

## ON AGENCY AND JOINT ACTION

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**ABSTRACT.** In this article I focus on two conflicting directions of supra-individualism concerning joint agency. The two representative authors here are Schmitt (2003b) and Pettit (2003). The tension lies between assuming there is a joint agent, without ontologically committing to such an agent, any reference to it being just a *façon de parler*, or, on the contrary, assuming there is a joint agent and ontologically committing to it. The problem of joint agency is discussed in relation to the problem of joint action. My aim is to provide a critical discussion of the problem of joint agency. For this, I provide an overview of Schmitt's and Pettit's approaches to joint agency, and an example meant to raise some doubts regarding Schmitt's criterion for possessing agency. The paper is structured as follows. In Section 1, I discuss the key concepts concerning this problem. In Section 2, I present Schmitt's noncommittal approach to joint agency. In Section 3, I present Pettit's committal approach. In Section 4 and 5, I discuss Schmitt's criterion for being an agent and why there cannot be a joint agent in the strict existential sense. His criterion relies on a system of beliefs that should be possessed by an agent. In this context, I formulate a critique of this requirement. In the last Section, I follow some of Pettit's (2003) and Gilbert's (2004) ideas to provide an example concerning the interaction between individual and group beliefs, which also supports the critique of Schmitt's criterion.

**Keywords:** *supra-individualism, joint agent, joint action, collective beliefs, ontological commitment.*

The challenge I discuss in this article is how to account for the relation between agency and collective action. What kind of agent is assumed in performing a collective action? Given the premise of a supra-individualist approach that collective action is not reducible to a set of individual actions (and relations between them), what kind of agent is needed for those actions and how do we understand agency? Is there a supra-agent *per se*, or is our reference to it just a *façon de parler*? Let's take the

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example of a collective action—suppose Mary and John are singing a duet. One approach is to consider that the joint agency needed to perform the act of singing a duet is reducible to the individual agents performing the action. In this case, Mary is an agent performing her part in the collective action of singing a duet, John is the other agent performing his part in the collective action of singing a duet. This way of explaining things is an individualist approach in which joint agency is reducible to the individual agents performing that collective action. However, instead of treating Mary and John as individual agents performing their parts in a collective action, one can treat them as a *pair* performing the action. In this case, the agent is the *pair* consisting of Mary and John. This way of explaining joint action is a supra-individualist account of agency. Such an account assumes a supra-agent that is “over and above” the sum of agents that perform a certain collective action. Two such approaches are Schmitt’s (2003b) and Pettit’s (2003) accounts of agency for group action. The supra-individualist account can be understood in (at least) two ways. The first is to argue for the conceptual irreducibility of joint agency without an ontological commitment to the supra-agent. For instance, in the example above, the *pair* of Mary and John is not an ontologically distinct entity. This is Schmitt’s (2003b) option, and it goes by the name of ontological eliminativism. The second proposal is that of ontological noneliminativism. Pettit (2003), for instance, argues that we should endorse such an ontological commitment to the existence of the supra-individual agent. Is the supra-individual agent a real ontological entity (noneliminativism), or is it simply an irreducible *façon de parler*?<sup>1</sup> These options are incompatible, and I will focus on the conceptual tension between the two accounts of supra-individualist agency.<sup>2</sup>

If supra-agency is more than a *façon de parler*, then the ontological commitment to supra-agency leads to some consequences that need to be explained by the noneliminativist. If groups have agency, it means they have intentionality and this implies possessing belief contents. The direction I take within this debate is to focus on the problem of belief possession when discussing the tension between ontological eliminativism and ontological noneliminativism. The two authors approach the relation between agency and belief possession in the following way: Pettit argues for an ontological noneliminativism because groups

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<sup>1</sup> This position can be characterized given Tuomela’s (2017) distinction regarding the conceptual and ontological reducibility or irreducibility of intentionality. Schmitt’s thesis can be characterized as conceptually irreducible, but ontologically reducible with respect to joint agency. Pettit’s (2003) thesis is that intentionality on a collective level is both ontologically and conceptually irreducible.

