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Thinking (about) Groups – A Special Issue of Synthese

Editors: Alessandro Salice, John Michael, András Szigeti

Preface

In the last three or four decades philosophers have started to pay more attention to the ontology of groups and the circumstances under which it might be legitimate and fruitful to ascribe to groups such properties as agency, consciousness, responsibility and personhood. This development has been paralleled by an increased interest in the nature of groups in the social sciences, psychology and the cognitive sciences. This special issue aims to forge a link between these various endeavours by examining the theoretical and practical uses they put the concept of a group to. At the same time, all of the seven contributions collected in the issue demonstrate in one way or another how philosophical reflection can contribute to integrating the different accounts offered within these multidisciplinary domains.

"Reminiscing together: joint experiences, epistemic groups and sense of self" by Axel Seemann is an investigation into a rather neglected kind of group in the literature on social ontology. Attention has mostly been devoted to groups that emerge as result of their members sharing goals or being involved in collective actions. By contrast, Seemann focuses on "epistemic groups" formed when several individuals share in a particular kind of epistemic authority. This is a form of epistemic authority conferred on individuals in virtue of them remembering a past, jointly-experienced event. This form of remembrance, which the author calls "jointly reminiscing," is characterized by a paradoxical feature: "when we jointly reminisce we try to conjure up, however imperfectly, a shared past that no single individual can episodically recall on her own." Illustrating this point with literary and real life examples, the author shows how ubiquitous epistemic groups are, but also how fragile their existence is. Precisely because the past episode is not available to the single individual's (episodic) memory, its recall is always open to debate and subject to dispute. But when such controversy emerges, do the individuals involved in the activity still constitute an epistemic group? The author doubts that "hard-and-fast answers are possible or even desirable". At the same time, he suggests that one can talk of groups even in such cases although these are of an "uneasy and ambiguous" character but "no less powerful for that".

As the title of her article "The Ontology of Social Groups" suggests, Amie Thomasson's contribution explores a set of ontological questions about social groups. Do social groups exist? And, if so, what are they? In line with the "easy" approach to ontology she defended in other publications, Thomasson contends that the answer to the first question should be straightforwardly positive. It is beyond doubt that natural languages have terms for social groups and that the application conditions for these terms are fulfilled in many cases. Yet, far more challenging is the question what social groups are. The author first scrutinizes various attempts at identifying a single feature shared by all social groups. She dismisses these in light of considerations suggesting that there exist radically different kinds of social groups. Thomasson argues that approaching the concept of social groups from a functional perspective may be a more promising endeavor. In other words, she recommends we ask "what do we want to use the concept of a social group for?" rather than look for the "real" or "common" essence of social groups. In fact, we will find that the concept "social group" has many functions: it justifies ascriptions of group intentions or responsibility, serve predictive and explanatory purposes in the social sciences, or helps diagnose social injustice. In general, "social group concepts have significance for us because they function to normatively structure our lives together". Uncovering this normative dimension of groups is what we gain by applying the "normative approach" to these social phenomena.

We think that many readers will profit from reading Tobias Hansson Wahlberg's essay side-by-side with Thomasson's. One of the principal merits of Wahlberg's paper is that it forges a link between the growing literature on the constitution of (social) groups and the metaphysics of mereology and temporal identity. Offering an original take on the celebrated multiple realizibility argument advanced by Fodor and others in favour of explanatory holism, Wahlberg accepts the conclusion of the argument but denies its premises. He argues that demonstrating the irreducibility of social sciences to an individualistic science does not require acceptance of the claim that the objects of social sciences (e.g., "the university", "a team") are multiply realizable. Nor does it require accepting ontological individualism according to which there are token-token(s) identities between "higher-level" social objects and pluralities/sums of "lower-level" individuals. So the bad news for anti-reductionist social scientists and philosophers is that they cannot both have their cake, and eat it. Wahlberg argues that multiple realizability arguments should be rejected precisely because they assume the existence of such token-token identities. However, the good news is that explanatory holism nevertheless

survives and reductionism ultimately fails because showing the falsity of token-identity claims is in itself sufficient to establish anti-reductionism.

