

Éliot Litalien

## **What We Owe to Groups. On the Moral and Political Status of Group Agents**

The moral status of groups has been approached in different ways in philosophy. On the one hand, multiculturalist and pluralist political philosophers have offered arguments supporting some of those groups' demands by focusing on the recognition of differences and the right of association. On the other hand, scholars in social ontology have mostly focused on the deficiencies of explanations in social sciences that do not take groups seriously or on the conditions that have to be met for collective responsibility to obtain. So far, however, not much work has thoroughly examined what recognizing that, as many do in social ontology, certain groups have, just like individuals, *agency* means in terms of the normative or moral claims groups can have. As a result, the shared understanding, among both philosophers and the general public, is that only individuals can see their agency constrained and demand that they be respected as agents. This view, however, obscures important injustices affecting persons that do not seem to be explained by constraint imposed directly on those very individuals and that rather seem to be the product of some maltreatment experienced by the group to which these persons belong. In other words, if we accept that one of the goals of political and legal institutions is to combat injustices, thinking about what groups could be owed would certainly help to shape or design better institutions. This research project remedies this gap by focusing on the normative and political implications of the recognition that certain groups can be agents, just as individuals are.

This research project comprises two parts. The first part addresses the central and more abstract issues around the nature of group agents. The goal is here first to defend a view of group agency based on what we can call the "standard conception of agency." This "standard conception of agency," which defines it as the capacity to act intentionally, characterizes agency in terms that do not entail that only human individuals can be agents. The "standard conception," then, can potentially be developed to encompass certain groups. The general argument put forward here is that certain groups qualify as agents because they display, just as individuals do, a capacity to form intentions and a capacity to carry out those intentions into the world. To support this argument, I aim to develop a functionalist account of collective intentionality and collective intentional states. Finally, it is needed to turn to the question of the normative implications of such a view of group agency. I aim to argue here that since certain groups qualify as agents, they can see, just as individuals can, their agency curtailed, reduced or, at the extreme, extinguished through different mechanisms such as interference and domination. It will further be established that that is normatively problematic because of the relation between the agency of the group and that of its individual members.

The second part of this project concerns more directly the social and political implications of such a view of group agency. The general conclusion of this second part is that if some groups effectively qualify as agents, and if there is a relation between their agency and the agency of their members, then these groups may indeed be *owed* something just as we owe certain things to individuals. More precisely, they may be owed that we respect and protect their agency from undue interference and domination. What that means depends on the kind of group they are. Here, the plan is to explore the different principles or mechanisms that would realize, for certain kinds of groups, the kind of protection they may be owed against infringement on their agency. Among those, we first find collective rights to self-determination, which would mostly be fit for national and cultural minorities. But we should further explore the principles of subsidiarity and of federalism and shared sovereignty that would likely fit better for the other collective agents that populate the social and political spheres.

This research project will lead to the publication of a series of research articles in internationally renowned academic philosophy journals. The end goal of the project is the publication of a monograph titled *What We Owe to Groups. On the Moral and Political Status of Group Agents*. However, this project might have an impact beyond the debates in academic philosophy. While it concerns very abstract questions in normative social and political philosophy, it also tackles concrete social and political questions. It might in particular have an impact on the development of policies around group or minority (including Indigenous) rights and around federalism (or, more generally, political power sharing arrangements). These are policy domains that are relevant both in Europe and at the global level.