

## Why Change the Subject? On Collective Epistemic Agency

**Abstract.** This paper argues that group attitudes can be assessed in terms of standards of rationality and that group-level rationality need not be due to individual-level rationality. But it also argues that groups cannot be collective epistemic agents and are not collectively responsible for collective irrationality. I show that we do not need the concept of collective epistemic agency to explain how group-level irrationality can arise. Group-level irrationality arises because even rational individuals can fail to reason about how their attitudes will combine with those of others. In some cases they are morally responsible for this failure, in others they are not. Moreover, the argument for collective epistemic agency is incoherent because reasons-for-groups are *ipso facto* reasons-for-individual(s). Instead of talking about reasons-for-groups, we should therefore distinguish between self-regarding reasons and group-regarding reasons. Both kinds of reasons are reasons-for-individuals. These conceptual considerations in favour of moderate individualism are strengthened by an analysis of our moral practice of responding to collective shortfalls of rationality and by the unpalatable moral implications of collectivism about epistemic agency. There is no need to change the subject. Groups can be rational or irrational, but they do not reason.

**Keywords.** Collective epistemic agency; epistemic agency; mental agency; collective rationality; collective action; collective responsibility; reasoning; metacognition; individualism; collectivism.

### 1. Introduction

Stretchers lifted, pianos moved upstairs, football games won and lost, motions of non-confidence passed, war crimes committed, colleagues mobbed, tenure decisions taken, global warming intensified – these things and more get done in groups. Many would also say they get done *by* groups. Whether it is so is currently a matter of intense debate. In this paper, I want to focus only on one kind of activity some think groups engage in: reasoning.

Can groups reason? To see what is at stake we need to define the terms of this question. So let me start by doing that.

By “groups” I mean groups of human beings ranging from formal organizations (e.g., corporations, intergovernmental bodies) to associations of various kinds (e.g., clubs, teams, armies) and random assemblages of people (e.g., victims of an environmental disaster) (Held 1970; French 1979; 1984; May & Hoffman 1991). The question is whether *some* such groups can reason.

By “reasoning” I mean activities of agents aimed specifically at maintaining or enhancing the rationality of their own epistemic states. So reasoning is a species of epistemic action and a reasoning subject is a species of epistemic agent. Epistemic actions aim to change the properties of one’s own epistemic states.<sup>1</sup> Epistemic agency denotes the capacity to bring about such changes. An epistemic agent is the subject who possesses this capacity. For example, an instance of reasoning would be an epistemic action

---

<sup>1</sup> Epistemic states are typically mental states, but perhaps not necessarily so. One important issue here is whether one is prepared to countenance the existence of “zombie minds”, i.e., minds incapable of phenomenological or conscious states (Szanto 2014). In order to sidestep this thorny problem, I talk about epistemic agency rather than mental agency in this paper. However, the collectivist authors discussed in this paper assume that epistemic agency entails mental agency. So if my arguments against collective epistemic agency are correct, then they also imply that groups cannot be mental agents. This may or may not constitute an additional consideration against the thesis that groups have minds depending on how essential mental agency is thought to be to having or being a mind.

undertaken to restore consistency among one's beliefs. Reasoning is thus a form of metacognition because it is an activity involving the monitoring and controlling of one's own cognitive processes (see Proust 2010).

It is a moot question to what extent rationality presupposes reasoning. Can a system conform to norms of rationality without being capable of reasoning at all? In any case, it is widely believed that certain kinds of agents are not only capable of conforming to requirements of rationality (as arguably thermostats and pigeons might also do), but are also capable of recognizing requirements of rationality and capable of undertaking epistemic actions to meet these requirements. In short, they can reason.

This is also shown by the fact that we hold these kinds of agents morally responsible<sup>2</sup> should they fail to take care of their rationality in this way. So we can recognize the essentially active character of reasoning also in that reasoning is much more closely connected to the notion of responsibility than rationality is. If the relevant kinds of agents were not capable of reasoning, i.e., not capable of recognizing the irrationality of their mental states and not capable of doing something about them, we should not hold them responsible for failing to be rational (Rovane 2004; Tollefsen 2004; Pettit 2007a; Pettit 2007b, etc.).<sup>3</sup>

The idea that groups can reason implies that groups can be collective epistemic agents. Group reasoning is thus also a species of collective action. By "collective" action I mean to refer to the "corporatist" understanding according to which collective action differs from both individual action and joint action. Thus when groups reason, it is more than just a case of one or more individual reasoning, and it is also more than just a case of a number of individuals reasoning jointly. Rather, it is the group reasoning *qua* group. Collective epistemic agency is thus meant to refer to the epistemic agency of the group as a kind of "super-agent" (see esp. Pettit & Schweikard 2006 for the distinction).<sup>4</sup>

The aim of this paper is to assess the collectivist argument that some groups are able to monitor and if need be change the properties of their own epistemic states, and specifically, that some collectives *qua* collectives can in fact take such a pro-active stance *vis-à-vis* their own rationality. If this is possible, some groups could exercise their collective epistemic agency to restore consistency among the group's attitudes. In sum, this argument purports to show that some groups are not like thermostats or pigeons: they recognize requirements of rationality as applying to themselves and can ensure their own compliance with these requirements.

---

<sup>2</sup> I will assume in the paper that epistemic responsibility and moral responsibility are closely related, and that epistemic responsibility for *X* entails moral responsibility for *X* (provided *X* is not morally indifferent). More precisely, the relationship typically obtains in the following manner. When one is epistemically responsible for some epistemic failure (e.g., one is negligent about a manifest inconsistency between two occurrent beliefs one has), and the failure has morally significant consequences (e.g., one gives misleading advice to others), then one is also morally responsible.

<sup>3</sup> I assume here that responsibility presupposes agency. This assumption is very common. It is explicitly endorsed by several of the collectivist authors discussed in this paper. See, for example, Pettit 2007a and Tollefsen 2004.

<sup>4</sup> The collectivist approach under scrutiny in this paper is therefore categorically different from those dealing with *joint* epistemic action. The latter kind of action involves a number of individual agents collaborating to realize an epistemic goal, e.g., members of a police investigation team aiming to establish the identity of the murderer (Miller 2012). There are other ways of construing joint epistemic action as well (see Gilbert 1987; Tuomela 1995). In any case, when referring to collectivism in this paper, I always have the robust, "corporatist" version in mind.

Moreover, the collectivist argument I will scrutinize is also intended to show that when collectives fail to maintain their rationality, we can criticize and hold them morally responsible for their failure. Once again, by “collective” responsibility I mean to refer to the “corporatist” understanding of responsibility. Such responsibility is something over and above the responsibility of individual members. It is the non-distributive responsibility of the group *qua* group (see Pettit 2007a).

I find this approach unconvincing. The position I will defend in this paper grants that (i) epistemic attitudes can be ascribed to groups. What is more, it will be assumed that such ascriptions can also be made in a *non-summative* sense. This means that it is possible, for example, for a group to believe that  $p$  without any of its member believing that  $p$  (see Hakli 2007).<sup>5</sup> It is also granted (ii) that these group-attitudes can be assessed in terms of standards of rationality. However, I will try to show that it is a mistake to conclude from (i) and (ii) that groups are (iii) epistemic agents, or (iv) that they are collectively responsible for failing to be rational. Instead, we should say, I think, that group-rationality is dependent on the epistemic agency of individuals, and it is those individuals (if anyone) who are morally responsible for the irrationality of group attitudes or behaviour. In a slogan, groups do not reason, individuals do, and it is their responsibility to see to it that the groups they are members of conform to the norms of rationality.