<sup>2</sup> Schmitt (2003a) provides an overview of the approaches available concerning social entities. He talks about the individualist approach, as opposed to a supra-individualist one concerning social entities. Each approach has a conceptual and an ontological subspecies. In my paper I focus on the conceptualist and ontological supra-individualist approaches to agency.

have beliefs, albeit a restricted set of beliefs, while Schmitt argues for an ontological eliminativism since, in order to adequately talk about belief possession and agency, one must have a complex system of beliefs. The intuition I support is that this criterion of complex belief possession for agency is too strong. Even though we cannot speak of a complex system of beliefs at the level of collective agency, collectivities can possess a restricted set of beliefs that are related to the individual beliefs of the members of that collectivity. In order to show this, I provide in the last section an example of a collective action (that of protesting) that shows how collective beliefs can rest on individual beliefs. I contrast individual beliefs that support the collective ones with those individual beliefs that go against the collective ones. Both the supporting, and the contradictory individual beliefs belong to individuals who take part in the same collective action.<sup>3</sup>

The paper is structured in the following way: In Section 1, I provide a general presentation of collective action, agency, and the relationship between agency and intentional content such as belief contents. In Section 2, I discuss Schmitt's supra-individualist approach to agency in relation to collective action. Here I focus on his eliminativist approach to agency and the consequences of this move for group beliefs. Schmitt (2003b) discusses agency, intention, and action in relation with possessing a system of beliefs. Thus, in this section, I also describe his supra-individualist and eliminativist approach to group beliefs. In Section 3, I present Pettit's (2003) proposal to "collectivize reason." This proposal argues for treating collectivities as entities having intentionality. In this sense, Pettit takes collectivities to be genuine entities since they have beliefs, and they need to be consistent within their system of beliefs. In Section 4, I discuss the tension between Schmitt's and Pettit's proposals. Schmitt requires a complex system of beliefs for agency, intention and action, while Pettit claims that a restricted system of beliefs (of an entity) is enough for intentionality. I focus on Schmitt's example on this matter. I also suggest an answer regarding his condition of having a complex system of beliefs. This condition can be met if the collectivity's beliefs rest on individual beliefs. In the example of protesting I develop in Section 5, I aim to show that a joint agent does not need to comply with Schmitt's condition and that the condition is too strong. The joint agent can have a restricted set of beliefs, and those beliefs may rest on individual beliefs which need not be consistent. As a comparison, an individual agent can have a belief that rests on inconsistent beliefs (without acknowledging it).

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<sup>3</sup> Hindriks (2017) discusses Tuomela's nonreductive approach to intentionality in collective contexts, and he discusses why Tuomela does not have an ontological commitment concerning the existence of such a collective intentional subject. Here I discuss Schmitt's eliminativist approach regarding collective agency and I focus on the problem of belief possession concerning collectivities.

### Collective action, agency, and group beliefs

I adopt an example from Ludwig (2016),<sup>4</sup> who analyzes examples of sentences containing plural subjects that show the difference between cases in which multiple subjects perform the same action and those in which multiple subjects perform the same action in a coordinated way. In Ludwig's (2016) terms, sentences containing plural subjects may have a distributive, or a collective reading. Given the sentence "We sang the national anthem," there is an ambiguity between reading it distributively, as each subject singing the national anthem separately, and collectively, as singing the national anthem in a choir. For instance, let's suppose that last night there was a football game between our national team and one from another country. We can say that "We sang the national anthem" is true even though each of us sang it, separately and individually in front of our TVs before the beginning of the game. What makes the sentence true is the attribution of this property to all elements of the set for which "we" stands.

However, the sentence "We sang the national anthem" might also be used in the context of a choir competition. In this case, the attribution of the property *singing the national anthem* seems to function differently. The property of *singing the national anthem* is attributed to the group, to the choir in this case. The action performed is collective, and the understanding we have with respect to it is that the action is not just a sum of individual, separate actions which are not connected<sup>5</sup>. For instance, if I eat ice cream before the football game and my voice is dreadful, the reader is not affected, unless she hears me. But if I eat ice cream before the choir competition and my voice is dreadful, the whole choir is affected and we might lose the competition.

The discussion about collective action, thus, is associated with the agency and intentionality of the performers of the action. According to Davidson<sup>6</sup>, we can properly define an event as an action as long as the event results given someone's

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<sup>4</sup> Ludwig (2016) has a reductive approach to plural subjects to which a collective action is attributed. In Schmitt's (2003a) terms, Ludwig has an individualist approach.

