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Collective Agency

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Abstract

This chapter shows how certain groups, such as corporations and political parties, are widely regarded as agents with causal control over their own actions and attitude formation. These collectives are believed to have their own mental states, such as beliefs and desires, with causal powers that must be accounted for in explanations of how they operate as parts of the social world. The chapter further demonstrates how this "group-agent realism" is considered compatible with methodological individualism despite this collective-level causal autonomy. Critics challenge group-agent realism by arguing that it relies on an implausible understanding of how individuals act in social situations. When we fully appreciate how individuals enable their group to form its attitudes and perform its actions, these critics argue, we shall see that individuals exercise causal control that undermines the case for collective-level agential control.

Keywords

collective decision making, collective-level causation, individual agency, group agency, judgment aggregation, methodological individualism, non-reductive individualism, social ontology, supervenience.

Objectives

- Understanding how certain groups can be considered rational agents irreducible to the individuals that constitute them.
- Understanding how collectives can be said to have their own causal powers despite being fully dependent on individuals to carry out their actions.
- Exploring how individuals think and act as parts of collective decision making, and how they can be understood to undermine their collective's autonomous causal powers.

1. Introduction

This chapter explores whether certain groups can be considered agents in their own right. More specifically, why might we think that some groups function as agents capable of forming and acting on their own intentional states, especially beliefs and desires? "Group-agent realists" maintain that groups can qualify as agents in this sense in virtue of their decision-making procedure (Collins, 2025; French, 1984; List and Pettit, 2011). We shall see how these groups depend on procedures that can produce what I shall refer to as "collective attitudes" that are irreducible to the judgments and preferences individuals submit to the procedures.[1] These collective attitudes therefore cannot be attributed to the individuals involved in forming them. Group-agent realists argue they must therefore be understood as the group's own mental states. Unless we take this view, we shall fail to explain how the group operates within its environment.

An analysis of this account of group-agent realism naturally focuses on the collective decision making said to produce the irreducible collective attitudes, or beliefs and desires, that the group agent acts on. We start with an introduction to the notion of agency and group agency. We then consider how the collective agent supervenes on the actions of individual agents but is nonetheless irreducible to facts about how the individuals realizing it act. This irreducibility view will be shown to rest on a view of collective attitudes as causally significant in social-scientific explanations. We end the chapter by considering how individualist critics of group-agent realism reject the idea of collective-level mental causation and agency.

The issues discussed in the chapter concern both philosophers and social scientists. In particular, the issue of whether a group can have causally significant attitudes affects how we

[1] I use the term "attitude" because these states are attitudes toward propositions with representational content about what the world is like (beliefs) or toward propositions with motivational content about what the world ought to be like (desires).

think of their ontological status. It also has important implications for how we study their internal processes and individuals involved in them, as well as how these groups interact with the social world they are a part of. It also raises moral questions about what it entails concerning group agents' duties and responsibilities, but I shall not consider these moral issues here.[2]

I should also make clear that by focusing on groups as irreducible agents in virtue of their collective decision-making procedures, I exclude the large literature on "joint agency," which is, roughly, said to arise when two or more individuals form a we-intention—an intention that they together perform some action (e.g., Bratman, 2014; Gilbert, 1989; Tuomela, 1995).[3] Individuals within the groups I shall focus on will likely act on we-intentions when they act as group members. But I shall here not take them to thereby form a collective agent within a larger collective agent.[4]

2. Groups as agents

An agent is standardly understood to be a system, or entity, that can act in ways explainable in terms of the system's intentionality (Anscombe, 1957; Davidson, 1963). The agent has intentional states, which are mental states projecting onto the world around it. In particular, it has beliefs, or representational states, about what the environment it operates in is like. It also has motivational states, or desires, about how its environment ought to be like. And

[2] The literature on groups as moral agents is large and growing. Defenders of this view include Collins (2023), Copp (2006), Hess (2014), and Pettit (2007). Critics include Haji (2006), Ludwig (2007), Miller and Mäkelä (2005), and Moen (2024a).

[3] Bratman (1999, p. 111) also holds that a joint, or shared, intention should be attributed to individuals, and not to any "superagent." Gilbert (1989), however, maintains that individuals' commitment to perform a joint action brings a "plural subject" into being.