My strategy will be to scrutinize a key example of the collectivist literature and ask how that example bears on the issue of collective rationality. Some collectivist authors – notably Pettit (2001; 2003; 2007a, b), List & Pettit (2011), and Tollefsen (2002a; 2002b; 2004) – have drawn conclusions from this example that are both general and fairly radical. So the plan of the paper is to first rehearse one version of the example (Section 2). This will be followed by a reconstruction of the four main collectivist claims drawn from it (Section 3). I will then formulate objections to two of these claims (Section 4.1 and 4.2), but will also show why a moderate individualist can accept the other two (Section 4.3).

## 2. The *Tenure Committee*

*Tenure Committee* (Table 1) is a version of the case that plays a central role in the collectivist approach. *A*, *B*, *C* are three members of a university tenure committee. They have to decide whether to award tenure to a candidate. The pertaining guidelines state that excellence in the three areas of research, teaching, and service is required (and is sufficient) for tenure. Members will aggregate their individual views on these criteria by voting. Table 1 shows the distribution of votes on the relevant propositions ( $p$ ,  $q$ ,  $r$ ) by members of the committee.

---

<sup>5</sup> I will just assume but not argue for the possibility of such non-summative ascriptions of epistemic states to collectives in this paper. It is necessary to accept this assumption because if only summative ascriptions were allowed, then the argument for collective epistemic agency would never get off the ground. If the conclusions of this paper are correct, however, then only those attitudes can be ascribed to groups in a non-summative sense that do not require collective epistemic agency.

**Table 1: Tenure Committee**

	Research?	Teaching?	Service?	Tenure?
A	No (-p)	Yes (q)	Yes (r)	No $\neg(p \& q \& r)$
B	Yes (p)	No (-q)	Yes (r)	No $\neg(p \& q \& r)$
C	Yes (p)	Yes (q)	No (-r)	No $\neg(p \& q \& r)$
A&B&C	Yes (p)	Yes (q)	Yes (r)	Yes $(p \& q \& r)$

Table 1 reveals something surprising about the tenure committee. Whether the committee will award tenure to the candidate will depend on how those votes are aggregated! Let the majority's vote decide on each of the relevant criteria separately ( $p$ ,  $q$ ,  $r$ ). Then take the outcome of these votes as premises and let these premises as a matter of logic entail the truth of the conclusion ( $p \& q \& r$ ). If it proceeds in this manner, the committee uses the so-called *premise-based procedure*.

The committee could have an alternative aggregation rule in place whereby each member reaches her decision by individually considering each of the relevant criteria and each member votes only on one question, namely whether or not to award tenure to the candidate. This is the so-called *conclusion-based procedure*. Since, as noted, each member judges that the candidate fails to meet one criterion, the committee will not grant tenure to the candidate if it uses this procedure.

This shows another surprising feature of the case. Individually each member of the committee rejects  $p \& q \& r$  because each judges that the candidate fails to meet one of the three requirements. No member of the committee is in favour of awarding tenure. So if the premise-based procedure is used, then tenure is awarded to the candidate despite the fact that no member of the committee supports this decision individually.<sup>6</sup>

### 3. Collectivism about Group Rationality

Examples like *Tenure Committee* play a major role in the theory of judgment aggregation and in the theory of collective decision making in general. A series of impossibility theorems have been put forward to formalize and generalize what such examples reveal about constraints on aggregating individual attitudes. Common to these impossibility theorems is the paradoxical finding that there exists no aggregation procedure that could satisfy a limited and intuitive set of criteria for deriving the collective view from those of the individual members.

At first sight, these examples appear to indicate a fundamental difficulty about the idea of collective rationality and agency. It is therefore initially somewhat surprising that *Tenure Committee* style examples are used to argue *for* collective rationality and agency. In fact, according to several authors, such examples warrant a robustly collectivist approach to agency, responsibility and rationality:<sup>7</sup> "...this paradox reveals quite nicely that groups rather than simply the individuals that comprise them are

<sup>6</sup> On the basis of this feature, *Tenure Committee* can also be used to argue for the plausibility of ascribing epistemic (mental) states to collectives in a non-summativ sense.

<sup>7</sup> And according to some, even about personhood, see esp. Rovane (2004) and Pettit (2003), but cf. Tollefsen (2004).

subject to the norms of rationality and form a distinct locus of power and responsibility. This makes our application of the intentional idiom to groups intelligible and suggests that groups are literally intentional agents." (Tollefsen 2002a, 34).

In short, collectivists extract ambitious conclusions from cases such as *Tenure Committee*. Let me try to regiment these conclusions. These are the four claims attributed to the (robust) collectivist:

1. Groups can be irrational.
2. Group-level irrationality need not be due to individual-level rationality.
3. Group-level irrationality can be produced by collective agency.
4. The group can be collectively responsible for group-level irrationality.

In the remainder of this section, I will go through these four claims and discuss how *Tenure Committee* is supposed to support them.

### 3.1. Claim 1

Does *Tenure Committee* exemplify some kind of irrationality, and if yes which kind? Pettit (2007b, 496f; also List & Pettit 2011, 34) identifies three areas where norms of rationality obtain: attitude-to-evidence, attitude-to-attitude, and attitude-to-action. Rationality in the first area is tantamount to responsiveness to how things are "out there", that is, responsiveness to evidence and facts. Typical failures of rationality in this area include, according to Pettit, inattentiveness and paranoia. Rationality demands in the second area that mental attitudes of a rational subject be appropriately related to one another. Informally, this means that the subject of the norm should avoid inconsistencies among her attitudes and strive towards coherence. Rationality in the third area demands that the subject of the norm should act in accordance with her beliefs and desires. Typical failures of rationality in this area include weakness of will and compulsive actions.

Suppose now that the conclusion-based procedure is used to reach the committee's decision. In that case, the respective aggregated views of the committee on each of the issues will be inconsistent. For if this decision-procedure is used, the aggregated views of the committee on each of the issues are:  $p; q; r$ ; but also  $\neg(p \& q \& r)$ ! Such an inconsistency is an example of attitude-to-attitude inconsistency. The collective's views are incoherent.<sup>8</sup>

Tollefsen (2004, 5) argues that for this reason the group should adopt the premise-based procedure instead. By avoiding the inconsistency, "the premise-driven approach preserves the rationality of the group." This claim seems the most persuasive when the premises stand for earlier decisions of the group. Not adopting the premise-based procedure would then mean risking inconsistency with those earlier decisions.

However, the premise-driven approach comes at a price.<sup>9</sup> First, the premise-based procedure gives priority to certain propositions – namely  $p; q; r$  – by treating them as premises. The position of the

---

<sup>8</sup> Some may object to my describing  $p; q; r$  as the group's view. After all, no vote has been taken on these issues if the conclusion-based procedure is used. But there is no reason why we could not use counterfactuals to determine the group's view on issues that have not been agglomerated by some voting procedure.

<sup>9</sup> List & Pettit (2011) are especially clear on this issue.

collective on the conclusion ( $p \& q \& r$ ) is taken to follow from these propositions as a matter of logic. But, as Pettit notes (2007b, 511) evidence available at the time may actually favour judging that  $\neg(p \& q \& r)$ . If, despite the evidence, the collective nevertheless hangs on to  $(p \& q \& r)$  as dictated by the premise-based procedure, then it could fall short of in the attitude-to-evidence dimension of rationality.<sup>10</sup> Second, it is often not the case that there will be a natural diachronic order in which the issues present themselves. That is, selecting some of the propositions as premises will be arbitrary (List & Pettit 2011, 78).

There could be other reasons for adopting the conclusion-based procedure. So, third, unanimity may be preferred over simple majority in some cases. In the conclusion-based procedure in *Tenure Committee*, the decision is a unanimously supported decision. By contrast, in the premise-based procedure the aggregation of each judgment (whether  $p$ , whether  $q$ , etc.) is supported only by a majority. Fourth, the premise-based procedure creates opportunities for manipulation by those who set the agenda of decisions. The conclusion-based procedure may better safeguard against unwanted strategic voting. Fifth, although the premise-based procedure is under most circumstances a better “truth-tracker”, this is not always the case (for details, see Bovens & Rabinowicz 2006). And finally, sixth, in some cases we may want to or have to take a stand on a logically complex proposition as a whole without having a firm view on one or more of the simple propositions constituting it. The conclusion-based procedure can better accommodate such situations. These additional considerations can also bear on how well the group fares with respect to standards of rationality.