Brian Epstein's paper also presents a continuation, along different tracks, of themes taken up in Thomasson's paper. Epstein takes up a cluster of questions surrounding the taxonomy of groups. He starts out by observing that there are great many different types – and subtypes – with wildly different functions, and suggests that it would be folly to expect there to be any simple and informative way of characterizing what they all have in common, or of dividing them up neatly into a few clear types. Indeed, he takes previous researchers to task for naively undertaking such a theoretical boondoggle. In place of such a project, he develops what he calls a "bottom-up" approach, based upon profiles of the metaphysical features of groups: a construction profile, which characterizes "how groups of a given kind are built out of their members, how they persist over time and can be identified across worlds, and when they exist in the first place"; an extra essentials profile, which characterizes "abilities, powers, rights, responsibilities, and norms" of groups; an anchor profile, which supplies facts about why a group has various properties, such as its conditions for membership and its identity conditions; and an accident profile, which supplies "salient accidental properties of groups of a given kind, which can be equally or more important to understanding groups are." These profiles provide a framework for understanding and classifying different types and subtypes of groups.

While it addresses a different topic, Carol Rovane's paper on group agency can also be read as ultimately aimed at spelling out some of the presuppositions and implications of collectivism about agency – the theoretical costs and benefits of collectivism, if you like. What exactly does one commit oneself to by saying that groups can be agents *qua* groups? According to Rovane, one such commitment is to the claim that groups have their own deliberative point of view. Another is that individual members of such groups will be the *loci* of "rational fragmentation". This means that some of their intentional episodes will constitute the group's point of view, whereas some of their other intentional episodes will continue to constitute the individual agent's point of view. Typically, there will be no unity between these perspectives. Underlying the idea of fragmentation is Rovane's view of agency according which an agent is not to be equated with a biological organism going through various intentional episodes in the course of its life-span. Rather, to be an agent is to be committed to rational unity from a given perspective. The perspective can be more comprehensive than that of an individual's life as in the case of group-level rational unity. However, the scope can also be smaller than that of an individual's

life. This in turn gives rise to the possibility that different parts of a single human life can each constitute a separate center of agency, and so each human life can be the site of multiple agents.

León, Szanto and Zahavi in their "Emotional Sharing and the Extended Mind" explore the possibility that emotions are shared by a plurality of individuals. The authors defend what they call the "Socially Extended Emotion Thesis", according to which "a subject's emotion can extend to and incorporate another subject's emotion". The article begins by critically assessing one way of interpreting this thesis previously defended in the literature. On this view, the "Socially Extended Emotion Thesis" implies the "Token Identity Thesis". The latter states that an emotion is shared if and only if the participants literally share one token of emotion. The authors reject the Token Identity Thesis arguing that "a necessary yet not sufficient condition for shared emotions is that the phenomenal character of a subject's emotional experience is socially extended in the sense of standing in a relationship of constitutive interdependence with the phenomenal character of another subject's emotional experience, without this entailing a breakdown of the individual boundaries of phenomenality". Drawing upon classical phenomenology and the current debate about joint attention, the authors hold shared emotions to two requirements. The first is reciprocal other-awareness: individuals are aware of the presence and participation of each other in the episode of shared emotion. This requirement, by preserving self-other differentiation, can block the Token Identity Thesis. The second requirement is integration: integration is achieved when individuals "identify" with each other, that is, when they understand themselves as "one of us". However, this account of shared emotion must be taken with a pinch of salt. It primarily focuses on emotions shared in face-to-face encounters. While these are paradigmatic cases of shared emotions, the authors also recognize the existence of more anonymous forms of shared emotions which only partly meet these requirements.

Like León, Szanto and Zahavi, Michaelian and Sutton's paper considers the appropriateness of transplanting concepts of mental phenomena from the individual to the collective sphere. Specifically, their main aim is to introduce and articulate a novel theoretical concept, namely that of collective mental time travel. This innovation is motivated, on the one hand, by the observation that individual episodic memory and individual episodic future thought (as in planning or imagining) are increasingly viewed as two instances of individual mental time travel, and on the other hand by the fruitfulness of the concept of collective memory. While Michaelian and Sutton are optimistic about the potential fruitfulness of the concept of mental

time travel for organizing philosophical and empirical research, they are also careful to point out that there may well be important disanalogies between individual and collective mental time travel – the latter, for example, may well lack some of the phenomenological features of the former.

Based on a memorable symposium in Copenhagen in the autumn of 2014, this special issue has been a long time coming. It is itself the output of a "thinking group" or perhaps even several "thinking groups". We would especially like to thank the contributors and reviewers for their hard work and their persistence through often lengthy rounds of revision. We are also grateful to the editors and publisher of the journal *Synthese,* and in particular to the editor in chief Wiebe van der Hoek, for their unwavering support and encouragement.

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