[4] On the differences between group agency, as it is discussed here, and joint agency, see Pettit and Schweikard (2006).

crucially, it has the capacity to act so as to alter its environment to satisfy a desire in accordance with its beliefs about how it can most effectively do so.

It is, of course, common to talk about individual humans as agents doing what they do because of their beliefs and desires. Alan ate the chocolate because he thought it would satisfy his desire for chocolate. Beth jumped in the water because she believed it was cold and would therefore help her cool down in the hot weather. But groups are often also talked about in this way. The political party supported the tax cut because it wanted to strengthen the economy and believed lower taxes would contribute to this end. The hiring committee rejected the candidate because it wanted a more diligent worker than it judged the candidate to be.

These groups are made up of individual agents, and for some other philosophers, this means the groups themselves cannot be agents. For these critics of group-agent realism, group agency is nothing more than a convenient metaphor or fiction. It might, for various reasons, be convenient to speak of certain groups as if they were agents, but they are not really agents capable of acting on their own intentional states (e.g., Moen, 2025; Velasquez, 1983). We return to this individualist objection to group-agent realism in Section 6.

Group-agent realists reject this reductionist view. Some groups, they argue, are agents in their own right; they are irreducible to the individual agents that constitute them. These groups, then, can form their own intentional states and act on them in ways that cannot be explained by looking at the mental states and actions of individual agents. Group-agent realism appears to be the dominant view in contemporary social ontology, which involves questions of what makes up the social world, as well as in collective ethics, which is especially concerned with the moral responsibility for collective action, or actions individuals perform on behalf of their groups. Collins and Tan (2024, p. 238) even declare that "there is consensus among social ontologists that a social entity is a *distinct agent*" (emphasis in the original).

Pettit (2025) presents five key elements of groups he takes to qualify as agents. A group

agent, he says, is (1) "purposively flexible," so that it can pursue its goals across a variety of situations, so as to reliably act in accordance with group beliefs and desires; (2) the individual members are aware that their actions contribute toward the group's goals (whether their actions are voluntary or not); (3) an authorized spokesperson can express the group's attitudes and give instructions to other members for how to pursue the group's ends; (4) the group can converse with other agents in a distinct constructed voice; and (5) this enables it to make and honor commitments to other agents.

To function in this way, the group agent must form attitudes that individuals can then act on in its name. This formation of collective attitudes is considered central to group agents, and the main focus in analyses of these groups is therefore standardly on the procedure forming these attitudes (Collins, 2025; French, 1984; List and Pettit, 2011). Collins (2019) takes what she calls "agential collectives" to have collective decision-making procedures that deliver collective attitudes on the basis of group members' attitudes. Such a group can thus formulate a common goal for the members to work toward together. The members, in turn, are responsible toward each other for the pursuit of this goal. They have specific roles to perform in their collective quest to meet their group's targets.

This is believed to give the group its own rational point of view, which differs from that of any of its members. Corporations are often taken to exemplify such groups. A petroleum company, for example, acts on its own beliefs and desires when it responds to an oil spill. We cannot understand its response by looking at the intentional states of its individual members. Other much-discussed examples are committees and various political groups, such as parties, legislatures, and cabinets.

What Collins calls "diffuse collectives" lack a collective decision-procedure and can form no common goal for the members. They are therefore not thought to qualify for agency. An example is the group of individuals constituting the overall demand for some product, say, Nutella. Individuals purchasing Nutella share no common goal. They do not collectively try

to realize a certain overall demand for Nutella. And they have no responsibilities toward each other in virtue of being parts of this diffuse collective. They do not somehow owe it to each other to contribute to the overall demand for Nutella. List and Pettit (2011, pp. 12–13) also deny that such groups are agents.

The same goes for "teleological collectives," whose members have a shared goal they expect each other to pursue, but they lack a collective decision-making procedure. The fossil-fuel lobby exemplifies such a group, Collins says, as its members have a common goal they expect one another to work toward, but the goal is not specified in a collective-level procedure directing how the whole collective is to operate. We thus see that by requiring that a group agent must have a decision-making procedure that can formulate the group's beliefs and desires, many kinds of collectives will not be regarded as agents.