<sup>5</sup> There seem to be certain actions that are meaningful when taken collectively, as for instance when we protest against decisions made by public institutions that we consider abusive and unjust. We intend such an action to be a collective one. The action is meant to express our shared belief that the decisions the institution takes are wrong. One can reply that people protest individually, that we also have one-man protests. However, such protests are also oriented towards a collectivity. The meaningfulness of the protest is given by the acquiescence of a larger number of people to the message the individual protester wants to send.

<sup>6</sup> See (Davidson 1963). Ludwig (2016), following Davidson, has a similar view on the relation between event, action and agency.

agency. Someone's action is her manifestation of agency. Thus, any action is only possible in relation to agency. Now, in the case of collective action, one needs to account for the aggregation of individual agencies. Chant (2018), for instance, talks about the principle of collectivization of an individual action. The principle is defined in the following way: whatever can be said about individual action can also be said about collective action. If an individual action is the result of the manifestation of one's agency, the collective action is the result of the manifestation of a group's agency. If we talk about agency in case of groups, then we must consider that groups are endowed with intentionality. Thus, groups should have beliefs, intentions and different cognitive and conative attitudes. As a result, a substantial part of the problem of joint agency regards whether we can talk about belief possession in the case of collectivities. Schmitt (2003b) claims that intention, agency and action depend on possessing a complex system of beliefs, and his (manuscript) discussion regarding belief possession is analogous with the one regarding agency. In case of group belief, one can have a summative approach and define group beliefs as the sum of the individual beliefs possessed by the members of the group, or one can have an approach that recognizes belief possession of a group and that is not reducible to the individual's belief possession (Gilbert 2004).

In the following section, I discuss Schmitt's (2003b) approach both to agency in the context of a collective action and to belief possession regarding groups, since Schmitt takes both agency and belief possession to depend on having a complex system of beliefs.

### **Schmitt's approach to joint action and group's belief possession**

Can we talk about a collective agent or group agent if we accept collective action in a nonreductive manner? Schmitt (2003b) treats this problem as a tension between (strict) individualism<sup>7</sup> and supra-individualism. His approach consists in the defense of the supra-individualist view. He provides an example of the following type: say Mary and Peter walk together, carry a piano or sing together a duet. The action is collective or joint (as Schmitt names it) and is performed by the pair Mary and Peter. This pair is the agent (Schmitt 2003b, 129). However, his thesis does not state a full commitment to supraagents. His thesis is not ontological: supraagents are not additional entities to the set of agents. Our reference to such entities is, according to him, just a *façon de parler*. However, Schmitt considers that the

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<sup>7</sup> I should note here that by (strict) individualism, Schmitt does not refer only to agency, but to joint actions as well.

sentences in which we refer to such entities are not reducible to those in which reference to such entities is analyzed away. Still, our reference to collective agents is not a genuine reference. Collective agency is, for Schmitt, neither explained away, nor ontologically real. It is something in between—it has an instrumental purpose in our ordinary language use.

The argumentative template that Schmitt (2003b)<sup>8</sup> employs is the following. (Strict) individualism fails in explaining how a joint action is performed without a joint agent. (Strict) individualism is the view that no conceptual, or ontological commitment is necessary for joint action and joint agency. Both can be explained in terms of individual agents and individual actions. Schmitt rejects this approach and argues that individual agents and the relation between them are neither necessary, nor sufficient for an account of joint action. We must therefore suppose *some kind of* supraagent for the resulting joint action<sup>9</sup>; this is his supra-individualist account. However, supposing a supraagent implies that such agent is endowed with certain characteristics. Since a supraagent cannot possess such characteristics, it follows that there is no supraagent. If there is no supraagent, then there is no joint action either. This is his eliminativist account of joint agency and joint action that results from supra-individualism.

