On What Makes a Social Group a Group Agent

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1. *Introduction*

When we say that our favorite soccer team has won a match, that the Parliament has passed a law or that a business company will invest in a fund, we are (more or less knowingly) treating social groups as agents. Thriving philosophical disputes between reductionists and realists revolve around the question: to what do the statements about group agency actually refer? Reductionists maintain that our ordinary language is purely metaphorical, as there is nothing in the social world over and above the individuals in relationships (Miller 1992; Bratman 2014; Ludwig 2017a). By contrast, realists find there is something right about the way we talk, as the case of group agency is indeed too complex to be reduced to any form of interaction among the members (French 1979; Gilbert 1989; List and Pettit 2011; Hindriks 2013; Hess 2020).

With this simplistic but functional distinction in the background,[1] the present article raises a crosscutting, but lightly debated, issue. The focal question asks what exactly is it (if anything) that makes a social group capable of action? I will suggest that if something can play that role, it must encompass the group's ontological structure.[2]

The account embarks on a novel investigation. Outlining a structuralist approach to group agency requires us to bridge the gap between studies primarily focused on whether and how a social group can be an agent and purely meta-

[1] There are indeed non-reductive positions in the debate that refer to group agents and actions without being strictly realistic about their existence. Tuomela, for example, has built a theoretical framework for group agency, which wavers between realism and reductionism. If from the point of view of the explanation Tuomela recognized the importance of describing group agents and actions as complex, high-level phenomena, underpinned by specific *we-mode* attitudes in the mind of the participants, ontologically speaking he seems rather inclined to consider group agents as *fictitious* entities, somehow reducible to their members (Tuomela 2013, pp. 232-36).

[2] In these pages, *ontology* refers to the study of existing entities, whereas *metaphysics* concerns the study of the nature of those things.

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physical research to ask: what kind of entity is a social group? And by what feature can be classified in that way? Some discussions in both debates suggest that this bridge is already under construction.

On the one hand, in the literature on group agency, some scholars hold that the ability of a social group to act depends precisely on whether the group has an internal organization such that the members can develop unified plans of action and execute those intentions by acting as a whole. List and Pettit (2011) have devoted a pivotal monograph centered on the design of social groups, its implications for what groups can do, and what normative status they can bear. As a development of that account, Hess (2020) proposes focusing on multiple internal organization models, not limited to the decision-making mechanism examined by List and Pettit. Along these lines, Tuomela (1995, 2013) has referred to organized collectives in terms of task-right systems with fixed positions and replaceable members. Moreover, Hindriks (2008) insists on the difference between actions that a group can do based on its internal organization and actions that also depend on the group's normative status. Thus, although theories of group agency do not directly discuss the metaphysical structure of social groups, they do refer to their internal organization as enabling certain properties and capacities.

On the other hand, recent studies in social metaphysics focus on the nature of social groups as social objects comprised of members. The claim that social structures should play some role in the definition of social groups is defended by authors such as Sheehy (2006), Urfalino (2017), Ritchie (2013, 2015, 2018), Strohmaier (2018), Uzquiano (2018), Fine (2020), Harris (2020), and Passinsky (2021), who argue that: insofar as social groups are structured wholes, they cannot be described as either sets or extensional mereological fusions.[3] For these accounts, which are to some extent sympathetic to a neo-Aristotelian conception of entities, social groups are made of form and matter, i.e., structural relationships and members. Structure, however, is not explicitly associated with the agentive properties enabled in social groups through such patterns of inter-member relations.

Brian Epstein's work deserves a special mention here because it contributes to both of the debates. Principally interested in social metaphysics, Epstein argues that to delve into the problem of group agency, it is worth considering

[3] On the limits of extensional mereological accounts of social groups, see Ruben (1983). For a defense of non-extensional mereology, see Hawley (2017) and Strohmaier (2018). A refined version of setism is advanced by Effingham (2010) and criticized by Uzquiano (2004), who proposes an account of groups as *unfamiliar entities* that – unlike sets – survive fluctuations in members. A reductive perspective, which departs from both mereology and set theory, is the plurality view offered by Horden and López de Sa (2020). The account holds groups to be identical to the plurality of the members.

what kinds of social groups can act and on what grounds action is possible (2015, pp. 217-35; 2017, pp. 24-26).[4]

In this paper, I investigate what enables organized social groups to act by combining the study of group agency with a structuralist approach in social metaphysics.[5] Assuming that any theory of group agency must be able to explain the grounds of group action, structure-based metaphysics offers a promising account. I will contend that, in this view, the grounds of group agency include the ontological structure of social groups, which contributes to determining what agentive properties each group can bear.[6] I will argue that acknowledging the grounding role of structure for agency means advancing an argument against reducing the explanation of group agency to accounts that only consider members' intentions and actions. Moreover, I will argue that group structure may depend, according to the case, either on internal factors – such as shared attitudes and agreements among the members – or on external factors – such as social norms and practices. The ontological dependence on heterogeneous factors will reveal that social groups and their agentive properties are not just mental phenomena but worldly entities and properties, deeply embedded in the social context.