3. Individualist foundations

For group-agent realists, group agents have causal impact on the social world. As we have seen, they take the group agent's intentional states to explain why it acted in one way or another. This causal explanation is said to be unavailable at the individual level. We cannot explain the group's action by looking at its members' beliefs, desires, or other intentional states. Group-agent realism therefore appears to conflict with methodological individualism (MI), which is the view that any social phenomenon can, in principle, be explained in terms of individuals' psychology (Elster, 1982; Watkins, 1952). That is, we can explain any social phenomenon by focusing strictly on the individual agents involved in bringing it about and their motivations for acting as they do. There are no other social forces at work.

List and Pettit (2011, pp. 3–6), however, explicitly endorse MI despite maintaining that collective agents are irreducible and non-redundant in social explanations. We make sense of this apparent contradiction when we see how they take group agency to supervene on individuals' actions without being irreducible to these individuals. List and Spiekermann

(2013) refer to this view as "supervenience individualism," which they take to be one understanding of the ambiguous notion of MI.

This individualist approach to the study of social phenomena is analogous to physicalism in the philosophy of mind, which says, essentially, that every mental event, in principle, has a physical explanation. Everything that happens in the mind can be explained in terms of some physical process. Any mental states m supervenes on a physical state p. That is, m is realized by p, so that whenever p occurs, m occurs, and any mental-level change requires a physical-level change. Crucially, on this view, the mental state has no causal powers independently of its particular physical realizer. Two worlds identical in terms of physical facts will therefore be identical also with respect to all psychological facts.

Analogously, a group agent's mental states are understood to be realized by a certain configuration of individual-level facts (List and Pettit, 2006, 2011; Tollefsen, 2002, pp. 40–42). Any such mental state, that is, is realized by some individual-level fact, like individuals having designed a certain procedure and voted a certain way (more on this in the next section). Just like a physicalist worldview is widely thought not to preclude causally efficacious mental states in individuals, an individualist view of the social world is considered compatible with causally efficacious mental states in collectives.

According to what List and Pettit (2011, p. 66) call the "supervenience thesis" about group agency, "[t]he attitudes and actions of a group agent supervene on the contributions of its members." These individuals' contributions realize any of the group agent's mental state, and these individuals enable it to act on these states. Any group mental state, then, is realized by a particular configuration of individual-level facts. And a change in group-level mentality requires an individual-level change. Any group mental state is thus explainable in terms of the contributions of the individuals involved in realizing it. Two worlds identical in terms of facts about their individuals will therefore be identical also with respect to their social facts. Any difference in the social facts about the world will be traceable to a difference

between their individual-level facts.

But if any group mental state is realized by individual-level facts, why can we not simply explain the group's behavior in terms of those individual-level facts? Again, group-agent realists here rely on the analogy with mind–body supervenience. While any mental state m has a physical realizer p, m may also have other physical realizers. That is to say that m is multiply realizable. When we then say that m causes some other mental state or an action, we are not referring to any particular physical realizer. A widely accepted view among philosophers of mind is that this makes m irreducible to any particular physical state despite being necessarily realized by a physical state. It is causally autonomous despite, in every instance, being realized by some physical states (Fodor, 1974; Putnam, 1967). The view is commonly referred to as "non-reductive physicalism."

"Non-reductive individualism" is defended analogously by maintaining that collective-level mentality is multiply realizable at the individual level (Kincaid 1990; Sawyer, 2002, 2003). This view is also taken to provide an individualist basis for group-agent realism (Collins, 2023, pp. 15–17; List and Pettit, 2006, 2011). Any collective mental state can be realized by several different individual-level configurations and is therefore irreducible to any particular such configuration despite, in every instance, being realized some one such configuration. This indeed seems quite obvious. Take any decision coming out of a collective decision-making procedure. In any particular instance, it will be supported by one decisive set of individuals. But it can also be made with the support of various other sets of individuals. Even in a small, three-member group operating under a simple majority rule, it can be supported by four different coalitions: A and B, A and C, B and C, and A, B, and C. Whenever one of these coalitions obtains, the decision will be made. A collective attitude supervening on individuals' contributions can therefore clearly be realized in multiple ways.

4. Judgment aggregation

There is, however, much more to say about the formation of collective attitudes and the collective–individual supervenience relation. Let us now look more closely at the collective decision making at the heart of groups believed to qualify as agents. Such a group forms collective attitudes based on the attitudes of individuals contributing to its decision-making procedures. The procedure is non-dictatorial, as several individuals are involved in the decision making. The procedure delivers attitudes toward particular propositions on the group's agenda. It formulates binary judgments of propositions, so that each is judged to be either true or false, good or bad, desirable or undesirable, and so on.