Schmitt (manuscript)<sup>10</sup> has the same eliminativist approach generated by supra-individualism with respect to group beliefs. Here, Schmitt introduces a holistic view of belief possession that constrains a supra-individualist approach to an eliminativist view. The argument is the following: we attribute different beliefs to groups, and when doing so, we treat each group as a single subject (Schmitt manuscript, 149). However, holism implies interlocking beliefs and a whole system

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<sup>8</sup> The negative thesis that Schmitt (2003b) argues for is that (strict) individualism fails. He has a general thesis regarding the criterion of constitution. He rejects the (strict) individualist thesis that a joint action is the mereological sum of individual actions or that this mereological sum entails a joint action. Schmitt also rejects a more particular thesis defended by Miller (2001). The thesis states that a joint action consists of interdependent singular actions that are performed towards a common end. The second general thesis that Schmitt argues against is that the individual actions that constitute the joint action are constitutive under a certain characterization or description.

<sup>9</sup> His account is thus still a supra-individualistic one since our reference to an such agent is not reducible to some other entities.

<sup>10</sup> Schmitt's (manuscript) aim is twofold here. His main aim is to argue that it makes perfect sense to talk about a group's belief if we talk about a group's acceptance. His aim is to argue against the thesis that in the case of groups, one can speak only of a group's acceptance. His other aim is to propose a supra-individualist approach to a group's belief possession. The final version of Schmitt's (2014) paper, however, does not include the eliminativist view on group beliefs and it is only mentioned. See (Schmitt 2014, 62). Here, the author argues for the idea that one should accept group beliefs if one admits group acceptances.

of intentional attitudes. Beliefs are interlocked with concept possession and dependent upon “dispositions, habits, practices or a regularity of actions necessary for beliefs” (Schmitt manuscript, 150). Given that a group cannot possess such a system of interlocking beliefs and intentional attitudes, then an eliminativist approach to sentences in which we attribute belief possession to groups requires that such sentences are, strictly speaking, false. However, our common reference to groups and their belief functions under a pretense principle, and we speak as if such sentences are true. In Schmitt’s (manuscript, 150) view, when we talk about what a group believes, we approximate truth. Such sentences are not properly true; rather, they are used as if they were true. In the following section I will sketch Schmitt’s analysis of joint agency and joint action.

### *Joint agency and joint action*

For the eliminativist, the supraagent is something that we are not committed to ontologically, as we are not literally committed to groups having beliefs. It is rather what we need in order to explain our reference to joint actions performed by a group. According to the supraindividualist reading, the conditions under which an action constitutes a joint action are:

“An action  $j$  is a joint action only if

- (1) There is an agent  $C$  who performs  $j$  from  $C$ ’s intention of performing  $j$ ;  
and
- (2)  $C$  is not an individual” (Schmitt 2003b, 155)

Joint action depends upon the existence of a group that performs the action. The performance is realized via the group’s intention. Thus, if there is no group agent, there is no joint action. Schmitt’s analysis extends beyond joint action. Therefore, assuming group agent  $C$ , we need its unconditional intention to perform the joint action  $j$ . On the level of the members that compose the group, each member acts with the conditional intention that their action “contributes to a joint action if there is a joint action” (Schmitt 2003b, 154). However, this condition is only necessary, and Schmitt has to add the additional one that the action be performed by the group agent having an unconditional intention. What compels Schmitt to adopt this condition is the fact that the conditional intention of each member of the group to perform a certain we-action is not sufficient for the performance of the action (Schmitt 2003b, 155).

In a nutshell, Schmitt's (2003b) view is that if there is no supraagent in the strict existential manner, it follows that there is not any joint action, in the strict existential sense, either. Why is Schmitt not committing to the existence of a supraagent? Because an agent is defined as having the intention to perform a certain action. In order to have such an intention, the agent must have beliefs regarding certain ends that bring about the intention in the agent. In order to act, the agent must have beliefs regarding a certain end as well, and, in order to be endowed with agency, the agent "must have cognitive, motivational, and conative faculties" (Schmitt 2003b, 157). The supraagent has none of these essential properties of agency. In order to account for the phenomenon of joint action, Schmitt can still be said to follow a supraindividualist route. However, strictly speaking, there is no supraagent, *but we talk as if there is*, given that this language use is more economical.

Let us analyze Schmitt's example in order to illustrate his positive proposal. The joint action of moving the sofa performed by *A* and *B* results from the agreement between *A* and *B* to move the sofa together. Why does this agreement result in a joint agent performing a joint action? The answer is that the joint commitment and joint obligation set up the joint agent performing the joint action. Using the practical syllogism<sup>11</sup>, the reasoning is the following:

- (i) We agreed that we should move the sofa.
- (ii) Every agreement implies a commitment and an obligation to perform given the content of the agreement.
- (iii) We are committed and have an obligation to move the sofa together.
- (iv) Then, we should move the sofa together.