Nevertheless, the fact that no decision-procedure may be optimal does not undermine the plausibility of Claim 1 that groups are subject to norms of rationality. It is precisely the existence of these norms that made it possible to evaluate different decision-procedures. The basis of the evaluation was to what extent the different decision-procedures enable the group to meet the norms of rationality.

### 3.2. Claim 2

*Tenure Committee* appears to support Claim 2 as well. Suppose a given committee uses the conclusion-based procedure. In that case, group-level attitudes will be inconsistent since the view of the group then is that  $p; q; r$ . But the group has also decided that  $\neg(p \& q \& r)$ .

At the same time, the inconsistency emerging at the level of the group is not traceable to the irrationality of individual members. Individual views are perfectly consistent and rational. So Claim 2 appears to be confirmed by this example in a striking fashion. The emergence of group-level irrationality threatens despite individual-level rationality.

Thus *Tenure Committee* can be read as yet another illustration of the possibility which has come to preoccupy social scientists and philosophers more and more, namely that individually rational forms of

---

<sup>10</sup> I should note that the introduction the criterion of evidential-sensitivity by Pettit here seems to me to confuse matter – at least as far as *Tenure Committee* is concerned. In *Tenure Committee* it is stipulated that the meeting of criteria  $p$ ,  $q$ ,  $r$  are each necessary and jointly sufficient for determining whether the candidate should receive tenure. If additional evidence is admitted as relevant, then this stipulation has to be abandoned. But abandoning this consideration also means that the group’s final decision (i.e., award tenure?) will depend on additional propositions, not just  $p$ ,  $q$ ,  $r$ , and so the proposition to be decided upon cannot be represented as the logical implication of  $p$ ,  $q$ ,  $r$ .

behavior or attitudes can lose some of their rationally desirable properties when aggregated. This is the implication of Condorcet's paradox, the findings of which were generalized and proved in Arrow's theorem (Arrow 1963; Morreau MS). More broadly, prisoner's dilemmas can also be interpreted in a similar vein. According to this interpretation, that type of situation also demonstrates the possibility of spontaneously emerging irrationality at the collective level despite the individual rationality of each participating individual (Parfit 1984, 89).<sup>11</sup>

### 3.3. Claim 3

We noted above that the premise-based procedure comes at a price. Nevertheless, we also noted that this approach is recommended on the grounds that the group will fail to be rational unless it uses the premise-based procedure because it will not meet the rational norm of consistency otherwise.

This is particularly evident in diachronic cases. Typically, the judgments accepted as premises stand for earlier decisions of the collective. Now there is a case to be made that a group that kept going back on its earlier decisions "will not be an effective or credible promoter of its assumed purpose" and so "will lose any hold on members, or any respect among outsider" (Pettit 2003, 177). In synchronic cases too such irrationality threatens to systematically undermine the interests of the group.<sup>12</sup> Tollefsen puts the point thus: "The justification for the premise-driven approach becomes apparent only when we acknowledge that the norms of rationality apply to groups as well as individuals. The constraints we recognize as applying to our own beliefs, constraints that we could loosely call epistemological, govern collective judgments." (Tollefsen 2004, 5).

As mentioned in the introduction, maintaining conformity with norms of rationality often requires active interventions by a reasoning agent. But who performs the epistemic actions that are required to ensure the consistency of the group's judgments? It is not always spelled out in detail by collectivist authors how exactly the group's rationality is to be maintained.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, it is clear that in their view the rationality-enhancing actions are to be undertaken by the collective *qua* collective.

So, first, Tollefsen says that "groups *choose* the premise-driven approach over the conclusion-driven approach" (Tollefsen 2002a, 37). This formulation is problematic for a number of reasons, but I will postpone that discussion until Section 4.1. Pettit uses a different formulation, but he also frequently talks about *group* actions required to maintain the group's conformity with norms of rationality: "And

---

<sup>11</sup> Conversely, altruistic prisoners produce group-level rationality by choosing irrationally. It is worth noting though that prisoner's dilemmas can also be read to witness a certain kind of individual irrationality. What prisoner's dilemmas reveal on this reading is an important limitation of rational, outcome-oriented, self-interested motivations. As long as participating individuals have this kind of motivation only, their choices can combine in ways that are sub-optimal for them even from the perspective of their existing motivations. On this reading, the upshot of prisoner's dilemmas is that purely self-regarding motivations are irrational because they are self-defeating (Parfit 1984, see esp. 88-91).

<sup>12</sup> This is because the outcome of the group's decision can easily be challenged for depending on the decision-procedure in the wrong way. For example, given the distribution of votes the decision in *Tenure Committee* would have been the opposite if instead of the conclusion-based procedure the premise-based procedure had been used (and conversely). Consequently, the decision depends crucially on a procedural issue which, arguably, has nothing to do with the merits of the candidate. For an assessment of this argument, see Szigeti 2014a, esp. 339-40.

<sup>13</sup> Pettit 2007b; List & Pettit 2011 are important exceptions. More on their specific proposal in Section 4.1 below.

the requirement that [the group] adjust to a judgment that there is an inconsistency amongst the propositions endorsed amounts to a requirement that it respond appropriately to any observed irrationality, removing the inconsistency while also respecting other constraints of rationality like that of evidential sensitivity." (Pettit 2007b, 513).

Second, according to collectivists we are also to think of the actions aimed at maintaining the group's rationality as the group's actions because these actions are guided by reasons which are *reasons for the group*: "If the committee follows the premise approach, then the group will have reasons to accept a conclusion that no individual, at least initially, has reason to accept. The reasons, then, to accept the candidates are reasons *for* the group but not reasons *for* any individual." (Tollefsen 2002a, 38; see also Tollefsen 2004, 8). This looks like a strong claim for two reasons. For one thing, it appears to imply that group rationality is achieved at the expense of individual rationality.<sup>14</sup> In addition, it also raises the spectre of dualism about the rationality of group minds. If rational unity at the group-level entails that "human constituents of the group are not committed to having separate viewpoints of their own" (Rovane 2004, 336), then it is unclear whether group rationality can still be said to supervene on individual reasoning and deliberation. But I will postpone discussion of these worries too until Sections 4.1 and 4.2.

Again, Pettit is more cautious about the question of how group-level rationality is to be maintained. However, he also talks of groups "collectivizing reason" when adopting the premise-based procedure or some more advanced procedure for resolving group-level inconsistencies<sup>15</sup> (Pettit 2003; List & Pettit 2011, 78-9). When that happens, he says, the group will have a *mind of its own*: "...the group will count as a reasoning subject in the image of the reasoning subjects that we individuals constitute. It will exercise a sort of control over its own processes of judgment-formation that resembles the personal control associated with individual reasoning. The members will act together in implementing an intentional exercise of group control. And they will do this in respect of themselves as a unified centre of attitude formation and enactment." (Pettit 2007b, 513; see also List & Pettit 2011, 104).

It is worth noting that this approach looks like a plausible answer to a complaint many might want to make at this point. It is commonly accepted that group agency is always expressed in individual action,<sup>16</sup> or as Pettit (2007a, 189) puts it: "Whatever a group agent does is done by individual agents." This is also granted by collectivist authors discussed in this paper.<sup>17</sup> Having said that, so the collectivist reply, while in some sense it is admittedly always individuals who act, when these individuals act on behalf of/by the commission of/on the instruction of the group the relevant actions are guided by the (ir)rationality of the "collective mind". Therefore, it is appropriate to characterize these actions as actions of the collective agent. Because group-level reasoning is in the driver's seat, the enacting individuals' reasons for action will in effect be the collective's reasons for action. The group governs.