If each proposition is treated separately from other propositions, the collective judgment can be viewed simply as an expression of the judgments of the individuals supporting it. We may, for example, explain the collective judgment in favor of a proposition p simply by saying that a majority of group members supported p. This is how a simple majority rule works. Things get more complicated, however, when we add more propositions to the agenda and we see that these propositions are logically interconnected. Suppose we add q and then the conjunctive "p and q." The latter connects all the three propositions (p, q, p and q), so that judgments of p and q separately entail a judgment of "p and q" conjunctively. That is, by accepting p and q, you must accept "p and q," or by rejecting p or q, you must reject "p and q." The judgment of "p and q" also comes with constraints on the judgments of p and q separately, as accepting "p and q" requires acceptance of both p and q separately, and rejecting "p and q" means you must reject at least one of p and q. There are also other connectives besides "and," such as "or," "if–then," and "not."

To see how groups form judgments of interconnected propositions and how it can lead to a problem of collective irrationality, let us consider an example first introduced by Pettit (2001a, pp. 107–110). Workers in an employee-owned firm worry about their work conditions, and a committee is brought together to decide whether to finance new safety

measures by sacrificing a pay raise. The members of the committee agree that the pay raise will be sacrificed if and only if the committee judges the following three propositions to be true:

P1: The existing safety measures do not protect the workers from serious danger.

P2: The new safety measures under consideration would effectively enhance the workers' safety.

P3: Sacrificing the pay raise would be an acceptable cost.

If and only if P1, P2, and P3 are supported, the committee will support the new safety measures—that is:

C: Forgo the pay raise to finance the new safety measures.

The committee members then vote. As we can see in Table 1, each member submits a consistent set of judgments. Since each of them rejects one of the premises, they reject C unanimously. We also see that each premise is supported by a majority, but C is not. So, while the committee members have individually submitted consistent sets of judgments, their majority judgments are inconsistent. Here, then, we have an example of the much-studied phenomenon of individual rationality resulting in collective irrationality.[5]

	P1	P2	P3	C
Member A	True	True	False	False
Member B	True	False	True	False
Member C	False	True	True	False
Majority	**True**	**True**	**True**	**False**

Table 1. A complete profile of committee members' judgments of four interconnected propositions. Each individual submits a consistent set of judgments, but the majority judgments are nonetheless inconsistent.

This problem of judgment aggregation has been much-discussed by philosophers and

[5] For an interesting introduction to this phenomenon and a collection of papers on various forms it might take, see Barry and Hardin (1982).

social-choice theorists in recent decades, but it is not a new discovery. It can be traced at least back to the work of the eighteenth-century French mathematician Poisson (1837, p. 21).[6] It later appears in the work of Vacca (1921) before taken up by Kornhauser and Sager (1986). List and Pettit (2002) generalize the problem by showing how it applies to any procedure satisfying certain minimal conditions for fair representation of individuals' judgments.[7]

List and Pettit (2006, p. 94) take this to show that what they call "proposition-wise supervenience" between group attitudes and individuals' contributions cannot work. That is, we cannot treat the propositions separately by taking the collective judgment toward a proposition p to be based strictly on the individuals' judgments of p. We instead need "set-wise supervenience," which takes the whole set of collective judgments to be based on the whole profile of the individuals' judgments of all propositions on the agenda (List and Pettit, 2006, p. 95, 2011, pp. 67–72).

To see how this works, let us return to the committee example. We now see that to form a coherent set of judgments, the committee cannot simply adopt the members' judgments. Pettit (2001b) refers to this as "the discursive dilemma." To get collective rationality, we have to give up responsiveness to the committee members' judgments. And to maintain such

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[6] Elster (2015: 411) therefore refers to the problem as "the Poisson paradox."

