

## **Reasoning about Collectives**

### Collective Intentionality and Collective Agency in Philosophy and the Social Sciences

Joint action, collective agency, and collective rationality have become important topics within philosophy as well as within the social sciences, in particular economics. There is a vital need for relating the theoretical and methodological frameworks employed within these disciplines to one another. Rather than claiming a superior grasp of them, philosophers and social scientists are well advised to enter into an open discourse conducive to an adequate understanding of collective phenomena. The problems concerning collective reasoning considered in this paper provide an excellent opportunity for this.

Collective reasoning has come to play a significant role both in the philosophical literature on collective intentionality, joint actions, and collective agency – see in particular Christian List's and Philip Pettit's work on judgment aggregation – and in the economic literature on team reasoning and collective agency to which Michael Bacharach, Nathalie Gold, and Robert Sugden have made important contributions.

We scrutinize the key claims made within these two strands of literature, and identify some important new insights that the judgment aggregation approach and the team reasoning approach offer into collective reasoning and rationality. Furthermore, we argue that, in spite of the claims the proponents make, the accounts offered should not be considered as alternatives for the conceptions of collective intentionality and collective agency developed by Margaret Gilbert, John Searle, and Raimo Tuomela. Instead, they are complementary to them.

Both of these approaches to collective reasoning start from the assumption that groups of individuals can be collective agents. While the team reasoning approach seeks to identify the distinctive modes of reasoning engaged in by the individual members of the group, the judgment aggregation approach investigates how the individual judgments of group members need to be aggregated for the group to count as rational. Furthermore, all reasoning is taken to be subject to norms of rationality. While the judgment aggregation approach insists on consistency among judgments made at the collective level, the team reasoning approach relies on an instrumental conception of rationality on which the agent, in this case the team, chooses what is best, i.e. it selects the option that maximizes its utility.

Proponents of both approaches criticize existing accounts of collective intentions, joint action, and collective agency. Existing accounts of collective agency focus on the formation of joint intentions and the use of collective decision-making mechanisms, and do not include rationality requirements. Against this, Philip Pettit has argued that (1) precisely those groups that realize rationality on the collective level constitute collective agents. According to the canonical accounts of collective intentionality, joint actions can be analyzed in terms of joint intentions. Against this, Bacharach, Gold, and Sugden have argued that (2) that team reasoning more adequately captures what is special about joint actions. We argue that both of these claims are false, and proceed to offer an alternative account of the role reasoning and rationality play in the formation of joint intentions and the constitution of collective agents.

Against (1) we argue that maintaining consistency between judgments formed at the collective level by means of some kind of procedure that takes individual judgments as its inputs is not necessary for the constitution of a collective agent. As Pettit points out, a failure to maintain consistency undermines the credibility of the group at issue, and diminishes its effectiveness. However, some organizations are not very good at achieving their aims and hardly deserve to be taken seriously. Nevertheless, we regard those organizations as collective

agents and treat them as such. Most significantly, they have agential powers that cannot be reduced to the abilities of their constituents.

Pettit appears to believe that collective agents are persons in the same sense as (most) individual human beings are persons. Against this, we argue that, even though some collective agents might be persons, personhood should not be seen as a requirement for collective agency. Collective agents are human constructs. An important class of collective agents is created as a means to reconfigure the distribution of rights and powers in a society – think, for instance, of limited liability companies. This supports the idea that collective agential powers rather than collective rationality should be seen as necessary and sufficient for collective agency.

Against (2) we maintain that, just as in the case of individual actions, the nature of joint actions is best captured in terms of the intentions that generate them. Whether an event is a joint action or consists of a collection of individual actions depends on how the individuals involved in it conceived of their contributions.

Gold and Sugden argue that the canonical accounts of collective intentionality do not have adequate means for distinguishing cases of coordination (Nash equilibria) that involve collective intentionality and those that do not. More in particular, they argue that the conditions that are invoked ‘are just as problematic as the original concept of collective intention’. In response, we point out that their argument depends on an overly demanding conception of conceptual analysis. The ideal of analysis as the specification of non-circular necessary and sufficient conditions that only employ terms that are simpler than the one that is analyzed has to be abandoned for many philosophically interesting notions anyway.

It is important to appreciate that, rather than with conceptual analysis, those who contribute to the literature on team reasoning are primarily concerned with the explanation of certain forms of cooperation and coordination on the one hand and normative analysis pertaining to the conditions under which it is rational to perform (one’s part of) a joint action. Once this is appreciated, the work done on team reasoning turns out to be complementary to that on collective intentions and collective agents. We support this claim by introducing some conceptual refinements, in particular a distinction between ex ante and ex post team reasoning, where the point of reference is the formation of a joint intention.