---

<sup>14</sup> In all fairness, Tollefsen is aware of this problem, see Tollefsen 2002a, 38-9 and Tollefsen 2004, 9-10. I will argue in Section 4 that her reply does not resolve the worry.

<sup>15</sup> Such as the straw-vote procedure discussed in Section 4.1.

<sup>16</sup> "Expressed" in this modest sense: "Action, which is the expression of agency..." (Ludwig 2004, 347).

<sup>17</sup> Tollefsen 2002b, 407n2: "When I refer to the action of an organization I am not presupposing that the organization is something over and above its members that acts independently of its members." See also Copp (1979).

We therefore seem to have clear cases of collective epistemic agency on this account. It is argued that some groups monitor their own attitudes and undertake epistemic actions *qua* group to resolve inconsistencies and other failures of rationality. There is a case to be made that through these collective actions, the group “reaches specific desirable mental states through an appropriate monitoring of [it’s] own mental processes”, to adapt a formulation from Joelle Proust (2001, 105).

### 3.4. Claim 4

Claim 4 states that the group can be collectively responsible for group-level (ir)rationality. It is important, first of all, to specify the notion of “collective responsibility” at issue here.

What it stands for is robust collective responsibility, or the responsibility of the group *qua* group. As noted in the introduction, this means that moral responsibility of some collectives is something over and above the combined moral responsibility of individual group members. In general, responsibility-collectivists think the following can be true: You have allocated all the moral responsibility there is to be allocated at the individual level, and still you have not allocated all the responsibility there is to be allocated. If you want to allocate all the responsibility there is to be allocated, you have to ascribe responsibility to the group as a group as well (Szigeti 2014b). According to Claim 4, it is in this robust sense of collective responsibility that some groups are responsible for group-level irrationality.

Claim 4 is supposed to follow from Claims 1-3 quite straightforwardly. If group attitudes can be irrational, if group-level irrationality is not the outcome of the irrationality of individual-level attitudes, and if the irrationality of group-level attitudes is due to some actions or omissions by the group, then it would follow that the group *qua* group is collectively responsible for the irrationality of group-level attitudes. Thus Tollefsen concludes: “The fact that in these cases the locus of power and responsibility is the group rather than any particular individual is also revealed in our practice of holding groups epistemically responsible. We often assess the judgments and decisions of groups in everyday contexts. We hold groups accountable for their policies and require them to explain how certain decisions cohere with past decisions. In doing so we are not asking individuals to justify their own beliefs and judgments.” (Tollefsen 2004, 8n12).

Again, this thesis regarding the collective responsibility of the group is closely related to the point made in support of Claim 3. Actions undertaken in order to maintain or enhance group-level rationality, such as the adoption of the premise-based procedure in *Tenure Committee* for example, are done for reasons which are reasons for the group, not for the individual members *qua* individuals: “The reasons for accepting the candidate are not ones that have immediacy for any particular individual. Instead, they have immediacy for the committee.” (Tollefsen 2004, 8) It would follow then that the group is morally responsible for acting or for failing to act on these reasons.

It is important to clear up a possible source of confusion at this point. It is not always spelled out *what* the collective *qua* collective is responsible for in cases like *Tenure Committee*. One possibility is that the collective decision issues in an attitude that is itself morally objectionable. It is arguable in some cases that because of the decision procedure used no individual is blameworthy for the morally objectionable outcome. Thus it is easily conceivable that using the premise-based decision procedure a group reaches a decision that has morally objectionable consequences. For example, awarding tenure to the particular candidate in *Tenure Committee* may be seen as morally wrong because unfair by another tenure

candidate or by (say) the appeals board of the university.<sup>18</sup> It may be argued that in such cases the reason for attributing responsibility to the collective (rather than to some individual) is that no individual has supported the decision.

The second possibility is that the reason why the collective is responsible rather than individual members is specifically that the group fails to be rational as a group. Thus a group can use the conclusion-based procedure and reach a decision inconsistent with its earlier decisions. In this case, what the collective *qua* collective is responsible for is failing to undertake actions to maintain group-level rationality. For example, we can imagine a version of *Tenure Committee* in which the committee votes on  $p$  at  $t_1$ ,  $q$  at a later time  $t_2$ ,  $r$  at  $t_3$ . The votes are distributed as in *Table 1* above. However, for some reason the committee may also directly take a vote on  $(p \& q \& r)$  at  $t_4$  this time voting, in accordance with the distribution of individual judgments, that  $\neg(p \& q \& r)$ . This may be because the earlier votes are forgotten, or it is simply ignored that their logical implication would be for the committee to go with  $p \& q \& r$  (that is, award tenure), or the university by-laws (drawn up by an administrator well versed in the vicissitudes of impossibility theorems) may just stipulate that both the premises and the conclusion of such decisions have to be voted upon separately.<sup>19</sup> If the committee ends up going with  $p \& q \& r$ , then it is guilty of inconsistency with its earlier decisions. Such inconsistency may be morally objectionable as it frustrates legitimate expectations. More generally, as we noted above, a group's failure to meet norms of rationality will prevent it from pursuing its objectives. If these objectives are morally significant, then failure to pursue them will be morally wrong. Therefore, the collective will be morally responsible for the failure unless it exercises its collective epistemic agency to avoid it.

These are two quite different ways of arguing for robust collective responsibility. This is witnessed by the fact that the first argument on the face of it does not even appear to presuppose collective agency. By contrast, the second kind of collectivist argument just discussed explicitly presupposes collective agency, and specifically the capacity of the collective to undertake actions to maintain or enhance its rationality.

Moreover, the first kind of collectivist argument is not based on a diagnosis of collective irrationality. In fact, the specific example discussed assumes that the group uses the premise-based procedure. It will be recalled that precisely that procedure (rather than the conclusion-based procedure) was recommended to groups committed to maintaining their group-level rationality. The second kind of collectivist argument, on the other hand, presupposes that there are morally binding reasons for groups *qua* groups to respect norms of rationality and that the failure to act on those reasons is something the group *qua* group can be criticized and even blamed for.

#### 4. Defending Moderate Individualism

In the remainder of this paper, I will defend a moderate individualist alternative to the collective approach outlined above. I will argue that Claims 1 and 2 are correct. I will also argue, however, that accepting Claims 1 and 2 does not have radical collectivist implications. This is a happy fact because, as we will see, Claims 3 and 4 are wrong. That is to say, while instances of collective practical irrationality

---

<sup>18</sup> Pettit (2007a, 197-8) offers another example in this vein. See also Copp (2007).

<sup>19</sup> The latter scenario is the version of *Tenure Committee* in Copp (2007). Here the committee's decision is taken in two stages: first the committee votes on the premises, but then it also votes separately on the conclusion alone.

are indeed frequent, shortfalls of practical collective rationality are not due to collective agency. And so, in some cases, no individual person is to be blamed for practical collective irrationality. In other cases, certain individuals are to be blamed. But it is misguided to describe instances of collective practical irrationality as failures of collective agency. *There is no reason to change the subject.* Collective irrationality is either accidental or is due to the irrational agency of individual members.

Conversely too, in order to pinpoint instances of practical collective rationality, we need not posit collective agency. In some cases, nobody is to be praised for practical collective rationality. In other cases, certain individuals are to be praised. But it is misguided to describe instances of collective practical rationality as the work of collective agency. Collective rationality is either accidental or is due to the rational agency of individual members.

I will proceed in the reverse order and start with the attempt to refute Claims 3 and 4.

#### 4.1. Against Claim 3

To recall, Claim 3 says that for a group to be rational it may be necessary for the group to “display its agency” (Pettit 2007b, 517). As we have seen earlier, this means that exercising the group’s epistemic agency may be necessary to ensure consistency among the group’s attitudes. I will not consider two attempts to describe the group’s relevant epistemic activity in a more detailed fashion.

