian List and Philip Pettit

*Group Agency: The Possibility, Design, and Status of Corporate Agents*. Oxford:

Oxford University Press, 2011, 248 pp.

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Treating groups as agents is not at all difficult; teenagers and social scientists do it all the time with great success. Reading *Group Agency*, though, makes it look like rocket science. According to List and Pettit, groups can be real, and such real groups can cause, as well as bear ethical responsibility for, events. Apparently, not just any collective qualifies as an agent, so a lot turns on how the attitudes and actions of individual members are aggregated.

Doubtless, the simplest and most familiar means of aggregation is majority vote, where any result that represents more than half the parts represents the whole. Unanimity is another option, where anything less than full agreement will not do. Looking solely at majority voting, we discover that groups bound by this function sometimes fail to be/look rational. List and Pettit (46) give the following illustration. Suppose three individuals are asked to vote yes or no on three issues, namely, whether to (1) increase taxes, (2) decrease spending, and (3) increase taxes or decrease spending—this last disjunction being treated as one proposition. Obviously, if one is to be consistent, one must vote yes on the third issue if one has voted yes on any of the other issues. Now, suppose the following results are obtained:

ISSUE:	Increase taxes?	Decrease spending?	Increase taxes or decrease spending?
Voter A	yes	no	yes
Voter B	no	yes	yes
Voter C	no	no	no

So far, if we look at the horizontal rows, each individual is being consistent. Voter C, for example, is consistent in not wanting to tinker with the budget.

How does the group as a whole fare? Combining the results of each vertical column so that the majority decisions win, we arrive at the following:

	<b>ISSUE: Increase taxes?</b>	<b>Decrease spending?</b>	<b>Increase taxes or decrease spending?</b>
Majority	no	no	yes

The group, it seems, failed at performing elementary logic: It does not want to increase taxes; it does not want to decrease spending; and yet, when asked whether it would like to do either of those things, it answers yes.

Given this inconsistency, it is unlikely that we would think that such a group “thinks.” Yet, by the same token, what if, when fed a wide variety of information, a group were to churn out consistent solutions and directives? If a group were to do this on a regular basis, we might be more disposed to regard it as an agent in its own right. This is the ascription that List and Pettit aim to facilitate in *Group Agency*.

Their effort is divided into three parts, each addressing a topic promised in the book’s subtitle: the logical possibility of group agents (i.e., showing that they can exist; 19-78), their organizational design (showing what form they must have; 81-150), and their normative status (asking what the foregoing implies, policy-wise; 153-201). The order of presentation matters, as—by the authors’ admission—the success of the later parts depends on that of the earlier ones. Each part is divided into three chapters, and each chapter is in turn divided in three sections. Judged by the standard of clarity, the writing is solid. There are only a few minor typographical oddities (for instance, Anthony Quinton is quoted on page 3, but the source of the passage is nowhere in the list of references; also, there is a general index and a name index, but the general index contains the names, which is redundant). On the plus side, numbering all the 138 endnotes consecutively makes their consultation speedy and efficient.

List and Pettit remark that the topic of group agency (if there is such a thing) has “received surprisingly little attention in recent philosophy and the methodology of the social sciences” (1). One way to bring order to such an underexplored area is to transfer/apply the lessons of a well-established theory by analogical reasoning. List and Pettit thus call on Daniel Dennett’s “intentional stance” for general support (6, 12). This move has two considerable advantages: talk of intentions squares with folk usage and yields predictive power. Whether one deals with philosophy of mind or philosophy of the social sciences, people routinely describe both individuals and groups as capable of having beliefs, desires, and so on. Indeed, the authors begin their

book by stressing, “We speak in ordinary life of what Greenpeace or Amnesty International intends, what the Catholic Church holds sacred, what the medical profession wants, what generation X values, and what the financial markets expect” (1). The plain fact of linguistic practice thus amply motivates an inquiry into group agency, and anyone wishing to deny the existence of groups is burdened with explaining how such an “error” could be so culturally widespread and allow for such fruitful forecasts.

However, as far as I can see, any theorist wishing to draw on the intentional stance must confront at least three difficulties: ascribing intentions (to groups or individuals) is more obviously something the ascriber does than something the ascriber has; the strategy can be directed at anything (human or not); and the recourse to intentions can be replaced by other (notably materialist) means of explanation/prediction. *Group Agency* barely acknowledges these pressing challenges. Dennett (1991) responded to them by outlining a promising ontology of patterns, which List and Pettit could have endorsed (Champagne 2013a). Doing so, however, would mean that *all* patterns—group related or otherwise—are on a par as real. List and Pettit do not want this, as they want to exclude “mere collections” from enjoying reality (31).