Here, the conclusion can be understood as a resulting action, just as Aristotle points out in *De Motu Animalum* (701a28-33): "And the conclusion, 'I ought to make a cloak' is an action."

An important specification is that Schmitt (2003b) takes both the agreement and the resulting commitment/obligation to be apparent, not genuine. This is because he considers the agreement itself to be a joint action, and, as we have seen, there are strictly speaking no joint actions without a joint agent. The nongenuine character of the commitment and obligation result from the nongenuine character of the agreement.

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<sup>11</sup>Broadie (1968, 26) places the complete practical syllogism in *De Motu Animalum* (701a28-33). I follow the form indicated here by Aristotle in *De Motu Animalum* (701a28-33): "[I] need a covering, and a cloak is a covering, I need a cloak. What I need I ought to make; I need a cloak, I ought to make a cloak."



Given the apparent agreement from which the joint agent results, the joint agent is altogether apparent as well. Moreover, if we refer to the truth value of sentences referring to such supraagents, they are literally false, even if, in ordinary language use we only work with an “approximate literal truth.” (Schmitt 2003b, 160) The “approximate literal truth” has pragmatic virtues: it is more economical and provides the possibility of making predictions concerning the performance of collectivities (Schmitt 2003b, 161).

The central thesis Schmitt (2003b) defends is, thus, that joint action requires a joint agent. For this reason, his account has a supraindividualist component. However, there is no such joint agent *per se*, but we refer to it in ordinary talk, for the sake of economy.

### **Pettit’s irreducibility of joint agency**

An approach that states the irreducibility of joint agency is Pettit’s (2003). This irreducibility is both conceptual and ontological. His general line of thought is of the following kind. We have the problem of the discursive dilemma with respect to decision procedures regarding collectivities. The dilemma consists in the inconsistent results between aggregating the conclusions of a set of individuals and the conclusion that should result if the premises were aggregated instead. Pettit (2003, 175) holds that the tension lies between seeking consistency at the individual level, with the possible cost of being inconsistent at a collective level, or seeking consistency at a collective level, with the cost of being inconsistent at an individual one. To be able to surpass such a dilemma, one should make the choice of “collectivizing reason” (Pettit 2003, 175). In this section I will present what Pettit understands by “collectivizing reason” and “intentional subject” concerning collectivities.

The problem posed by the discursive dilemma imposes the necessity of “collectivizing reason.” Pettit (2003) argues that the discursive dilemma arises when collectivities must take decisions. Decisions should be based on some procedures that either focus on an aggregation of decisions made on an individual level, or focus on seeking consistency within the collectivity’s stance on the issues that lead to the final decision. Pettit’s idea is that if collectivities choose the second alternative, such collectivities “deserve ontological recognition as intentional and personal subjects.”<sup>12</sup> (Pettit 2003, 175) Recognizing them as intentional and personal subjects implies collectivizing reason.

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<sup>12</sup>Pettit (2003) argues against the idea of an eliminativist approach to collective intentionality. One reason is the need to treat a collectivity as a rational unit, as opposed to an approximate acquiescence of a majority to a certain aim, belief, etc.

My focus is on “intentional subject.”<sup>13</sup> Collectivities that are united under a certain purpose are called “social integrates.” (Pettit 2003) Such social integrates are endowed with intentionality and represent intentional subjects. For Pettit (2003, 180), a collectivity represents an intentional subject if it meets the constraints of rationality. Such constraints govern mental content by aiming for consistency and adjusting this content in case contradictory beliefs, intentions, or purposes appear. What distinguishes such intentional subjects from individual intentional subjects is their lack of certain features such as having perception and memory (Pettit 2003, 182). Another aspect is that their cognitive<sup>14</sup> and conative attitudes do not come in degrees.

Here one can see an important difference between Schmitt and Pettit. The difference lies in the clash between the set of properties ascribed to a collectivity/collective agent. For Schmitt, intention is possessed if there is belief possession regarding an end; action is performed if it is oriented towards a certain end; and agency requires possession of cognitive and conative attitudes.