According to Tollefsen (2002a, 37; see also 2002b and 2004) the committee ensures (diachronic) consistency by *choosing* the premise-based procedure in advance. Let me now explain why I think this formulation is not satisfactory.

(i) First, it is too demanding. Even well-organized groups with sophisticated and reflective decision-making mechanisms may simply be unaware *ex ante* that their decision-procedures can yield inconsistencies in the future. Expecting groups to choose decision-procedures in full awareness of these implications places the bar of rationality too high.

(ii) Second, even if some groups are aware of possible future inconsistencies it is not obvious that they are to choose the premise-based procedure. This is for the two reasons already mentioned (discussed in Pettit 2007b and List & Pettit 2011). On the one hand, evidence may actually support the judgment that the logical conclusion of the premises is false (e.g., in *Tenure Committee* based on the evidence available the committee may be expected to judge that  $\neg(p \& q \& r)$ ). On the other, the group may have to decide about  $p$ ,  $q$ ,  $r$  as well as  $p \& q \& r$  simultaneously. In that case, selecting some of the propositions as premises will be arbitrary. For example, the group can accept  $\neg(p \& q \& r)$  and choose to preserve consistency by also accepting  $\neg p$ .

(iii) Thirdly, and crucially, Tollefsen’s formulation begs the question against the epistemic agency individualist. It is worth recalling that the bone of contention here is not whether group-attitudes can be assessed as rational or not. That has already been conceded. The debate about epistemic *agency* is about *whose* actions are required to ensure the group’s rationality. The individualist position defended here accepts Claims 1 and 2 (more on these in Section 4.3). What it denies is that collective rationality is sustained by collective actions. By stipulating that it is *the collective* “who” chooses to ensure its own rationality, Tollefsen assumes the possibility of what the epistemic agency individualist denies.

(iv) Fourthly, and relatedly, it is also left unexplained *how* this *ex ante*, upstream choice is carried out. This is important because it bears on the question whether the collectivist is actually entitled to describing that upstream choice as the *group's* choice. We can identify two possibilities. The decision-procedure could be imposed by an individual. Someone – for example, the already mentioned university administrator well versed in the perils of impossibility theorems – could choose on her own the premise-based procedure *for* the group in *Tenure Committee*. If the premise-based procedure best ensures the group's rationality, then that is the right choice. But that choice does not involve collective agency at all. The group's rationality is in this case ensured by the action of an individual.

(v) Alternatively, the decision-procedure might be thought to have been selected by the group itself in some sense. Clearly, Tollefsen has this option in mind when she says that: “When groups choose the *premise-driven approach* over the *conclusion-driven approach* they do so from a plural perspective.” (Tollefsen 2004, 7) But it is unclear what this means because she fails to spell out through which formal or informal procedure the decision-procedure itself would be selected upstream by the group. Suppose that the decision-procedure itself gets selected by aggregating individual votes on what decision-procedure would be preferable. This alone does not ensure that the choice will be made from a plural perspective and represent an exercise of collective epistemic agency, not even by the collectivist's own lights. As we have seen, the collectivist does not claim that when in *Tenure Committee* the tenure-awarding decision is taken *any* aggregation procedure, or even any majoritarian aggregation procedure will ensure group rationality. Specifically, Tollefsen argues that the conclusion-based procedure will not do so, whereas the premise-based procedure will.

But the formation of the plural perspective cannot depend on using the premise-based decision-procedure for the upstream choice. This is not just because it is difficult to conceive of the upstream choice of decision-procedure as a conclusion derived from premises facing the given group. Even if we could somehow formalize the upstream choice in terms of premises and a conclusion, there is another problem about requiring the premise-based decision procedure to be *necessary* for the group to be rational. If the collectivist takes the premise-based procedure to be necessary for collective rationality she becomes vulnerable to an objection from infinite regress: no matter how far upstream we reach we cannot be sure that the group's decision is collectively rational for we need to look yet another step further upstream to make sure that the group used the premised-based decision-procedure, and so on *ad inf.*

The conclusion to be drawn from these objections is that the “plural perspective” and collective epistemic agency cannot be dependent on the decision-procedure: using the premise-based procedure is neither necessary (see points i, ii, v above) nor sufficient for the formation of the “plural perspective” and collective epistemic agency (see iii, iv). So what does the existence of a “plural perspective” depend on if it is *not* dependent on the decision-procedure?<sup>20</sup> The most plausible collectivist response to this question could be (in connection with the point already discussed in Section 3.3) that the formation of

---

<sup>20</sup> Would a formal decision procedure for aggregating propositional attitudes of individuals other than the premise-based procedure fare better? This is unlikely. Several of the objections (e.g., demandingness, failure to respond to evidence, infinite regress) raised in response to Tollefsen's approach seem to apply to any proposal according to which fixing a decision procedure *ex ante* can guarantee group rationality. By contrast, an *ex post* procedure of the kind put forward in Pettit (2007b), while ultimately failing to demonstrate the possibility collective epistemic agency, can avoid some of these difficulties as I will argue shortly.

the “plural perspective” really depends on whether individual members are guided by reasons that do not constitute reasons for them individually but rather are reasons for the group.<sup>21</sup> As noted, collectivists argue that even if, strictly speaking, such actions are performed by individuals they can be described as collective actions provided these actions are guided by group-reasons.

Now, and this will be crucial for what is to follow, if we interpret collective epistemic agency in this way, it still needs to be explained how individual and collective rationality are related to one another. More has to be said about the nature of such “reasons-for-the-group”, and their relationship to “reasons-for-individuals”. For one thing, it is questionable whether the pursuit of collective rationality could be at loggerheads with individual rationality in the sense of the former in some sense trumping or crowding out the latter. I will take up this worry in the next section. The other, conceptual issue is how it is possible for a reason to be a reason-for-the-group without it being a reason for one or more individuals. I will discuss this issue in this section.

Specifically, I will try to show that these issues also plague Pettit’s proposal concerning group agents with system-level feedback. At the same time, it is worth noting that this collectivist proposal does steer clear of *some* of the difficulties mentioned above in connection with Tollefsen’s approach. So, according to Pettit, groups may have a so-called straw-vote procedure in place, for example. The straw-vote procedure is supposed to provide the kind of feedback to groups that can help them maintain their compliance with norms of rationality in the face of difficulties about agglomeration diagnosed in impossibility theorems. Here is how the straw-vote procedure would go:

- “(1) With every issue that comes up for judgment take a majority vote on that issue and, as issues get progressively settled in this way, keep a record of the accumulating body of judgments.
- (2) With every new issue that is voted on, check to see if the judgment supported is consistent with the existing commitments of the group.
- (3) If majority voting generates an inconsistency, treat the judgment supported and the set or sets of judgments with which it is inconsistent in the record as candidates for reversal.
- (4) Identify the problematic judgments – say, the judgments that  $p$ , that  $q$ , that  $r$ , and that not  $-p&q&r$  – and address the question of how to resolve the inconsistency.
- (5) Take a vote on where it would be best to revise the judgments: whether, in the simple example considered, it would be best to revise the judgment that  $p$ , that  $q$ , that  $r$ , or that not  $-p&q&r$ .