Why? Seeing how fears about the legitimization of totalitarian regimes “accounted for the rise of the eliminativist view of group agents in the twentieth century” (10, 74), the authors ostensibly want their definitional net to catch commercial corporations while letting ethnic groups go.

The criteria that are supposed to enable this are divulged after lengthy (and often contentious) preliminaries. List and Pettit define a group agent as something that has representational states, motivational states, and a capacity to process those states and act on their basis (32). We are told that “a state is ‘representational’ if it plays the role of depicting the world, and ‘motivational’ if it plays the role of motivating action” (21)—which is not really helpful. Not to worry though, these terms and definitions are to be understood in a merely instrumental manner: so long as it is useful to think of a group as having representations and motivations, the question of whether a group can truly have such states is conveniently suspended.

In addition to representations and motivations, List and Pettit require group agents to demonstrate “a modicum of rationality” (36). Rationality is construed as efficacy assessable along three axes (akin to the semantic/syntactic/pragmatic tripartition): attitude to fact, attitude to attitude, and attitude to action (24-25). According to the authors, the more matches are made along these axes, the more rational a group is. If a group agent explicitly or implicitly develops a metalanguage that reduces mismatches, then that agent is not just rational but “reasoning” (30-31). To make reference to the

opening example, this would be the case if a second round of voting was held once all members have been made aware of the inconsistency of their initial results (64). Regardless of the structure, List and Pettit (25-26, 37-38) require deliberation and exchange among the various individuals to bottleneck into binary attitudes like yes/no verdicts.

There are far more technical details in *Group Agency* than one can hope to cover in a review of this scope. Nevertheless, the overall message conveyed by List and Pettit is that bona fide group agents must not only act (or *look* like they act) but act intelligently (or *look* like they act intelligently).

In keeping with this demand, the authors claim that, to function well, a group must be committed to tracking truth(s) (81-103). Perhaps if “proper functioning” is taken to mean the accumulation of knowledge, this makes sense. But, if by “proper functioning” we mean, say, the furtherance of a group’s existence or size, the emphasis on truth seeking is not at all obvious—the immediate counterexample here being religious groups, whose disregard for rational standards and evidence (and appeal to raw sentiment) allows them to secure a significant degree of in-group cohesion and resilience. Unlike organic bodies though, self-regulating social bodies do not have to meet any inherent teleological demands (Canguilhem 2012, 67-78), so List and Pettit are right to construe their purposefulness as a product of artificial design. Yet, if this is so and the attractors are up for grabs, it seems misplaced to take mirroring the world as the unproblematic end of all agents.

Evidently, the exemplar that group agents are held to emulate is the educated adult, not the infant or nonhuman animal (arguably agents too). There are supposed to be normative upshots to this. List and Pettit write, “We can regret a machine’s defect, or the bad weather, but we can accuse only an agent of being irrational or immoral” (214n2). Now, the authors (10-11, 170-85) are aware that the legal concept of “person” already encompasses groups such as businesses, so one might wonder whether adding these to the philosopher’s official ontology truly makes them easier targets for critique. It seems to me that, when proclaiming a given group as agent, it is not so much the object that gains in “reality” as the subject that gains in confidence.

Like the feedback loop of the “straw vote” (52, 62-64), List and Pettit hope that certifying certain groups as “real” will make possible actions that would have otherwise not been undertaken. They write that, fully developed, their theory “would license economists to look at the aims and strategies of a corporation as if it were an individual agent, abstracting largely from the individual dispositions of its members” (13). Three things are worth noting. First, the use of “as if” suggests a facile instrumentalist dodge. Second, economists already do treat groups as agents, and if instrumentalism holds any

water, they hardly need an elaborate story to reassure them. Third, the account propounded by the authors does not abstract “largely” from the individual dispositions of group members; rather, it can abstract completely from them since “a group that satisfies plausible conditions for agency may have to embrace an attitude or intention that is rejected by all its members individually” (10). This last claim merits closer inspection.

According to *Group Agency*, joint intention can help cement a group, but it is not mandatory. Members of a terrorist organization, for example, could conceivably contribute to a “cell” without knowing the overall plan of attack (33). In the terminology of the authors, individuals signal their membership to a group either by “authorizing” a personal figurehead(s) to speak on their behalf or by “acting” toward the group’s impersonal ends (35). However, because “acting” can be taken as a behavioral sign of tacit consent/participation, we encounter a queer consequence: “Here the individuals contribute to the group agent’s performance, but do not explicitly authorize the group agent; *they need not even be aware of its existence*” (36; emphasis added). Clearly, ascriptions like these depart from the terrorist example and would be nearly impossible to falsify.