The general argumentative schema is the following: Collectivizing reason requires that the group have consistent beliefs. Having consistent (even if restricted) beliefs imposes an “ontological recognition” of the collectivity as an intentional and personal subject. Thus, in analyzing the problem of collective intentionality, one should rely on the constraint of belief possession and the rationality of those beliefs. Also, given the conditions that Schmitt imposes on intention, action and agency, the problem of agency in the case of collective action should also be treated with regard to belief possession.

In what follows, I focus on the problem of belief possession and the conditions Schmitt imposes on intention, action and agency. The idea is to treat this problem as a tension between recognizing that a collectivity is endowed with intentionality, given the possession of a restricted set of beliefs, or going with Schmitt’s approach that intention, agency and action are dependent upon a very complex set of beliefs and attitudes. The question I would raise here is the following: Is it necessary for the group’s beliefs to be the result of a complex system of beliefs, or can they be the result of something else, such as each member’s individual set of beliefs?

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<sup>13</sup>However, in order to have joint or collective agency treated in relation to joint action, one may not need such a strong thesis as “personal subject” for collectivities. Moreover, such a concept may exclude joint agency when performing simple joint actions such as moving the couch.

<sup>14</sup>Here Pettit (2003, 182) mentions beliefs as coming in degrees. However, I would slightly alter the cognitive attitude and talk about “assent” instead of “belief.”

### A Possible Answer to Schmitt's conditions of possessing agency

I will start with the requirements Schmitt imposes on agency. Agency requires, in Schmitt's view, a large set of beliefs and desires: "To have cognitive faculty, it is presumably not enough merely to have a few beliefs on a restricted range of topics. You must have beliefs on diverse topics. Similar remarks apply to a motivational and a conative faculty" (Schmitt 2003b, 157). Pettit (2003) does not impose such a requirement concerning the range of beliefs and desires an agent must have in order to be considered an agent. Moreover, (Pettit 2003, 182) explicitly states that an agent constituted by a social integrate does not have such a wide range of beliefs and desires. The clash between the two requirements impinges on further development of the discussion: according to Pettit, a collective agent is required to have a certain range of beliefs, i.e. a restricted range of beliefs; for Schmitt (2003b) however, manifestation of agency requires a wide range of such beliefs and desires. The question is whether the collective agent can manifest agency with a restricted set of beliefs and desires, while the adjacent beliefs and desires that support the collective beliefs can be strictly possessed by the individuals composing the social integrate that manifests agency. I will discuss this using Schmitt's (2003b, 158)<sup>15</sup> example.

The action of lifting a couch by A and B requires, in Schmitt's view, that certain beliefs and desires be possessed by the joint agent in order to have joint agency. A first example would be that the action performed by the agent rests on the belief that the object to be lifted is a couch and not something else, thus the agent possesses knowledge concerning the properties that differentiate that object from others. For instance, a property that differentiates the couch from a pillow is that the first one is much heavier. Both A and B have the belief  $p$  that the couch is heavier than other objects such as the pillow or the coffee table, or the coffee table book about coffee tables<sup>16</sup>. Central to his account is, in my view, the definition for belief possession: "[...] you believe  $p$  only if you are disposed to (theoretically) reason from the premise that  $p$ " (Schmitt 2003b, 158). Schmitt's view is that it can only be the case that A and B individually possess  $p$  such that both are disposed to reason from  $p$  and that it is not even necessary that they have this common belief  $p$  in order to act jointly. The cognitive content that constitutes the possibility for

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<sup>15</sup>However, I will alter Schmitt's (2003b, 158) example in some ways. These changes do not alter, in my view, Schmitt's conclusions.

