

Collective intentionality and oppressive societies

The intentionality of officially sanctioned group behaviors in oppressive societies presents a special challenge to most contemporary accounts of group agency and group intentionality.

This paper explores how the idea of group intentionality can be applied to oppressive societies and considers the complexities of group intentionality in such societies in light of individual members' self-identification with the set of beliefs constitutive of group agency.

According to Carol Rovane's ontological account of group agency, group intentions are on a par with individual intentions.ⁱ A group person is constituted by inter-personal affairs that involve the recognition of the order and relations among intentional episodes. Paul Sheehy argues that group intentions not only correspond to group agents but are, in fact, group-constituting interrelations.ⁱⁱ Peter French holds that collectivities with an institutional organization and a decision procedure are capable of purposeful action over time and have identity over time independent of particular membership.ⁱⁱⁱ All of these accounts do not seem to take into consideration the complexity of individual attitudes to group-constituting sets of beliefs. Even Raimo Tuomela's treatment of group intention, which takes into consideration that not all of group members act on its behalf, ties operative and non-operative members through the "we-intention."^{iv} A collective's non-operative members tacitly accept the commitment of its operative members because all of them exist in the "we-mode" that ascribes intentions to the group. However, consider an individual's everyday inclusion in various groups in the Stalinist Russia. The individual's inclusion into her collective at work, komsomol or party group, her neighborhood had a clear set of promulgated and shared rules of engagement, norms of behavior and/or institutional organization with the corresponding decision procedure. She would be cooperatively disposed, at least in her public and often self-

professed attitudes and actions. As French's corporation, the regime had a life of its own regardless of the changing individual membership, and the machine of the state possessed an organization that delineated stations and levels within its power structure.^v This structure incorporated intentions and acts of various biological persons by subordinating and synthesizing them into a corporate decision at every level. Moreover, while we may say that not all "non-operative" members accepted the communist commitment, they may still be said to have ascribed intentions to the group and behaved accordingly. Nevertheless, there is something very different in the role of an oppressive structure and of a democratic structure in constituting a group intention. This intuitive difference needs to be articulated and I do it in the first part of the paper, in which I consider the attitudes of members of a non-liberal culture to group membership to highlight the complexities of group intention in various power settings. I explore how the element of individual self-identification with the set of beliefs constitutive of group membership can help to sort out individual relations to group intentions in the second half of the paper.

1. When one attempts to incorporate into an account of group intentionality the attitudes that individuals take toward beliefs of group membership, some obvious difficulties arise in the context of oppressive societies. Individuals participating in officially sanctioned groups and activities can believe, as a matter of fact, the same proposition their official culture advances but have normative beliefs about the proposition different from those that are officially endorsed. Individuals can also act so that their actions appear to be motivated by a certain belief promoted by the authorities, but at the same time they may have developed a disposition to behave as they do based on an entirely different belief (e.g., an individual may carry a slogan with enthusiasm not because she endorses, as expected of her, the content of the slogan, but because she is afraid to be punished). What is more, individuals may self-deceive

and sincerely avow that a certain belief is true in order to cope with an oppressive power structure. I sort out various types of individual attitudes to group membership by employing the notion of self-identification with beliefs of group membership. Philip Pettit argues that collective agents form intentions discontinuously from the intentions of their members.^{vi} It seems then that individual attitudes toward group membership do not play a significant role in collective intentionality. However, the discontinuity of individual and group intentions can derive not only from the psychological autonomy of groups but also from the fact that their individual members do not identify with the group. The distinction between these two very different options has to be accounted for.

2. While self-identification has clear implications for the notion of political legitimacy and for ascriptions of group responsibility, its role in relation to group intention needs to be assessed. When individuals do not self-identify with their political power, does collective intentionality exist? Is it one's identification with a particular decision or the group overall what matters? I will answer these questions by assuming that group agency requires the presence of a shared set of beliefs about the terms of membership and the relevant collective interests (I defended this notion elsewhere) and explaining how group intention relates to group agency in oppressive societies.

3. I conclude the paper by stating how the theoretical framework I propose applies to transitional societies for determining the presence, responsibilities and entitlements of group agents.

ⁱ Carol Rovane, *The Bounds of Agency* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998): 169.

ⁱⁱ Paul Sheehy, "Holding them responsible," in Peter A. French and Howard K. Wettstein (eds.) *Shared Intentions and Collective Responsibility; Midwest Studies in Philosophy Vol. No. XXX* (Boston, MA & Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 74-93: 75.

ⁱⁱⁱ Peter French, *Collective and Corporate Responsibility* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 13.

^{iv} Raimo Tuomela, "Joint intention, We-mode and I-mode," in French and Wettstein, 35-58: 47.

^v French, "The corporation as a moral person," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 16, number 3, July 1979, p. 211.

^{vi} Philip Pettit, *A Theory of Freedom: From the Psychology to the Politics of Agency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001): 116.