[7] Informally, any aggregation function satisfying *collective rationality* so that it produces consistent judgments of all the proposition on the agenda, must violate at least one of the following three conditions: Allow each individual to submit any logically possible, or consistent, set of judgments (*universal domain*); give equal weight to individuals' judgments in the determination of the collective judgments (*anonymity*); make a judgment of each proposition strictly dependent on the individuals' judgments of that proposition, not on their judgments of any other proposition, or on how the propositions are ordered on the agenda (*systematicity*). See List and Pettit (2002) for the formal proof. For a discussion of how the theorem relates to Arrow's theorem in preference aggregation, see Dietrich and List (2007).

responsiveness, we must sacrifice collective rationality. To function as a rational agent, the committee must reject at least one of the premises or accept the conclusion. List and Pettit (2011, pp. 56–58) call the former solution "the conclusion-based procedure" and the latter "the premise-based procedure." Neither procedure is entirely responsive to the members' judgments. Whichever solution is taken to this problem of collective irrationality, the committee will form a judgment that conflict with the majority judgment. Indeed, by accepting the conclusion, C, it will form a judgment all its members reject.

By employing the conclusion-based procedure, the committee will accept C—that is, support the pay sacrifice and the new safety measures. And if the committee employs the premise-based procedure, it will reject C—that is, maintain the pay raise and reject the new safety measures. The key observation here is that different procedures can deliver different decisions based on the same profile of individuals' judgments. So, if the premise-based procedure is employed, and the pay sacrifice is implemented, it is the group agent's own judgment that is acted on, and not that of any individual committee member.

When we interpret the committee as an agent, we take these procedures to be the group's reasoning procedure (List and Pettit, 2011). By employing the premise-based procedure, it arrives at the decision in favor of C because it *believes* (1) the premises and (2) that the premises are necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for C. By employing the conclusion-based procedure, we take the committee to reject C and at least one of the premises because it believes (1) C, (2) that the premises are necessary and jointly sufficient for C, and therefore (3) that it must reject one of the premises.

This view of group-level reasoning is particularly developed by List and Pettit (2011), who see the decision-making procedure as a group mind in action. The group agent is in control of its own judgment formation and is taken to reason from its own rational point of view. It is capable of forming beliefs and desires that may come apart from those of the individuals constituting it. With this capacity to form its own mental states that is then acted

on by individuals acting on the group's behalf, the group agent is seen to possess a "surprising degree of autonomy" (List and Pettit, 2011, p. 59).

Here it is important to note that since the profile of individuals' judgments is indeterminate with respect to the formation of collective judgments, it is by itself an insufficient supervenience base for the collective judgments. In a supervenience relation, the base property necessarily realizes a particular supervenient property. Since the profile of individuals' judgments cannot do so, as we have seen, it is insufficient as a base for a supervenient set of collective judgments. To get determinacy, we must consider the procedure that forms collective attitudes out of the individuals' judgments as part of the particular instance of the base property that realizes the collective judgments. And insofar as we commit to supervenience individualism, we must understand the procedure as a contribution by individuals to the collective attitude formation. List and Pettit (2006: 90) also note that the procedure could be regarded as "yet another individual contribution on the part of the members." But the significance of viewing the procedure as an individual-level contribution to the collective attitude formation is not much discussed in the literature. We shall see in Section 6 how it can be built on to formulate a critique of group-agent realism.

5. Collective-level causation

Group-agent realists understand the attitudes formed autonomously by the group agent as mental states with causal powers. A group belief or desire, for example, causes the group to perform some action, or to form an intention to perform it. How is such collective mental causation possible? And how is it compatible with the individualism we have seen group-agent realism is based on?

The case for collective mental causation is usually based on the observation that collective attitudes are multiply realizable. As we have seen, there are several ways individuals can realize a collective attitude, despite the collective attitude, in each instance, being realized

by one particular individual-level configuration. List and Pettit (2011, pp. 161–163) take collective mental states to be "causally relevant" in that they program for a group action. They apply Jackson and Pettit's (1990) program model of causation, where the higher-order programming structure is seen to ensure that an outcome is implemented by a lower-level property. The programming property, that is, ensures that some lower-level realizer state will implement the outcome, although it does not specify which particular lower-level state will do so. This view thus goes well with the observation of multiple realizability. The program model is thought to allow for a physicalist view of mental causation, as it is the lower-order physical state that implements what is programmed for by the higher-order mental state.