---

<sup>21</sup> I do not have space here to consider in detail other replies to this question. One such reply is defended by Schmid (2014): “Plural self-awareness is pre-reflective, non-thematic awareness of our attitudes *as ours, collectively*, in a way that makes the social sharedness of those attitudes phenomenally transparent to us constitute a shared perspective, and normatively drives us towards consistency of our attitudes.” Another important approach is Gilbert’s account of plural subject formation (Gilbert 1989, 1990, 1997) that focuses on the conditional disposition of individuals to be individually ready to be jointly committed to acting as a body. And finally, the literature on team agency and team reasoning discusses the adoption of a “we-frame,” i.e., a psychological disposition of individuals primed by, but not necessitated by, the formal properties of certain “cooperation-hungry” games (Bacharach 2006; Gold & Sugden 2007). It seems to me that whether these approaches are more successful than the ones discussed in the main body of the paper depend on two issues. First, it may well be that the positing of plural self-awareness or psychological dispositions can explain how joint epistemic action is possible. However, what also needs to be shown is that they can explain how robust collective agency is possible (see footnote 4 above for the distinction between joint action and collective action). Second, it remains to be seen whether, for example, plural self-awareness, if it is indeed pre-reflective and non-thematic, can really explain why an agent recognizes as binding specific norms of inferential rationality (e.g., that of consistency). I thank an anonymous reviewer for insisting on the relevance of these alternative approaches.

- (6) Take the proposition identified in this way, and hold another vote on how the group should judge that proposition.
- (7) If the group reverses its previous judgment, treat the new verdict on that proposition as the one to be endorsed by the group.
- (8) If the previous judgment is not reversed in that vote, go back to stage 3 and try again.
- (9) If it appears that there is no prospect of success in this process, try to quarantine the inconsistency, and the area of decision it would affect, so that it does not generate problems elsewhere.
- (10) If this quarantining is not possible, perhaps because the area of action affected is important to the group's aims, there is no alternative but to declare defeat on the issues under consideration, even perhaps to disband." (Pettit 2007b, 512-3)

This procedure solves the difficulty that it may be too demanding to expect groups to be aware of the fact that the use of a given decision-procedure can yield inconsistencies in the future. All that is required is that emerging inconsistencies are continuously monitored by means of a feedback mechanism. It also solves the second difficulty indicated above in connection with Tollefsen's suggestion because it allows some flexibility with regard to the question which proposition is to be revised to ensure consistency at group-level.

But does the straw-vote procedure solve the remaining difficulties? Granted, the proposal does spell out a detailed procedure for how to avoid inconsistencies at group-level and thus preserve collective rationality. But the crucial question is whether we are indeed entitled to describing that procedure as a collective epistemic action performed by a collective agent. Pettit thinks that is the case: "If [the group] follows the straw-vote procedure, then the group will count as a reasoning subject in the image of the reasoning subjects that we individuals constitute. It will exercise a sort of control over its own processes of judgment-formation that resembles the personal control associated with individual reasoning. The members will act together in implementing an intentional exercise of group control. And they will do this in respect of themselves considered as a unified centre of attitude formation and enactment." (Pettit 2007b, 512-3).

I want to show in the following that Pettit overstates his case. The idea of a collective epistemic agent is not needed to explain how group-level rationality is maintained in such cases. And that is a good thing because that idea is ultimately incoherent.

So, first, we do not *need* to appeal to collective agency, not even in the case of groups that use the straw-vote procedure (or some other form of system-level feedback). All we need is to distinguish between two kinds of reasons an individual may accept: self-regarding reasons and group-regarding reasons. No individualist will deny that every (individual) person can have his or her own private, that is self-regarding reasons *as well as* reasons to do with the fact that he or she also belongs to groups (clubs, companies, teams, tenure committees, and so on). But the reasons to do with the individual's group affiliations will be just as individual as the individual's self-regarding reasons. It is only that group-regarding reasons have to do with how that individual ought to collaborate with others to realize certain aims which can only be realized together.

By the same token, the individualist has no trouble accepting that conflicts of reasons due to one's having different interests and motivations as a member of a collective and as a private individual are of course possible (and in fact rampant). But the individualist line is to describe such cases as involving a conflict of different kinds of reasons an individual faces *qua* member as opposed to *qua* private person.

Admittedly, the acceptance of group-regarding reasons presupposes that the individual adopts the group perspective. Hurley (2003, 165) sums up the point nicely: "...as an individual I can recognize that a collective agent,<sup>22</sup> of which I am merely a part, can produce results I prefer to any I could bring about by acting as an individual, and that my doing the latter would interfere. Acting instead in a way that partly constitutes the valuable collective action can be rational." So individualism is not some sort of solipsistic egoism. That is, individualists accept that the presence of other people can and should impact on one's own reasons: both moral reasons and prudential reasons. It is safe to say that no individualist would deny that membership in groups of various kinds generates reasons for individuals which reasons they would lack as non-members. No doubt, whether I have reason to lift the stretcher at my end will crucially depend on whether there is somebody willing to lift it at the other.

This is also true of groups with a feedback mechanism in place such as the straw-vote procedure. The procedure enables the monitoring of group-level inconsistencies. If it is detected that such an inconsistency has in fact emerged, then the inconsistency will generate reasons for individual members to consider revising their attitudes regarding the propositions to be decided upon. These will be group-regarding reasons because they depend on group members being committed to the group's aims and continued functioning. But it is unclear why these group-regarding reasons should be referred to as reasons-for-groups. They are reasons for one or more individuals to the extent they are committed to the group's aims and continued functioning. If, furthermore, one or more individuals are indeed willing to "hear the call of the group" (Pettit 2007b, 516), and as a result willing to revise their judgments in order to avoid group-level inconsistency that will be a clear instance of exercising individual epistemic agency. And so, *pace* Pettit and Tollefsen, group-level attitudes are controlled by the epistemic actions of individual agents.

Emphatically, we need not take a stand here on the justifiability of self-regarding and group-regarding reasons. It is possible that in some situation one's private commitments are morally and/or prudentially unjustifiable, while one's group-regarding reasons, arising from a commitment to the group's aims and continued functioning, are morally and/or prudentially justified. It is equally possible that the opposite is the case. And it is always a possibility that an individual's self-regarding and group-regarding reasons are *both* morally and/or prudentially justifiable.<sup>23</sup> In fact, the latter kind of case often involves a special but quite familiar kind of moral conflict. The difficulty in such cases is caused precisely by the fact that one and the same person has to decide among reasons which that person sees as applying to her with that "immediacy that is characteristic of reasons" (Tollefsen 2004, 2). The often tormenting character of such conflicts would be difficult to explain if the immediacy was not experienced *by* and *in* the same agent, namely the individual group-member torn between her obligations to her group and her duties as an individual.

Second, one may also doubt the very coherence of the collectivist alternative to the individualist approach just sketched. If the notion of a group-reason is not interpreted as a group-regarding reason of some individual, but rather as a reason-for-the-group, then the relationship of these putative reasons-for-the-group to reasons-for-individuals becomes problematic. The issue is highlighted by stark collectivist statements such as the following (Rovane 2004, 337): "...human-size persons might initially

---

<sup>22</sup> It is made clear by the rest of the citation that Hurley does not mean "corporatist" collective agency here.

<sup>23</sup> Pettit considers this possibility; see esp. Pettit 2007b, 516. It is all the more surprising that he embraces the collectivist conclusions discussed above.

decide to pool their efforts in a joint endeavor. If they implement their decision, they no longer maintain separate rational points of view.” As we have seen, Tollefsen (2002a, 38) too says about a *Tenure Committee* type example that: “The reasons, then, to accept the candidates are reasons *for* the group but not reasons *for* any individual.”

My misgivings about the ethical implications of this approach will be discussed the following section. The concerns here are of a conceptual nature. The point is that if individual members of the collective “no longer maintain separate rational points of view”, then it is hard to see – short of accepting some form of strong emergentist dualism about the collective mind (see Theiner & O’Connor 2010) – *how* the rationality of the collective point of view is maintained. If a reason-for-the-group is not *ipso facto* also a reason-for-some-individual, then it becomes unclear *whose* agency putative reasons-for-the-group are supposed to guide.