The paper is divided into three sections: Section **2** outlines a structuralist approach in social metaphysics leaning on Katherine Ritchie's view that social groups are structured wholes (Ritchie 2013, 2015, 2018). Then, section **3** asks whether the account might be compatible with the idea that some organized social groups can be agents. Here, I propose an integration with the functionalist

[4] It is important to note that Epstein does not propose a hylomorphic approach to social groups as do the authors mentioned above, whose view is close to neo-Aristotelianism. Epstein, in fact, presents a constitution view for which social groups are constituted or grounded by heterogeneous factors. The way in which members are related can be understood (whenever this characterization is appropriate) as an extra-essential property. However, the relational pattern is not part of the ontological construction of the social group: On Epstein's account, groups are materially constituted by members, not by relationships. See Epstein (2017, pp. 9–23). While leaning on Epstein's work on groundings, the discussion I propose in this article about the ontology of groups is closer to the neo-Aristotelian, structure-based metaphysics. I will present social groups as being structures realized by individuals. Structures – I will contend – are grounded in social factors.

[5] Structuralism has wide application in philosophy. For example, in the philosophy of mathematics and physics, the reality of unobservable entities has been approached through a structuralist framework centered on a form realism (either metaphysical or epistemological) about structures (Worrall 1989; Shapiro 1997; Ladyman 1998; Kincaid 2008). In the social sciences, structuralism is at the core of Elder-Vass' emergentist ontology (2007), inspired by Bhaskar's scientific realism (1978), Giddens' interactionism (1984), and Archer's morphogenetic approach (1995).

[6] By "agentive properties" I mean forms of agency that can be both abilities (e.g., moving obstacles) and enactments of normative functions (e.g., issuing certificates). I suggest that, insofar as agentive properties depend on the metaphysical structure of groups, they are essential properties, see §3.

conception of agency proposed by List and Pettit (2011). I will argue that structuralism can help to explicate the metaphysical foundations of group agency and frame the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic agentive properties. The intrinsic-extrinsic distinction is not captured by List and Pettit's account. To show the strengths of a structured-based approach to group agency, section **4** illustrates and discusses three scenarios: For each scenario, we will examine the agentive properties of the group – i.e., a committee – in relation to the social factors that ground the group's structure. To conclude, I suggest that (at least some of) the agentive properties of organized social groups are not fully captured by theories of agency that are primarily focused on the group's internal design and rational unity. If the argument is convincing, structuralism offers a helpful scheme for vindicating the realist view on group agency, enhancing the account through the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic agentive properties and offering a non-reductive perspective that considers social groups as concrete, deep-rooted components of the social world.

2. *Social structures*

The structuralist approach to group agency endorsed in this paper applies the notion of social groups proposed by Ritchie (Ritchie 2013, 2015, 2018), who argues that 'social structures are central to the nature of all social groups' (Ritchie 2018, p. 1). This account's strength is that it studies social structures based on how they are constituted by social factors. This distinguishes between cases in which the group's structure only depends on factors internal to the group and cases in which it depends (at least in part) on external social factors.

2.1. A general definition of "structure"

According to Ritchie's structuralism, social groups are instantiations of structures that have a social nature. In general, structures are "complexes, networks, or "latticeworks" of relations" (Ritchie 2018, p. 4) and can be represented as graphs formed of nodes and edges. Nodes are places occupied by entities (node occupiers), whereas edges represent relations between nodes and define their function within the whole structure. To give an example, we might consider the structure of a baseball team, which includes, among others, the node labeled *pitcher* and the node labeled *catcher.* On one side, the *pitcher's* function is defined by its pitch-ball-to relation to the *catcher* (Ritchie 2013, p. 268). On the other side, the *catcher* is related to the *pitcher* by the return-ball-to relation, which also defines the functional relation between the *catcher* and the

pitcher.[7] The definition of nodes might also depend on eventual (possibly null) constraints on the node occupier, fixing the number, the type, and the powers of the occupier. For instance, the molecular formula (structure) of water, H_2O, determines that the structure has three nodes: one node occupier must be an oxygen atom, whereas two occupiers have to be hydrogen atoms.

As exemplified by the H_2O case, not all structures are social structures. Given that this paper concerns social groups, I will concentrate exclusively on the case of social structures. In Ritchie's view, for a structure to be social, it has to constitutively depend on social factors, including – at least – social behavior, patterns of interaction, habits, beliefs, intentions, processes, practices, rules, norms, and agreements.[8] Those aspects of the social environment can be relevant to the constitution of a social structure, as they provide the context within which a certain latticework of relations can arise.

Fundamental to the existence of social structures, the constitutive relation between social factors and social structures is a complex form of dependence that covers phenomena of conceptual priority, metaphysical necessity, and grounding relations. Ritchie proposes the following definition of constitutive dependence:

> Structure, S, constitutively depends on social factors just in case
> (i) in defining what it is to be S reference must be made to some social factors or
> (ii) social factors are metaphysically necessary for S to exist or
> (iii) social factors ground the existence of S (or the fact that S exists) (Ritchie 2018, p. 6).

Based on this, the relation between some social factors and a social structure is a kind constitutive relation so long as at least one of the three disjunctions applies to it.[9]

This notion of constitution helps to distinguish social structures from other kinds of structures. For example, the structure of water, blood, and fire is not social because it is not related to social factors in any significant way. Other cases do not appear to be so clearly separated from social influences; even if some structures are not constituted by social factors, they could still depend on

[7] Pitch-ball-to and return-ball-to are both asymmetrical and non-hierarchical relations. Edges can also be symmetrical (being twins) or hierarchical (relationships of authority).