In the case of collective mentality, by analogy, the collective-level property programs for how some individual, or individuals, makes a causal impact on the world. In a group, individuals carry out the group's actions, but what they do is programmed for by the higher-order collective structure. This structure forms the attitudes to be acted on, and it ensures that someone will carry out the action. If one individual is not doing it, another individual will do it. The group agent, List and Pettit (2011, p. 163) write, "controls for the performance of a certain action by some members … by maintaining procedures for the formation and enactment of its attitudes, arranging things so that some individuals are identified as the agents to perform a required task and others are identified as possible back-ups." This makes the collective-level property causally relevant and cannot be left out of the causal story of why the group acts as it does. But it is individuals that are causally efficacious as they are the ones actually implementing the outcome as programmed by collective. The individual acts on the group's behalf, but the group itself programs for this action.

In his sole-authored work on group agency, List (2025) applies a different model of causation. This is the difference-making account of causation as counterfactual dependence developed by List and Menzies (2009). On this view, to say that F causes G means that if F were to occur, then G would occur, and that if F were not to occur, then G would not occur.

F is thus what makes the difference as to the presence or absence of G. F is therefore the difference-making cause of G. Crucially, the property F, and not just any instance of F, is the cause. Suppose F is multiply realizable. Any particular realizer, say F_1, will then be "causally sufficient," as List and Menzies put it, for B. But F_1 is not the difference-making cause of G, since the presence of G does not depend on the presence of F_1. Any instance of F would suffice to bring about G. The difference-making cause is therefore F, and not F_1 or F_2 or F_3, etc.

When we then consider what causes a particular group action, we should not look at any particular individual-level realizer of a collective attitude p. It makes no difference for the action how p was instantiated—whether it was realized by one individual-level configuration or another. The difference-making cause is p (List, 2025, pp. 1041–1043). If the collective forms this judgment, so that p is present, then the action will occur, and if p is absent, the action will not occur. The action thus depends on the collective-level fact, not on any of its particular individual-level realizers. The former is therefore understood to cause the action.

List (2025, p. 1041) remains sympathetic to the program model, and Pettit (2017) understands List and Menzies's difference-making account to "not break in any fundamental way with the program model" (Pettit, 2017, p. 248). The program model, Pettit suggests, can similarly be understood to say that an action occurs when the programming intention occurs, and not to occur when the intention does not occur. List and Pettit thus both separately and jointly provide accounts of how higher-order, and particularly collective-level, causation is possible; how collective mental states can have real causal impact on the world. This is a crucial step in the demonstration of the reality of group agents.

6. Individual agency

Critics of group-agent realism argue that a group cannot be an agent because it is itself made up of agents. If we accept the collective–individual supervenience introduced in Section 3,

we take one set of properties to supervene on another set of properties of the same (psychological) kind. Collective beliefs, for example, supervene on individuals' beliefs. This supervenience relation is commonly treated as analogous to that between the mental and the physical in physicalist philosophy of mind. But as Rupert (2014, 2019) argues, a problem with this analogy is that only the mind–body relation is between two genuinely different kinds of property. The relation between individual agency and collective agency, on the other hand, is between properties of the same (psychological) kind. Rupert then argues that the phenomena involving group agents actually can be explained in terms of individual psychology. Parsimony therefore does not warrant the inclusion of collective mentality and agency in our scientific models.

Rupert thereby joins forces with other individualist critics of group-agent realists all denying that collective-level agency is needed to explain how collective decisions are made and acted on. Such explanations are always available in terms of individual agency, which makes group agency redundant. Individuals make the group function as it does, and there is no need to invoke higher-order collective agency with their own causal powers. Saying that a group, as an agent in its own right, forms and acts on its own intentional states is at best metaphorical talk with no place in explanations of how the group operates. Quinton (1975–1976), a well-known critic of realism about collective agency, maintains that every attitude ascribed to the group is merely the aggregate, or summary, of the attitudes ascribed to the group members. Explaining a group's behavior therefore does not seem to require us to introduce a group mind; individual minds suffice.