Those embracing a strong form of dualism about the collective mind will have no qualms answering that reasons-for-the-group guide the group’s actions. However, none of the collectivists discussed here are willing to accept such a radical metaphysical position. That is, they continue to agree that group agency supervenes on individual agency (see esp. List & Pettit 2011). More simply put, they all accept the claim already cited above that “[w]hatever a group agent does is done by individual agents” (Pettit 2007a, 189). But if group agency is sustained by individual actions, then reasons-for-the-group must *ipso facto* be reasons-for-some-individual as well. Otherwise it is hard to see how group rationality can guide the individual actions that sustain group agency.<sup>24</sup>

I conclude that the concept of collective epistemic agency is neither necessary nor possible. Not necessary because the explanatory work it is supposed to do is more convincingly and more parsimoniously handled by the individualist distinction between self-regarding and group-regarding reasons. Not possible because the concept of collective epistemic agency is inconsistent with the thesis that facts about the collective supervene on facts about individual agents. In the next section, I will try to garner support for these conclusions by addressing the moral implications of the collectivist approach.

#### 4.2. Against Claim 4

Let me recall the distinction made earlier about what a group can be collectively responsible for. As I argued in Section 3.4 above, sometimes the collectivist claim is that a group is responsible for an attitude because no member supports that attitude individually. This can be the case in *Tenure Committee* when the premise-based procedure (or the straw-vote procedure) is used and a morally objectionable decision is reached. Elsewhere what the collective is said to be responsible for (rather than individual members) is that the group fails to be rational as a group. This is the case in *Tenure Committee* when the conclusion-

---

<sup>24</sup> This is not some Kim-style argument against non-reductive physicalism based on the exclusion principle. The point here is a different one: (1) Reasons (of the kind at issue here) are action-guiding. (2) Only individuals act. (3) Therefore, reasons guide individual actions. (4) Therefore, reasons-for-the-group must *ipso facto* be reasons-for-some-individual. Collectivists discussed in the paper appear to accept (1) and (2). The point above is that it is then inconsistent for them to reject (3) and (4). For the record, I do think (see Sziget 2014b) that it is possible to run Kim-style arguments to show that “corporatist” collectivism of the kind discussed in this paper cannot be rendered consistent with the supervenience of collective properties/events on individual properties/events (*pace* Jackson & Pettit 1990; 1992a; 1992b, and List & Menzies 2009; 2010). But that is not the issue discussed above. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to clarify the difference.

based procedure is used. Here what the collective *qua* collective is responsible for is the inconsistency itself if the inconsistency is morally objectionable.

It is the latter kind of robust collective responsibility that is at issue here because only that kind of collective responsibility directly presupposes collective agency, namely collective epistemic agency. Since I deny the possibility of collective agency the impossibility of this kind of collective responsibility would follow by *modus tollens*. But as we know: “one philosopher’s *modus ponens* is another’s *modus tollens*” (Putnam). So let me adduce a few independent considerations for objecting to collective responsibility of this kind. These considerations focus on the moral implications of the collectivist proposal.

For one thing, there is something worrying about groups in which as Rovane puts it “human constituents of the group are not committed to having separate viewpoints of their own” (Rovane 2004, 336). To my mind, this is an unattractive picture even if the group’s aims are morally laudable. On the contrary, when establishing groups one should organize them in a way that reinforces individual autonomy and enhance individual rationality as much as possible.

Moreover, this approach creates a loophole for individuals to escape their individual responsibility by forming the kind of rationally unified groups Rovane and other collectivists envisage.<sup>25</sup> The individualist approach does not have this problem. On this account, an individual can be required on moral or prudential grounds to prioritize her group-regarding reasons. But that too will be a demand addressed at the individual, not the group. If the individual fails to comply with that justified demand and thereby undermine the morally worthy aims of the group, then he or she will be rightly held responsible for this.

Relatedly, we have reasons to doubt that “[w]e often assess the judgments and decisions of groups in everyday contexts. We hold groups accountable for their policies and require them to explain how certain decisions cohere with past decisions. In doing so we are not asking individuals to justify their own beliefs and judgments.” (Tollefsen 2004, 8n12) Consider a group using the straw-vote procedure. For example, the group could be a sophisticated tenure committee the members of which are alive to the difficulties of maintaining group-level consistency when individual views have to be aggregated by means of a formal decision procedure. Now suppose that in this advanced version of *Tenure Committee* a group-level inconsistency is diagnosed, e.g., it is found that the group endorses  $p$ ,  $q$ ,  $r$  as well as  $\neg(p \& q \& r)$ . Suppose also that this very inconsistency has morally objectionable consequences (as in the version of *Tenure Committee* in Copp 2007). Once all this has been established and made known to the members, the group runs the straw-vote procedure. But, alas, it is found that it is not able to avoid the inconsistency because no member is prepared to revise his or her view on any of the propositions.

It seems to me that in such a case, depending on the circumstances, we either should hold all members of the group individually responsible in equal degree. Alternatively, if their reasons for refusing to revise their view are not equally legitimate, then we should differentiate among individual members holding

---

<sup>25</sup> Compare and contrast Pettit’s argument (2007a, 196) that “...the failure to impose a regime of corporate responsibility can expose individuals to a perverse incentive. Let human beings operate outside such a regime, and they will be able to incorporate, so as to achieve a certain bad and self-serving effect, while arranging things so that none of them can be held fully responsible for what is done.” This is a surprising rationale for responsibility-collectivism. To my mind, the obvious way to avoid the creation of such a “perverse incentive” is to hold the *individuals* responsible who incorporate for such bad and self-serving purposes. It is hard to see how holding the *collective* robustly responsible could remove this incentive.

those responsible who should have changed their views. In any case, responsibility for the group's failure will distribute among individual members.

The upshot of this section is that collective epistemic (and resultant moral) responsibility is objectionable not only on conceptual grounds. It also has unpalatable ethical implications. I will close by considering where these criticisms leave Claims 1 and 2.

#### 4.3. Revisiting Claims 1 and 2

To recall, Claim 1 is that the property of rationality can be predicated of group-attitudes and group-behaviour. Claim 2 is that the property of rationality can be predicated of group-attitudes and group-behaviour in a non-summative sense. That is to say, an attitude at the group-level can be irrational even when the individual attitudes of group-members, upon which the group-level attitude supervenes, are rational. For example, a group may be said to believe something, and that belief may be irrational because (say) inconsistent with other beliefs ascribable to the group, and yet none of the individual beliefs on which the specific collective belief depends, need to be irrational.

The objection I finally want to consider is that if I concede this possibility, then I cannot at the same time deny Claims 3 and 4. If groups can be irrational without their members being so, and such group-level irrationality should not be described as the result of robustly collective actions as I have argued, then where does group-level irrationality come from? And if groups can be irrational without their member being so, and such group-level irrationality should not be described as the result of robustly collective actions, then who is responsible for group-level irrationality?

I think the distinction between reasoning and rationality provides the answer. With this distinction in hand, we can understand how group-level irrationality can arise without collective epistemic agency. This can happen when individual members are rational, but their reasoning is faulty or at least of limited scope. That is to say, the individual agent is rational because she meets the norms of rationality. However, an individual agent can be rational and yet fail to reason adequately as regards the implications of her attitudes.

In particular, and this is crucial for our purposes, the individual agent may fail to reason with regard to the consequences of how her attitudes mesh with those of others. Among others, she may fail to reason about the fact that once her attitudes are conjoined with those of others, in a formal agglomerative decision-procedure for example, the agglomerated attitude may fall short in one or more domains of rationality. Such a failure of reasoning is tantamount to either an omission to recognize that the group-level attitude is faulty in this respect or an omission to scrutinize one's attitudes as to how the fault could be rectified by revising one's own attitudes. Such failures of reasoning indicate shortcomings of one's epistemic agency.