<sup>16</sup>One does not have to be very strict about the content of this belief. We can generally rely on the vague content that the couch is an object heavier than some other objects and that it cannot be lifted by just one person.

the manifestation of agency must be a system of such beliefs  $p$ , say  $p_1, \dots, p_n$ . Such a system is a complex one, containing beliefs that are not even explicit in one's mind when performing an action. As Pettit acknowledges, such a system of beliefs cannot be possessed by a social integrate. However, I think the social integrate can possess a restricted system of beliefs that are emergent on the individual systems the actors possess. Such a belief can be, for instance, the belief that there is an agreement between A and B. Going back to the practical syllogism formulated in terms of "we", the first premise is that "We agreed to move the sofa together." This belief is one that sets dispositions to reason from it. This belief is taken to imply obligation of action in case the agreement is made. The first premise of the practical syllogism, however, seems to rest on individual beliefs possessed by the individuals jointly performing the action: for instance the belief that the sofa is heavy enough to require at least two people to perform the action; that it is light enough to be lifted just by two people; that should be lifted from where it is placed, etc. Thus, the system of beliefs that agency requires in the collective case need not all be joint beliefs. Such beliefs support the belief content of the joint agent and make possible those belief contents that allow the joint agent to perform the joint action.

However, there remains a point that Schmitt uses in order to argue against joint agency and joint belief content. A and B can, in Schmitt's view, perform a joint action without having a joint belief content. Say A and B agree that the sofa is used for sitting, but A does not believe that it is upholstered, while B does. In this sense, the content of the belief "We are moving the sofa" is different for A and B. Thus, it is possible to have joint action without joint belief content. A possible answer that Schmitt considers is that the content of the belief can be replaced with something more general, such as "We are moving something." In this case, the content of the belief is the same. Schmitt, however, rejects this solution. In keeping with his view that believing something means having the disposition to reason from that belief, the limit case he imagines is the following: at least one of the two (A or B) lacks the disposition to reason from "We are moving the sofa." If one of them lacks this disposition, then the belief content is not the same. One possesses the belief content "We are moving the sofa," the other one does not.

The claim that at least one of the agents may lack the disposition to reason from "We are moving the sofa," i.e. to possess the belief that "We are moving the sofa" seems, however, to be misleading. Either A or B, may not have the disposition to reason from the content of the belief. The term Schmitt (2003b, 158) uses for this is "unwilling to reason." For Schmitt, this unwillingness must be understood as both unwillingness to theoretically reason, and to practically reason. However, it seems that this unwillingness must be restricted to theoretical reasoning, since

performing the action shows that the agents possess the belief content that “We are moving the sofa” and the action is the result of practical reasoning performing from that belief. The unwillingness to theoretically reason may take something of the form: “We are moving the sofa. The sofa is much heavier than we thought and we risk having a backache afterwards.” However, the unwillingness to practically reason is more difficult to support. If we accept that the conclusion of a practical reasoning is the action, then A and B do not perform an action. It seems that unwillingness to practically reason from a belief goes against our manifestation of agency.

### **A Critique of the Elimination of Joint Agency**

In this section, I provide an example I consider relevant for the relationship between individual and collective beliefs. This example is meant to question Schmitt’s criterion for agency. Recall that his criterion is that to be an agent one must possess a large body of beliefs and desires, and that those beliefs be interconnected in a system of beliefs and desires. What I want to show is that we can speak about agency even though the agent possesses a restricted set of beliefs. Having a restricted set of beliefs does not mean that they are not supported by a complex system of beliefs. The complex system of beliefs may occur at an individual level, and they may give rise to consistent collective beliefs, even if the beliefs of the individuals in the collectivity are inconsistent. I contrast the situation in which inconsistent individual beliefs may support consistent collective beliefs with the situation in which individual beliefs go against the collective beliefs.

For the theoretical background, I start from some of Pettit’s (2003) considerations:

“How to secure the dual basis that is necessary for a collectivity to be an intentional subject? [...] Specifically, by ensuring, first, that the collectivity has a shared purpose and forms the judgments and intentions associated with pursuit of that purpose; and second, that it collectivizes reason in forming those judgments and intentions.” (Pettit 2003, 181)

I propose that, in the context of the discussion of belief possession, a shared purpose can be understood as joint commitment in Gilbert’s (2004) sense<sup>17</sup>. The condition of collectivizing reason is expressed as the need for a rational unification (Pettit 2003, 181). In what follows, I present the requirements one has when

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<sup>17</sup>In belief context, a collectivity believes something if there is a “joint commitment to *believe* something as a body” (Gilbert 2004, 101).

treating a collectivity, and the beliefs and the purposes of the collectivity when engaged in the act of protesting. I also present the relation between individual beliefs and intentions, and the collective beliefs and intentions manifested by a collectivity engaged in the act of protesting.