[8] In acknowledging that Ritchie does not provide any definition of what social factors could be, I will use the notion as she does, that is, in a general way. In Ritchie's 2018, there are two lists of items that can be considered social factors: "social behavior, patterns of action, habits, beliefs, intentions, processes, practices, activities, rules, laws, norms, and arrangements" (p. 3); "social practices, patterns of interaction, agreements, beliefs, and so on" (p. 15).

[9] Ritchie's notion of constitution is inspired by Haslanger's definition of constitutive social construction of social facts (Haslanger 2003, pp. 317-8).

social factors in a causal way. For example, if I forget an old lamp on my balcony, it will start rusting. In this sense, my action is a (social) factor that (partially) causes the formation of rust, which is not social in itself (Ritchie 2018).

2.2. Social structures constitutively depend on social factors

Structures in general, and social structures in particular, can be viewed as (universal) patterns that can be actualized by different systems of entities (node occupiers) (Ritchie 2018, p. 5).[10] Social structures specifically constitutively depend on social factors, which can be either internal or external to the system of entities that, in world *w* at time *t*, realizes some particular arrangements of nodes and edges.[11] A social factor is internal if it concerns or coincides with (some of) the entities instantiating a certain social structure; whereas, a social factor is external if it does not concern or coincide with (some of) the entities instantiating the structure, either partially or fully.

Let us consider the case of a group of street musicians who start playing together spontaneously, just by coordinating the performance and harmonizing the sound (cf. Epstein 2017). As the musicians stop playing, the group dissolves. No matter how fleeting, the group has a structure that modulates the activity of each musician because of the activity of the others (*x* plays rhythmic parts, *y* plays the melody, *z* sings). The structure is social because it depends on social factors such as intentions, patterns of behavior, and coordination among the members. Because all these social factors regard the group's members, they count as internal to the system, so the group's structure has internal grounding conditions.

A different kind of case is presented by analyzing groups like the Supreme Court (cf. Uzquiano 2004; Epstein 2015, pp. 222-24; Ritchie 2018, pp. 11-12,): It can be described as a social group made up of nine members who occupy the nodes of a structure, in which one member is the chief justice, and the other

[10] In this paper, I use the notion of system meaning a set of individuals in relationship. On this, I lean on Shapiro's contribution to the philosophy of mathematics where he defines a system to be 'a collection of objects with certain relations' (Shapiro 1997, p. 73). Shapiro then maintains that a structure is the abstract form or patter of relations that can be exemplified by many different systems (cf., p. 77). Such multiple realizability of the pattern is also found in Ritchie's conception of structure.

[11] The realization of a structure confronts us with (at least) two different meanings of *constitution*. First, the notion might refer to coincidence without identity, a view paradigmatically exemplified by the case of the marble statue (Baker 2000). Second, constitution might address the constitutive dependence holding between social factors and social structures, in which the constituting elements did not count as node occupiers but provide the context within which a certain social structure could exist (Hindriks 2013). This is the meaning at issue within Ritchie's theory. Building on Ritchie's definition, I will refer to this meaning of *constitution* especially as a grounding relation. We might instead refer to the former meaning in terms of material constitution.

eight are associate justices. The structure of the Court can easily be viewed as a social structure because it constitutively depends on a set of social factors, including the third Article of the Constitution, some specific declarations of the Congress, and other institutional facts. As these institutions are not part of the group – i.e., they are not node occupiers – we can infer that part of the Supreme Court's foundational structure are external to the group itself.

Ritchie's metaphysical perspective leads us to see that the ontological structure of a given object might depend on either internal or external social factors. Although the following discussion departs from the scope of Ritchie's proposal, it is important here to anticipate that the internal-external distinction will prove relevant in dealing with the issue of group agency. In more detail, I will talk about group agency in terms of agentive properties (Section 3): specific forms of agency (e.g., making a decision, organizing a party, playing a symphony), each having its own conditions of instantiation. Thus, I will maintain that when we ask what turns a social group into an agent, we want to know exactly what aspects in the ontology of the group allow it to meet the requirements of the agentive property at stake. More precisely, I argue that distinguishing between internal and external social factors will present the possibility for recognizing two kinds of properties: intrinsic, when enabled by structures that fully depend on internal social factors, and extrinsic, when enabled by structures that fully or partially depend on external social factors. Provided that each kind of property relates to the metaphysics of groups, I will treat both as essential proprieties.

2.3. The social structure of organized social groups

To address the problem of group agency and distinguish between intrinsic and extrinsic agentive properties, we should narrow our focus from the general notion of social structure to the structure of organized social groups such as committees, soccer teams, corporations, and universities.[12] The choice to exclusively consider organized social groups is not random but instead prompted by the fact that these groups are generally thought of as group agents. As mentioned in the introduction and further developed in Section 3, the standard account of group agency holds that, for a group to be an agent, it must be organized in a way that meets the requirements of agency (List and Pettit 2011). So, groups that are not appropriately organized do not belong in this category. Examples of non-organized groups include social classes, gender, and ethnic groups.[13]

[12] In Ritchie's framework, organized social groups are classified as Type 1.