We have seen, however, that collective attitudes are multiply realizable and not straightforwardly reducible to individuals' attitudes. Group-agent realists, such as List and Pettit, formulate their accounts of collective mental causation on this observation. But it remains the fact that any collective decision is necessarily both made and implemented by individuals. The discursive dilemma (as well as social choice theory more generally) shows

the significance of the procedure and not just how individuals vote. But whichever procedure is employed, it is implemented by individuals and how it works in each case is driven by how individuals vote (Miller and Mäkelä, 2005, pp. 648–649). Critics also consider a group as necessarily incapable of acting, as it is invariably individuals that act on the group's behalf (Haji, 2006, p. 300; Mäkelä, 2007, pp. 464–465). More generally, Rupert (2019, p. 23) argues that at each step of the process of forming and acting on collective decisions, there will always be some individual to influence in ways that can affect how the group functions. He indeed takes List and Pettit to demonstrate this by providing recipes for how individuals can construct group states.

Group-agent realists would presumably accept these observations. But they will deny that individuals thereby gain the kind of control over their group necessary for undermining its agency. You can design a system and put it to work, but that does not mean you have full control over it. Group-agent realists can accept that individuals have something to do with the formation of collective attitudes, and to the extent that they do, their actions explain the outcome (French, 1998, p. 25; Pettit, 2007, pp. 189–194). But in cases like the committee example presented above, where no one votes for the outcome, Pettit (2007, p. 198) and Collins (2019, p. 952), at least, think no individual, and only the group agent, is responsible for the outcome. And while groups depend on individuals to act on collective attitudes, we have seen that a well-structured group agent is thought to program for its attitudes being acted on by ensuring that one individual or another will do so in its name.

What the individualist opposition to group-agent realism seems to need is a deeper demonstration of how individuals causally contribute to the collective attitude formation that will make group agency redundant. Moen (2023, 2024b) draws on insights from political economy to show how individuals involved in the collective decision making have more

opportunities for influencing the outcome than group-agent realists appreciate.[8] First, he shows how agenda setters—that is, individuals deciding which propositions appear on the agenda, the order in which they are voted on, and how procedures deal with inconsistencies—have considerable power in the decision making. Based on expectations of how other individuals will vote, agenda setters can select agenda items with an eye on how they will affect the outcome. In the committee example, we might plausibly explain the outcome by pointing to the agenda setter's decision to place P1, P2, and P3 on the agenda. The agenda setter knows that the other committee members might support these propositions, and that, under the premise-based procedure, that leads the committee to support C. And more obviously, whoever decided to employ the premise-based procedure enabled the group to accept an outcome no one supported.

Second, we should not think we cannot explain an outcome in terms of individuals' thinking and acting just because they did not vote for the outcome. The literature on strategic voting is full of examples of how individuals vote insincerely on one issue in order to contribute to what they judge as a more desirable outcome than what they would have contributed to by voting sincerely. We have seen that Collins and Pettit think no individual voter can be blamed for the outcome in the committee example. But presumably, the committee members know about the premise-based procedure, and they therefore know that support for any premise can be a contribution to an outcome—the pay sacrifice—they reject. So, by saying no individual is responsible for this outcome, these group-agent realists seem to see individuals, implausibly, as incapable of such reasoning and incapable of acting with an eye on what outcome they might contribute to as parts of a collective.

These considerations of individuals' capacity to think strategically as voters and agenda

[8] For good examples of such analyses by political economists of individuals' strategic thinking and acting in the context of collective decision making, see Riker (1986) and Shepsle (2010: pt. 2).

setters is meant to show that there is no scope for judging a group agent to be in control of its own attitude formation. By fully accounting for individuals' agential capacities within a social environment where their actions combine to produce a collective outcome, there will be no need to ascribe causally potent mental states to the group itself. Individuals' agential capacities are thus seen to undermine the case for the reality of any collective agent.

7. Conclusion

Certain collectives are widely seen as agents capable of forming and acting on their own beliefs and desires. Despite being made up of individual agents, we cannot explain how these collective agents function unless we treat them as agents in their own right. That is at least the view of group-agent realists. We have seen that this view is considered compatible with a fundamentally individualist view of the social world, as groups' mental states supervene on individuals' contributions. The multiple realizability of these collective-level states is crucial to the arguments for the causal significance that makes them non-redundant in explanations of group agents and their impact on the social world.

Critics, however, deny that explanations of how these groups operate require us to regard them as agents. The procedures forming collective attitudes are made by individuals, and individuals also submit the attitudes from which these procedures form these collective attitudes. A close look at how individuals' beliefs and motivations explain their actions within this social environment will suffice to explain how these groups function. So, while group-agent realism is a popular position in social ontology, it remains contested.[9]

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