Having said that, shortcomings of epistemic agency need not be morally culpable. Thus it may well be that the individual agent is not morally responsible for her failure to recognize and/or do something about how her attitudes mesh with those of others. Familiar excusing and justifying conditions can be invoked here. The agent may have been non-culpably ignorant of these implications because she could not have known. The agent may have been non-culpably ignorant because it would have been unrealistic to expect her to be aware of the consequences of agglomeration. At other times, the individual agent

could have known and should have known. In such cases, the agent is morally responsible for her failure to exercise her epistemic agency provided the inconsistency does have morally objectionable consequences because due to the inconsistency someone suffers harm unjustifiably.

I believe that as a limiting case there are situations in which *none* of the relevant individual agents can be said to be culpable for the emergence of group-level irrationality. *Tenure Committee* is a case in point.<sup>26</sup> Whatever we think of that particular example, it seems in general possible that all individual agents have either a valid *justification* or a valid responsibility-undermining *excuse* for their failure to reason about morally bothersome consequences at group-level.<sup>27</sup>

We can now also answer the worry about Claim 4. If there are no collective agents, who is to be held responsible for group-level irrationality? The answer suggested here is that either some individual agents are or no one is. It is irritating that bad things happen without anyone being responsible. It is especially irritating that a bad thing can happen due to human agency and yet no human agent is responsible. This, I submit, also holds true for shortfalls of collective rationality. Not all instances of collective irrationality are somebody's fault. If this sounds too pessimistic, remember first that harm, including harm due to collective irrationality, can and should be redressed even if no one is responsible for that harm (see Szígeti 2014a). And remember also, second, that doing away with the notion of collective epistemic agency can actually help to close loopholes that could be exploited by individual agents who seek to shirk their responsibility by hiding behind the broad backs of the collective they are members of.

## 5. Conclusion

We do not need to resort to the concept of collective epistemic agency to explain how group-level (ir)rationality can emerge. The distinction between an individual agent's self-regarding reasons and group-regarding reasons adequately takes care of that explanatory task. In fact, the idea of collective agency, and *a fortiori* that of collective epistemic agency, seems incoherent because it is hard to make sense of reasons-for-groups that would not be *ipso facto* reasons-for-individual(s).

These considerations are strengthened by our practice of responding to collective shortfalls of rationality and the unpalatable moral implications of collectivism. There is no need to change the subject. Groups can be rational or irrational, but they do not reason.

## References

Arrow, K. J. (1963/1951). *Social choice and individual values*. New York: Wiley.

Bacharach, M. (2006). *Beyond individual choice: teams and frames in game theory*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

---

<sup>26</sup> For a different reading of *Tenure Committee*, see Miller (2007). Miller argues that *if* the committee's decision is morally wrong, then this shows that the decision-procedure is flawed, and so those individuals (who may or may not be identical with members of the committee) are culpable who chose the decision-procedure in the first place. For a critical response to this approach, see Szígeti 2014a.

<sup>27</sup> In some cases group-level rationality and individual-level rationality *necessarily* conflict. This is a plausible interpretation of what happens in prisoner's dilemmas.

- Bovens, L. & Rabinowicz, W. (2006). Democratic answers to complex questions – an epistemic perspective. *Synthese*, 150, 131-153.
- Copp, D. (1979). Collective actions and secondary actions. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 16, 177-186.
- Copp, D. (2007). The collective moral autonomy thesis. *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 38, 369-388.
- French, P. (1979). The corporation as a moral person. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 16, 207-215.
- French, P. (1984). *Collective and corporate responsibility*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Gilbert, M. (1987). Modelling collective belief. *Synthese*, 73, 185–204.
- Gilbert, M. (1989). Rationality and salience. *Philosophical Studies*, 57, 61-77.
- Gilbert, M. (1990). Rationality, coordination, and convention. *Synthese*, 84, 1-21.
- Gilbert, M. (1997). What is it for us to intend? *Synthese Library*, 65-86.
- Gold, N. & Sugden, R. (2007). Collective intentions and team agency. *Journal of Philosophy*, 3, 109-137.
- Hakli, R. (2007). On the possibility of group knowledge without belief. *Social Epistemology*, 21, 249-266.
- Held, V. (1970). Can a random collection of individuals be morally responsible? In L. May & S. Hoffman (Eds.), *Collective responsibility* (pp. 89-100). Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Hurley, S. (2003). The limits of individualism are not the limits of rationality. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 26, 164-165.
- Jackson, F. & Pettit, P. (1990). Program explanation: a general perspective. *Analysis*, 50, 107-117.
- Jackson, F. & Pettit, P. (1992a). In defense of explanatory ecumenism. *Economics and Philosophy*, 8, 1-21.
- Jackson, F. & Pettit, P. (1992b). Structural explanation in social theory. In Charles, D. & Lennon, K. (Eds.), *Reduction, explanation, and realism* (pp. 97-132). Oxford: Clarendon.
- List, C. & Menzies, P. (2009). Non-reductive physicalism and the limits of the exclusion principle. *Journal of Philosophy*, 106, 475-502.
- List, C. & Menzies, P. (2010). The causal autonomy of the special sciences. In C. Macdonald & Graham Macdonald (Eds.), *Emergence in mind* (pp. 108-128). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- List, C. & Pettit, P. (2011). *Group agency: the possibility, design, and status of corporate agents*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ludwig, K. (2004). Rationality, language and the principle of charity. In A. Mele & P. Rawling (Eds.), *Oxford handbook of rationality* (pp. 342-362). New York: Oxford University Press.
- May, L. & Hoffman, S. (Eds.) (1991). *Collective responsibility*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Miller, S. (2007). Against the collective moral autonomy thesis. *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 38, 389–409.
- Miller, S. (2012). On joint epistemic action. Paper presented at the lecture series of the Finnish Centre of Excellence of the Philosophy of Social Sciences (TINT), Helsinki, Finland.
- Parfit, D. (1984). *Reasons and persons*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

- Pettit, P. (2001). Deliberative democracy and the discursive dilemma. *Philosophical Issues*, 11, 268-295.
- Pettit, P. (2003). Groups with minds of their own. In Frederick Schmitt (Ed.), *Socializing metaphysics* (pp. 167-194). New York: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Pettit, P. (2007a). Responsibility incorporated. *Ethics*, 117, 171-201.
- Pettit, P. (2007b). Rationality, reasoning and group agency. *Dialectica*, 61, 495-519.
- Pettit, P. & Schweikard, D. (2006). Joint actions and group agents. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 36, 18-39.
- Proust, J. (2001). A plea for mental acts. *Synthese*, 129, 105-128.
- Proust, J. (2010). Metacognition. *Philosophy Compass*, 5, 989-998.
- Rovane, C. (2004). Rationality and persons. In A. Mele & P. Rawling (Eds.), *Oxford handbook of rationality* (pp. 320-342). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Schmid, H. B. (2014). Plural self-awareness. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 13, 7-24.
- Szanto, T. (2014). How to share a mind: Reconsidering the group mind thesis. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 13, 99-120.
- Szigeti, A. (2014a). Are individualist accounts of collective responsibility morally deficient? In A. Konzelmann-Ziv & H. B. Schmid (Eds.), *Institutions, emotions, and group agents* (pp. 329-342). Berlin: Springer.
- Szigeti, András (2014b, forthcoming). Collective responsibility and group-control. In J. Zahle & C. Finn (Eds.), *The Individualism/Holism Debate: An Anthology*. Berlin: Springer.
- Theiner, G. & O'Connor, T. (2010). The emergence of group cognition. *Emergence in Science and Philosophy*, 6, 78-117.
- Tollefsen, D. (2002a). Collective intentionality and the social sciences. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 32, 25-50.
- Tollefsen, D. (2002b). Organizations as true believers. *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 33, 395-410.
- Tollefsen, D. (2004). Collective Epistemic Agency. *Southwest Philosophy Review*, 20, 55-66.
- Tuomela, R. (1995). *The importance of us: a philosophical study of basic social notions*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.