[13] Ritchie defines examples of this kind in terms of feature groups (Type 2), because the members are brought together by one (or more) shared feature(s). For some criticism on Ritchie's distinction

For a social structure to be the structure of an organized social group, "it must have people or social creatures as node occupiers" (Ritchie 2018, p. 10). Ritchie clarifies that people are human beings and social creatures are social groups. First, this definition implies that not all social structures are structures of social groups. Structures that constitutively depend on social factors and are realized by systems of entities – including elements other than people and social creatures – are not structures of this kind. An example of this distinction is the structure of the market, in which corporations and investors cover some nodes and others are filled by market indices, tendencies, and risk factors. Second, by including social creatures among the set of node occupiers, Ritchie suggests that some social groups can both be realizations of social structures and node occupiers of more expansive social complexes (such as soccer teams being part of a soccer league). Third, if the expression "social creatures" identifies social groups in general, then organized social groups are not the only ones that can work as node occupiers. Meaning that, for a social group to be part of an external social structure, it does not have to instantiate a social structure itself. Thus, unorganized groups can occupy positions of social structures even if groups of this sort are not built around any functional organization.

3. *Structure and agency*

The fact that some social groups are internally organized is crucial because the functionalist model of action theory that this article undertakes to implement holds that the internal design contributes to making certain systems capable of agency.[14] The task is to explain how metaphysical structuralism might support and strengthen such a functionalist perspective.

3.1. From structure to agency

In the literature on group agency, a prominent account maintains that, as long as a group intervenes in the social context based on reasons, the group can be defined as an agent (French 1979; List and Pettit 2011). This characterization of group agents especially applies to organized groups, in which a particular network of relations among the members secures the group's unity around any

between Type 1 and 2, see Epstein 2017, §1. Because in this paper I do not engage in discussing the classification of social groups but concentrate only on groups with an internal structural organization, I will leave the classification problem aside.

[14] Some authors have focused on the ability that a set of people might have to organize themselves into a group and thus solve a collective problem. In those cases, the ability to act as a group is mediated by the group-formation process (Collins 2019; List & Koenig-Archibugi 2010; Wringe 2019). Here, I focus exclusively on the agentive properties of group agents.

decision-making procedure (or corporate policy). If a group follows the procedure, then the complex of reasons it adopts constitutes the rational point of view of the group.[15]

This account of group agency embraces a minimal concept of being an agent, according to which an agent is a system that fulfills some basic requirements, such as (1) being receptive to the inputs from the environment, (2) processing/accommodating those inputs, and (3) intervening in the environment based on (1) and (2).[16] Here, *system* means any set of units related in a certain way, such as, the set of interrelated mechanical components in a robotic device. In the case of social groups, a *system* refers to any set of individuals or social creatures realizing some specific pattern of relationships.[17]

On this basis, one can also say that agency is a property possessed by any social group that somehow fulfills a list of basic requirements. For instance, if a

[15] From then on, I will refer to this account as the standard account of group agency. This theory is mainly concerned with functional organizations centered on decision-making mechanisms. I will not discuss other kinds of organization such as the division of labor among the parties (Hess 2014; Bird 2015; Theiner 2018). Yet, I find the structuralist model could also apply to organized social groups in which the ability to act is based on different ways to achieve cohesion.

[16] The list of requirements relies on List and Pettit (2011, p. 20). In this article, I restrict the discussion to List and Pettit's theory of group agency as it is one of the most articulated, non-reductive perspectives on the matter. However, my proposal can also be applied to other non-reductive approaches: French (1979), for example, addressed group agency by arguing that group agents can act as single subjects by virtue of an established corporate policy. Similarly, Rovane (1998, 2019) explained that an agent is defined by having a coherent and consistent rational perspective – every agent is a single subject, unified by that rational viewpoint, regardless of whether it is held by a human being or a multiplicity of them. On a different line of thought, Tollefsen has offered a form of interpretivism which regarded our practice of making sense of group agents as an extension of our practice of making sense of individuals as subjects of dispositional attitudes. Tollefsen maintained that 'if our taking the intentional stance toward a group allows us usefully to understand the group's actions, then we have every reason to believe our assumptions of rationality are justified and that we are dealing with intentional agents' (Tollefsen 2015, 111). It can be observed that it is a shared point among these and other non-reductive theories of group agency to focus primarily on the functioning of groups and group concepts rather than on the group's metaphysical nature. My precise attempt is to assess the gain that non-reductive theories of group agency would have if they combined the analysis of agency with a non-reductive, structured-based metaphysics. It is important to specify that a combination with metaphysical structuralism would be inappropriate for cases like Tuomela's and Ludwig's for which group agents and actions are considered ontologically reducible to individuals and individual actions, respectively (Ludwig 2017a, Tuomela 2013). With this, I am not claiming that only non-reductive perspectives on group agency allow the connection between theories of agency and metaphysics; I just assume that reductionism regarding group agency is best combined with some form of metaphysical reductionism such as those offered by set theory and mereology. In fact, on those accounts, social groups are found reducible to their members. Hence, groups are not counted as single entities. This is consistent with the claim that groups cannot be single agents. About the subject of group agency and the question of singularism in social ontology, see Pettit and Schweikard (2006).

