

Book Review

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Deborah Perron Tollefsen: *Groups as Agents*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2015, 184 pp.

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Deborah Tollefsen's *Groups as Agents* provides a clear and concise summary and analysis of contemporary debates on group agency and develops a novel approach based on the ways we interpret groups.

The first four chapters focus on group belief (Chapter 1), group intention (Chapter 2), group agency (Chapter 3), and group cognition (Chapter 4). Each Chapter starts with general questions to frame the discussion (e.g. Are groups agents? What is it about a phenomenon that makes it an intention or a belief?), then sets out the major views in the area and critically examines each. There are two ways Tollefsen frames the discussions that are particularly interesting and will prove illuminating to all readers, from the novice to the expert.

First, Tollefsen considers the ways *joint* intention and agency relate to *group* intention and agency. The former cases usually involve two individuals in close communication. The latter involve particular sorts of groups. The sorts of groups focused on in the book are structured, have decision-making processes, and can persist through change in membership – groups like corporations, governments, educational institutions, and research teams. There are obvious differences between you and a friend deciding what to make for dinner and a corporation modifying their business plan. Do these differences mean distinct theories of intention and agency are required for interacting pairs and large organized groups?

Tollefsen carefully examines views of joint intentional action to see whether they can be applied to the actions of corporate groups. On accounts developed by Bratman, Miller, and Searle, joint action involves the intentions of individuals.¹ On these theories, groups themselves are not the subjects of belief or intention. So, the accounts cannot be carried over to groups while allowing for genuine group intentionality or agency. In contrast, the accounts given by Gilbert and Tuomela allow for groups to be the bearers of attitudes. So, such accounts could be applied to groups themselves. Tollefsen argues, however, that even if a theory cannot be directly applied to yield group intentions or action, “the performance

¹ The views vary in requirements on the intentions themselves and the ways intentions must be related.

of joint actions on the basis of group ends, shared intentions, joint commitments, or we-intentions might very well be the way in which corporate agents form and sustain their agency over time” (p. 47). This suggestion and the overall discussion help to reframe the debates on group and joint intention inviting further research on how group agency and intentionality come about.

Second, Tollefsen frames the discussion of group mentality and agency in terms of views in the philosophy of mind more generally. She asks questions like, what makes something a belief or an intention? Many theorists working on group mentality, agency and responsibility adopt a functionalist theory of mind (e.g. List and Pettit, Huebner). Functionalism can be defined as the view that “mental states are internal states of an agent that are caused by certain inputs to the system and cause both certain other internal states and certain behavior outputs” (p. 81). Functionalism is a popular view in philosophy of mind and allows for groups to be minded as long as one does not require that the realizers of mental states be brain states. This makes it a plausible view for one who holds that groups can be agents. Tollefsen argues that functionalism fails to capture what we do when we ascribe mental states and is too metaphysically realist to allow for (many) groups to count as agents. She argues instead that we should take our practices of ascribing mental states, practices which do not rely on knowing internal functional workings of a system, seriously.

This leads to the second aim of the book—an argument that a less metaphysical “modest realist” view of mind allows for many corporate groups to be agents and (possibly) morally responsible. Tollefsen argues that our theorizing about the mental should start with how it is that we make sense of others (e.g. how it is that we ascribe beliefs and explain behavior). She suggests that we should adopt interpretivism about the mental. According to Tollefsen’s interpretivist view, we assume that agents are rational with a rational point of view that allows them to assess the consistency and truth of their attitudes. We then “attribute to the agent intentional states that a rational agent *ought* to have” (p. 101). Finally, our ascriptions of belief, desire and intention are justified when our practice is explanatorily powerful and successful in predicting. Tollefsen argues that interpretivism can be applied to both individuals and groups. She states:

Our practice of interpreting the actions of groups is just an extension of our practice of making sense of individuals, and it is governed by the same constitutive rules. If our assumption of rationality is justified in the case of groups, then this is good grounds for counting certain groups as intentional agents. (p. 104)

She argues, following Dennett, that the assumption of rationality is justified if the ascriptions it allows an interpreter to make are explanatorily powerful. The book argues that our ascriptions to groups are often explanatorily powerful in allowing

us to explain types of actions and to see patterns we would otherwise miss. So, Tollefsen concludes that groups can be agents.

The argument that groups are agents relies on the truth of interpretivism for which the book does not offer arguments (a point which is explicitly acknowledged by Tollefsen). While she notes that she is not alone in relying on a theory of mind, the more metaphysically minded reader might not be convinced that interpretivism is a view on equal footing with functionalism or other realist theories. Questions also remain about the specifics of the version of interpretivism adopted. For example, one would like to know more about the interpreter. The book's sustained focus on our actual ascription practices suggests that Tollefsen takes interpreters to be ordinary agents like us. We, however, make errors. You and I might interpret the same person or group in different ways. According to the interpretivist *what it is to*, for example, believe that it will rain later today is to be interpreted as having the belief that it will rain later today and for the interpretation to be explanatorily powerful. In asking, "Does Bert believe that it will rain later today?" or "Does Ford believe it should lower prices on SUVs?" we want a determinate answer that does not vary by interpreter and protects against interpreter error. This gives evidence that an interpretivist should appeal to an idealized interpreter. These considerations lead to different versions of interpretivism.

Last (in Chapter 6), Tollefsen turns to whether group agents can be morally responsible. In actual practice, groups are held to be morally responsible. BP was fined for spilling oil in the Gulf of Mexico; the Catholic Church has been chastised for covering up abuse. Tollefsen argues that these practices should be taken seriously, and argues for a view on which groups can be morally responsible (or at least morally accountable).

Groups as Agents offers a clear and concise exposition of the state of research on group mentality, agency, and responsibility. It also presents a new approach, which turns the focus in philosophy of mind from metaphysics and representationalism to our practices and their explanatory power. The book would make an excellent addition to a graduate class on group agency and will be valuable to anyone with an interest in the relation between the social world and the mental.