We can compare this strange (and, I would argue, unacceptable) result with that obtained by John Greenwood (2003), whose work also aims to show that talk of groups has a basis in fact. Greenwood’s account allows an individual’s belief(s) to be labeled as “social” even when no one else besides that individual shares the belief(s) in question (see Champagne 2013b). On this view, what the individual thinks is essential and looking at patterns of collective organization is inessential. On the view championed by List and Pettit, what the individual thinks is inessential, and looking at patterns of collective organization is essential. Both views are ultimately plagued by absurd consequences. The present lack of consensus makes for exciting times. Still, in dialectic fashion, I suspect that, as these burgeoning debates unfold, theories will eventually come to a more prosaic resting place.

It is not just psychological states that *Group Agency* disregards. Although List and Pettit appeal to folk practices to motivate their project, their theory does not show much concern for actual linguistic usage (their approach is in many ways reminiscent of decision theory back when it still took its artificial constructs to be describing human choice making). There is nothing in List and Pettit’s account, for example, to shed light on locutions like “what generation X values.” Groups like these do not live up to their model, so any talk about them is presumably relegated to “error theory”—which is quite contrary to the intentional stance.

In a bid to distance themselves from loose ascriptions of agency, the authors repeatedly stress that only a specific type of pattern will make a group

agent real. Great care is thus taken to specify that exact pattern. Although *Group Agency* impresses with rigor, this exclusive emphasis on sophisticated groups does more to decrease than increase the plausibility of its central proposal. Indeed, something missed by the book is that lack of sophistication can be an explanatory and predictive virtue. List and Pettit are doing miniature ship building in the functionalist black box, but their delicate theorizing will be for naught if one can capture the relevant inputs/outputs without the detours (framing outputs in binary terms makes this competition with simpler strategies even more pronounced).

The authors write that “the difficulty of predicting from an individualistic base what a group agent does provides a justification for making sense of the group agent in terms that abstract from the ways its members perform” (78). I wholeheartedly agree (see Champagne 2013a). Yet, if predictive fecundity is indeed the prize and standard, then there is no reason to think that the sort of complex group canvassed in *Group Agency* enjoys a privileged standing. By analogy, conclusions gleaned from the study of insect-eating plants should not commandeer botany (nor relegate other species to “mere vegetation”). Of course, looking at the wide variety of human social interactions, the authors are free to prefer the study of self-reflective groups that aim to balance systematicity, anonymity, collective rationality, and so on (49). This topical predilection for corporate agents, however, ought not to be reified into a momentous threshold.

As Ned Block (1980) reminds us, even if one were to arrange the massive population of China so that it realized a specific computational architecture, that arrangement would not spontaneously generate anything more than its starting constituents. This thought experiment was originally meant to make a point about consciousness, and List and Pettit (66) mention it to show that individual attitudes and group attitudes can in principle be dissociated (insofar as individual Chinese citizens might not know what computations they are performing). Despite this, the suggestion in *Group Agency* does seem to be that if a number of us get together and exchange pieces of paper and other sign vehicles in just the right way, “we” somehow “think” (194). For the purposes of shaping foreign policy, a country like China might as well be “making decisions.” Still, the idea that arranging some stuff (in this case people) in a particular configuration somehow gives rise to something “different” is implausible (McGinn 2012) and calls for further support.

To be sure, the authors go out of their way to insist that their proposal does not violate “methodological individualism” (4). As they put it, “let the individual contributions be fixed and the attitudes and actions of the group will be fixed as well” (66). Yet, they also insist that “talk of group agents cannot

be dispensed with in favor of talk about individual agents” (5). How can both tenets be upheld? Individualism *just is* the thesis that talk of groups can be dispensed with. One can certainly draw a grid (10) combining columns (e.g., circular/noncircular) and rows (square/nonsquare) that show where a given description *would* fit, but this does nothing to show that anything *can* fit the description (perhaps the qualifier “methodological” is supposed to spare the authors from this charge by signalling some sort of “quasi-commitment” to the reality of group agents).

Although I am unsure who will read this book, I can envisage four relatively distinct population segments: philosophers, decision theorists, activists, and social scientists. Philosophers who take questions of ontology seriously will likely find this book evasive. Decision theorists who enjoy axiomatic model building for its own sake will find much to keep them occupied. Activists who have taken it upon themselves to “raise group consciousness” (193) will probably skip ahead to the third part and feel emboldened by the thought that the model builders are busy with the first two. However, since the normative questions (about responsibility and so on) are answerable to prior metaphysical questions for which *Group Agency* supplies vacillating answers at best, a transition to advocacy would seem hasty.

As for social scientists, either they will glance at the book’s dust jacket and (wrongly) assume that philosophers have now “proven” the existence of the groups they study, or they will engage with List and Pettit’s model only to discover that, unless they happen to specialize in commercial corporations, the model’s many stipulations impede rather than facilitate/elucidate their usual group intentional ascriptions.

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