[17] On the meaning of *system*, see footnote 10.

committee is organized to meet the conditions of the functional property *make-decision*, and if the group has people as node occupiers, then the social group is an agent capable of making a decision based on its structure and through the activity of the members. The property *make-decision* is functional because its realization is not tied to any system in particular, so that two heterogeneous systems, such as my friend Jessica and a prize committee, can both decide the winner of a contest. Still, how Jessica and the prize committee fulfill this function might be different and system specific. Although a unique characterization of agency is extremely helpful in addressing the general phenomenon, it still might fail to capture relevant traits carried by particular forms of agency and by the systems realizing them. Therefore, it might be worthwhile re-thinking the notion of agency in terms of *agentive properties*.[18]

Just as the standard account defines agents as systems that meet a list of basic requirements, we might say that agentive properties are functional properties that necessitate specific conditions of instantiation. When a system satisfies the requirements of a particular agentive property, then the system has that property (and it is an agent). Because the bearer of any agentive property is (by definition) an agent, one might take agentive properties to be (a class of) powers.

The definition of powers and its relation to the notions of dispositions and abilities is currently much debated; it goes beyond the scope of this article to explore the matter with the attention it would deserve (Maier 2018; Collins 2019; Vetter 2019). In general terms, powers are a kind of disposition that pertains to agents and can refer either to actions (e.g., speaking a language) or to passive capacities (e.g., understanding that language). Powers of the former kind are abilities, and, in so far as agentive properties relate agentive systems to the performance of specific functions, they can be defined as such. In this sense, an agentive property is the ability of a system to perform a certain function. For example, the agentive property *make-decision* is the ability of a system to satisfy the function "making a decision". It is worth noting that "making a decision" is a teleological function, as its performance aims to achieve the goal of becoming firm about an issue. Functions of this kind include targeted actions such as making toast, painting a wall, searching for treasure, and so forth. Differently, some other functions might be normative and refer to the deontic powers of systems: Let us consider the case of a police officer who wants to stop a motor-

[18] The notion of agentive property is different from Searle's *agentive function*, which indicates the function of objects in relation to the interests of agents. Examples of objects with agentive functions are chairs, paperweights, and screwdrivers (Searle 1995). As opposed to this, agentive properties are properties of agents that make them able to make use of the agentive functions ascribed to the objects. For example, if a stone has the agentive function of holding down paper, I – as an agent – have the agentive property to use it as a paperweight.

ist for speeding. On one hand, if all conditions are met, the officer's agentive property *raise-arm* can count as the officer's ability to perform a teleological function aimed at raising the arm. On the other hand, the subject of the property *raise-arm* is an individual who – as a police officer – can stop drivers for excessive speed by raising his arm. The status *being a police officer* makes the performance of the agentive property *raise-arm* count as the performance of the agentive property *stop-car*.[19] Such a power relates the agent to an action that is not (just) the achievement of a goal, but the enactment of a duty ascribed to the agent from the outside. Other examples of normative functions performed through action are issuing certificates, acting as a spokesperson, imposing fees, and refereeing a game.[20] Accordingly, the following characterization of agentive properties might serve as a general definition:

Agentive property. The agentive property *p* is the ability of a system *s* to perform function *f* in world *w* at time *t*. *F* can be either teleological or normative.

The definition allows us to capture different forms of agency and analyze the specific conditions that allow certain systems to have agency. Moreover, breaking down the agency of a system into a set of agentive properties may also help us understand how different agentive properties relate to one another.

3.2. On group agency

Questioning whether social groups can act is undoubtedly far from Ritchie's original project, which is specifically concerned with the metaphysics of social groups, not considering – at least, not directly – the possibility of group agency. Indeed, it is not necessary to raise an issue about the additional properties of social structures to define groups in terms of social structures. Nonetheless, I claim that by holding Ritchie's view, some form of realism about group agency is plausible for the following reasons: First, Ritchie's examples of organized social groups are typical cases of group agents (Supreme Court, House of Commons, and baseball teams). Second, she explicitly mentions List and Pettit's realism about group agency without any criticism (Ritchie 2015, p. 312), as she agrees with the idea that "group agents display patterns of collective behavior that will be lost on us if we keep our gaze fixed on the individual level" (List and Pettit

[19] With a reference to Goldman (1970), we might consider the production of the act *stop-car* as a form of *conventional generation*, since it is in virtue of social conventions, norms, and practices that the performance of the police officer's property *raise-arm* stands for the realization of the property *stop-car*.

[20] Bearing a normative function is not necessarily a synonym for being agents. For example, a piece of paper has a normative function when it counts as money in context C (Searle 2010). The status function of money does not make money an agent.

2011, p. 6). Third, Ritchie claims that the structure of organized social groups captures their functional organization (Ritchie 2015, p. 316). As no specification regarding the sort of function incorporated into the organization is provided, we might assume that the function of the structure can be agentive and that, as far as a social group realizes that function, it is an agent. As we observed in the case of the prize committee, the group can decide because it is organized in a way that it can receive information, process data, and make a decision based on those data and procedures. In other worlds, based on its functional organization, the group can meet the requirements of the property *make-decision* and thus function as a decision-maker.

Some might complain that this view does not add enough to the standard account of group agency, which is based precisely on the idea that social groups can act because they have an internal decision-making procedure and members allow its application. The analogy would only be true if the structuralist framework stopped at that level, concentrating almost exclusively on the description of the structural features regulating member-to-member interaction. But this is not the case for Ritchie's structure-based metaphysics; it characterizes social structures based on their constitutive dependence on social factors. Therefore, if a certain agentive property (*make-decision*) relies on a social structure (*decision-making procedure*), which constitutively depends on social factors (*agreement among the members*), one could fully understand the grounds of the agentive property in question only insofar as it relates to the social factors that ground the group's structure. To put it otherwise, a structuralist account helps us to argue that if the constitutive dependence on social factors determines the structure of an organized social group, those social factors also fix (at least some of) the structural features in virtue of which the system meets the requirements of an agentive property. Furthermore, so long as agentive properties depend on constitutive structural features, I suggest such properties are essential to the group.

As noted already, my point is that Ritchie's metaphysical perspective can be seen as compatible with a theory of group agency, even though this connection is not explicitly endorsed by her account. It is the task of this article to delineate such a development. In implementing the metaphysics of social groups, I have been working primarily on grounding relations. I have argued that this line of investigation is consistent with Ritchie's assumption that social structures constitutively depend on – and so are grounded in – social factors. The emphasis on grounding relations, though, is an aspect of my account for which I rely on Epstein's approach to social groups (Epstein 2015). [21]

[21] In this article, I am treating social groups as entities made up of individuals realizing patterns

On that basis, observing that the standard account of group agency does not give adequate weight to the social factors that ground the group's internal design is not the same as assuming that those factors are completely excluded. Indeed, the standard view acknowledges the role played by external influences in ascribing statuses and functions to groups. Still, the problem remains that if external factors are not studied as essential parts of the metaphysics of groups, it prevents the in-depth view allowed by structuralist metaphysics.

3.3. Intrinsic and extrinsic agentive properties

In the wake of the distinction between internal and external social factors, I propose that agentive properties can be either intrinsic or extrinsic to the system. On one side, if the structural features that allow a system to possess a particular agentive property constitutively depend on internal social factors, then the agentive property is intrinsic to the system:

Intrinsic agentive property. If a system s_x, in world w at time t, has the agentive property p_1, and if s_x meets the requirements of p_1 based on structural features that totally depend (in a constitutive way) on internal social factors, then p_1 is intrinsic to s_x.

To exemplify, we can return to the group of street musicians, who play together based on patterns of behavior that fully depend on the members' attitudes, abilities, and interactions. By virtue of its social structure, the group can play music, or – to say it otherwise – it bears the agentive property *play-music*. As far as the structure incorporates the function *play-music*, the social factors that ground the functional organization also determine the ability of the group to fulfill the function *play-music*. Assuming that, in this case, all social factors are internal to the system, we can define the agentive property *play-music* as an intrinsic property because it is enabled by structural features that are grounded on internal social factors.

Alternatively, if the requirements of an agentive property are met based on structural features that constitutively depend on external social factors, then the agentive property is an extrinsic agentive property of the system:

Extrinsic agentive property. If a system s_x, in world w at time t, has the agentive property p_2, and if s_x meets the requirements of p_2 based on structural features that fully or partially depend (in a constitutive way) on external social factors, then p_2 is extrinsic to s_x.

of relations. Such characterization is close to Ritchie's view and to neo-Aristotelian accounts in social metaphysics, while it differs from the way Epstein refers to groups. In fact, Epstein proposes a constitution-view for which the group's structure is not part of the ontological construction of the group. See footnote 4.

This is the case of the Supreme Court; the Supreme Court has a social structure that constitutively depends on external social factors such as the Third Article of the Constitution and declarations of Congress. Together with the social structure of the Supreme Court, those social factors determine some of its agentive properties, such as the property of deliberating about the case of an ambassador and deciding how to solve a controversy between the United States and a State in the USA. These agentive properties of the Supreme Court are based upon its structure, which is then realized through the activity of the members. As far as the structure constitutively depends on external social factors, the properties are extrinsic to the system.

The problem of the standard account is that it focuses primarily on the in-group organization and not on the social factors that ground such internal designs; the account cannot capture the essential nature of agentive properties, especially of the extrinsic ones. As a result, essential agentive properties would all be intrinsic.[22]

4. *Development and application of the model*

To appreciate the strength of structuralism as applied to group agency, in what follows, I consider the example of two social groups with similar internal functional organizations that still differ in their agentive properties, mainly because their organization is grounded on different social factors. The example aims to emphasize the specificity of intrinsic and extrinsic properties, state the essential nature of both kinds, and discuss to what extent the constitutive dependence on social factors might affect the agentive properties of groups. The proposed analysis is meant to be consistent with the standard account while refining the explanation of group agency across contexts and conditions.

4.1. Fake and real commissions

Consider the case of a photographic exhibition organized once a year by a museum. Among the invited artists, a young photographer also takes part in the event every year. A group of experts, which I call *real commission,* handles the selection. I will focus on the selection procedure and the set of agentive properties required to carry out the task:

[22] The standard account might accept that some organized social groups have extrinsic agentive properties as non-essential properties, deriving from social factors related to the social group through contextual (non-constitutive) relations. For example, the Supreme Court's property to decide the case of an ambassador would be counted as extrinsic and non-essential, deriving from the normative status attributed to the social group by other institutions that are external to the system of entities realizing the structure "Supreme Court".

Real commission. The museum decides the organizational structure, the powers, and the restrictions of the real commission. The museum appoints four experts in photography to the commission for the year and selects a spokesperson.

We assume that to select the winner the committee must bear the following agentive properties: (*a1*) making a decision, (*a2*) communicating the winner, (*a3*) performing *a2* on behalf of the museum.

This scenario resembles the case of the Supreme Court because the group's structure constitutively depends on an external authority. This means the real commission's structure is based on social factors that are external to the system of entities realizing the structure. Neglecting this step and merely considering the internal organization of the parties would make it difficult to distinguish the real commission from a fake one that possesses a similar internal structure but different relations to the environment. We can describe the case as follows:

Fake commission. A group of experts in photography agreed to form a committee and assess the successful candidate for fun. The members set up a decision-making mechanism for processing their personal competence through a single procedure and decide by a simple majority who must play the role of spokesperson.

Now, consider property *a1*: making a decision. Based on the functionalist model discussed so far, a system has an agentive property if and only if the system meets the requirements of that property. Therefore, in world w at time t, system s_x has the agentive property a_1 to make a decision, if s_x can (1) receive the necessary information from the environment, (2) process the information, and (3) make a decision based on (1) and (2). From the description of the two scenarios, we can observe that in both cases, the commission holds the information needed to assess the candidates, has a procedure for processing the information, and can make decisions according to the data and procedures. Differences emerge when the organizational structure of the two groups are identified, then we can begin the work of questioning which social factors provide each system with their respective organizational structures. The decision-making mechanism of the fake commission is grounded upon the agreement among the members, a_1 is intrinsic to the system. Opposed to this, when accounting for the real commission's decision-making ability, social factors about the members would be insufficient, as the real commission's constitutive dependence on a social structure generated by external social factors makes a_1 extrinsic to it.

Once it has been established that both commissions can bear property a_1, however differently, we might want to know whether they are suitable to meet the requirements of a_2: communicating the winner of the contest. In world w at

time *t*, system s_x has the agentive property a_2 to communicate the winner of the contest if s_x can (4) have a decision about the winner to announce, (5) make an announcement, (6) communicate the decision based on (4) and (5).

As said, the real commission satisfies the first condition based on external social factors, the fake commission due to internal social factors. Regarding the second condition, a social group can issue a communication if its structure includes at least one node that functions as a spokesperson (Ludwig 2017a; 2018). From the description of the two scenarios, we know that both commissions include a spokesperson, but, once again, the requirement is fulfilled on different grounds: In the case of the real commission, a_2 is extrinsic because the spokesperson is determined by external social factors (instructions of the museum) that regulate the attribution of the role "spokesperson". In the case of the fake commission, the spokesperson is determined by a mechanism that entirely depends on internal social factors, as the members have established the procedure and processed the vote. This means that the requirements of a_2 are met by structural features grounded on internal social factors, making a_2 intrinsic to the fake commission. Given that in each case, a_2 depends on the ontological structure of the group, a_2 can be considered an essential property.

The fact that a committee can declare the winner is not enough for its speech act to count as an official declaration equivalent as a declaration from the museum. The task requires the commission to possess property a_3: performing a_2 on behalf of the museum.

As an implementation of property a_2, a_3 shares those same requirements in addition to the fact that the performance of a_2 can count as an official declaration. The social factor that makes a system fulfill this specific condition and turns its committee decision into a museum selection is the authorization given to it by the museum. This act of authorization equips the commission with the agentive property a_3, so that when the spokesperson announces the winner, she also speaks on behalf of the museum. This is exactly what happens in the first scenario where the museum has empowered the commission with the function of speaking in its name. As opposed to this, the fake commission does not have the agentive property a_3, since, based on internal mechanisms only, the group cannot acquire the normative status demanded by a_3 (Hindriks 2008). This is to say that the member who plays the role of spokesperson can speak on behalf of the fake commission, but they cannot act as a representative of the museum.

4.2. Extrinsic agentive properties acquired over time

The fact that, in the example, the real commission has essential extrinsic properties originally does not imply that constitutive relations of dependence

on external social factors need to ground the group's structure right from the moment the group is formed. In fact, constitutive relations might happen later, as an implementation of the group's original social structure. If at time t_1 the social group g_1 has a structure based on internal factors only, it is likely that at time t_2 the group g_1 will also be constituted by some novel relation to external social factors. Thus, at time t_2, the group's structure will be based partly on internal factors and partly on external factors. As a result, at time t_2, some agentive properties of g_1 might depend on structural features already present at time t_1, while structural features acquired at time t_2 might activate new properties.

Consider the following mixed scenario:

Real commission.* The museum finds the competence and the reliability of the fake commission so good, they authorize the group of experts to make a selection on their behalf.

Although real commission* has the same origin, organizational structure, and members as the fake commission, in this context the group becomes a real commission, entitled to announce – via the spokesperson's words – the winner of the competition on behalf of the museum. Real commission*, thus, bears a_1 and a_2 intrinsically and has a_3 extrinsically. Each of these properties is essential: While a_1 and a_2 are intrinsic and original, the group has acquired a_3 over time due to novel constitutive relations to external social factors.

It is worth mentioning that being externally grounded is not necessarily empowering, as external social factors might also work as an impediment. Consider the case of the agentive property a_4: Changing the member who counts as spokesperson. It might happen that, in each scenario, the person appointed as spokesperson proved to be so inadequate that the group's members unanimously agreed to select a different spokesperson. The real commission cannot hold the agentive property a_4, because the group's structure is bound to external constraints in a way that those constraints prevent the group from having the property a_4 based on internal social factors.[23] In contrast, within the fake and real* scenario, the collective intervention of the members can be accomplished because the structural features involved in the appointment of the spokesperson depends entirely on the collective attitudes of the members.

[23] The point can be viewed in two different ways. On one side, one could observe that external social factors preclude the possibility for the group to have the agentive property a_4. On the other side, it can be assumed that external factors establish, together with (positive) agentive properties, negative agentive properties, such as the impossibility of bearing a_4.

4.3. Three kinds of organized social groups

This example has proved that organized social groups can be classified into three kinds, depending on whether they realize social structures that:

(1) fully depend upon internal social factors,
(2) fully depend upon external social factors, or
(3) depend upon social factors of both kinds.

The first kind can be derived from the *fake commission* scenario: Because they have no external ground, organized social groups of this sort could only have essential agentive properties that are intrinsic to the group, i.e., grounded in internal social factors. The range of examples includes spontaneous groups like bands of street musicians, crews of street dancers, reading groups, etc.

The second kind concerns organized social groups with social structures grounded exclusively on external social factors. Organized social groups with an institutional status, such as courts, universities, and corporations fulfill these criteria here exemplified through the *real commission* scenario. Such groups only have extrinsic agentive properties, and because extrinsic properties rely on the ontological structure of such social groups, extrinsic agentive properties can count as essential, or so I have argued.[24]

Third, representing the mixed category, we might find organized social groups based on social structures that constitutively depend, partly, on internal social factors and partly on external social factors. Consider the *real commission** scenario: The social group has the ability to decide and select the winner as intrinsic agentive properties and the ability to announce the winner on behalf of the museum extrinsically. A generalization of the example leads us to include, in this kind, all organized social groups that did not originally have institutional status and instead acquired it over time. An example is provided by a reading group of university students, first organized on student initiative and later recognized by the institution as a seminar that gives credits to its participants.

[24] Characterizing the agentive properties of institutional organized social groups as extrinsic properties does not apply only to the ability to perform normative functions – such as issuing certificates, passing new decrees, and signing agreements – since being extrinsic also concerns properties related to the performance of teleological functions. In general, we can observe that, while intrinsic properties can only relate to the performance of teleological functions, extrinsic properties can include abilities related to both teleological and normative functions.

5. *Concluding remarks*

In these pages, I have argued that bridging the gap between the theory of group agency and the metaphysics of social groups allows us to provide fine-grained explanations of the agentive properties of groups. Compared to the standard account that centers the study of group agency mainly on the functional organization of the members, the metaphysical framework delineated so far offers a structuralist approach to group agency that clarifies the grounds of that internal design and conceptualizes the group's agentive properties either as intrinsic or extrinsic. As argued, this distinction is not accessible to the standard view because it aims to explain how the group functions without examining how it is constituted.

To buttress the argument, I would like to advance some brief considerations on the ontological status of the agentive properties of groups in relation to the properties of the members. This is meant to show how structuralism underpins realism about group agency.

Because extrinsic agentive properties necessarily require external groundings, proponents of structuralism might find it reasonable to infer that the extrinsic properties of a group are not reducible to the members' properties in relationships, as the possibility to bear these properties depends on external social factors.

Then, comes the difficult case of intrinsic properties: On one side, reductionists might claim that intrinsic agentive properties of social groups are derived from the properties of the parties. On the other side, realists might want to reject this form of reduction and defend the view that, even if some agentive properties constitutively and exclusively depend on internal social factors, those properties can only be grasped by regarding the system as a whole.[25] I want to suggest that if the structuralist framework applied to the study of group agency has been found convincing, it might serve as a non-reductive argument in support of the realist view endorsed by the standard account. In fact, the form of structuralism proposed here provides that group agentive properties are enabled by structural features. Meaning that, we could not see how the individuals can act as members and have the properties they have as node occupiers unless we consider the structure of groups and the way it positions each member. As an example, consider the fake commission's intrinsic agentive property a_1: A reductionist might account for this property by observing that the group

[25] One of the most widespread arguments against reductionism is supervenience: a relation of "necessary determination of one set of facts by another" (List & Spiekermann 2013, p. 629). Supervenience allows the multiple realization of facts about groups, by assuming that the same high-level fact can be determined by a multiplicity of low-level arrangements (Sawyer 2002).

members can decide upon a winner because the parties interact in such a way that they can aggregate their judgments and produce a single output out of their individual attitudes (Miller 1992; Ludwig 2017b). Indeed, there is nothing to object to the idea that the group can perform a_1 in so far as the members are able to do their part. However, the structuralist might contend, this claim is just one side of the coin – in order to do their part, the members must be nodes of a structure, which enables their agentive property to act as group members and contribute to the decision-making procedure. When a system of individuals realizes a social structure, the agentive properties they had as individuals are affected by their new positions and new role-related properties are acquired. Thus, the intrinsic agentive properties of organized social groups cannot be reduced to the properties of the members because (1) the properties that the individuals acquire as node occupiers derive from the functions of the nodes they cover and because, in most cases, (2) those properties cannot be performed in contexts other than the group's action.

Therefore, structuralism offers a non-reductive interpretation of the agentive properties of social groups that does not deny the importance of the role played by the individuals. Instead, it aims to emphasize that, just as much as any group performance would not be possible without the activity of the group's members, some properties of the members are conceivable only within the social structure that they realize.

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