In order to better illustrate the relation between individual beliefs and the shared beliefs at the level of a collectivity, I will provide an example. The joint action I have in mind is that of a protest performed by a group of citizens (the group varies from a thousand to several tens of thousands of people). The protests are motivated by several actions of the members of the government. Let's say that a certain event ( $e_1$ ) in which a member of the government is involved stirs up several citizens, and they decide (individually) to protest against this member of the government. Call this group  $G_1$ . After some time, a certain event ( $e_2$ ) takes place. This time, what stirs up a larger number of people is the lack of involvement of the government in solving the problems that led to  $e_2$ . These people also decide to protest and the protest is much larger than the first one. Call this group  $G_2$ . As an effect, the government resigns. There is also the relation between  $G_1$  and  $G_2$  that is worth noting. Many of the members of  $G_1$  are also members of  $G_2$ <sup>18</sup>. Many of the participants see the protest determined by  $e_2$  to be a continuation of the protest determined by  $e_1$ , since both events have the same cause. Here lies the relevance of the example. Suppose one member,  $x$ , who belongs both to  $G_1$  and  $G_2$ , takes part in the protest performed by  $G_2$ . She says that she only protests against the involvement of the government official in  $e_1$  and does not protest against the lack of implication of the government in solving the issues that lead to event  $e_2$ . She states (in conversation with her friends) that she does not support the message that the government should resign. It is worth noting that her message is not made explicit on a placard and there are no members of  $G_2$  that share her view. Also, she does not seek to convince others to share her view. The reason she takes part in the protest against the government is that if the government resigns, then the government official responsible for  $e_1$  will also lose her position.

Now, if some TV reporter describes the event, she will presume the group is rational. By "rational" I mean acting in accordance with an intention and providing a justification for doing so.<sup>19</sup> Taking the collectivity to be rational, as opposed to

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<sup>18</sup>The condition stated in (Pettit 2003, 180) regarding the conservation of the intentional content of the collectivity over some variables like time and form is fulfilled here. For instance, during massive protests, the constant number of participants may be that of 100.000. This number is conserved over a period of a few hours because people come and leave constantly. However, the members that constitute the group that protests change constantly.

<sup>19</sup>Being rational in this case does not mean the subject is epistemologically infallible. The subject can still support wrong beliefs, but I think this does not exclude rationality.

irrational (unless the group's behavior suggests otherwise) is legitimized by a principle of charity and the need for fruitfulness in explanation. A principle of charity in this case simplifies our explanation. We do not need further instruments to explain the group's behavior and there is nothing to suggest that we would need those additional instruments. Contrast it with the phenomenon of mass hysteria in which additional sociological and psychological theories and instruments are needed to provide an explanation for the phenomenon. Considering the group to be rational is more fruitful for the explanation. If the government resigns as a result of mass pressure, we can also understand the behavior of the government officials and we can understand that there is a connection between the protest and the government resignation. Considering the group to be rational, the reporter will suppose that the protest is oriented against the whole government. One reason would be, for instance, that the protesters send this message explicitly by texts written on placards or by chanted slogans<sup>20</sup>. The reporter would not suppose that this is a phenomenon of mass hysteria like the dance plague<sup>21</sup>. The reporter will also suppose that the group is protesting for the resignation of the government, since this is their intention. She will not suppose they have the intention to support the government, and nonetheless, that they act against their intention. She would also suppose that they mean the message they send, and that they sincerely assent to it<sup>22</sup>.

An important aspect that derives from this example is that, for the message to be sent, and to have an effect (the resignation of the government), it is necessary to suppose that the group of people is rational. The group has the belief that the government is corrupt or incompetent and is disposed to reason from this theoretical belief. For instance, the protesters believe that the protest should take place in front of the government building and that they should shout anti-government messages instead of pro-government messages. The belief that they should shout anti-government messages is supported by the fact that this action is in accordance with their intention. Shouting positive messages instead would mean they act against their intention, if the effect they expect is the government resignation. Such beliefs that are ascribable to the group are supported by and emergent over different individual beliefs. Those individual beliefs may even be contradictory or contrary, but the beliefs at the collective level may still be consistent, in spite of this. For instance, there is a majority of people from  $G_2$  who believe that the government, by its activity, contributes

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<sup>20</sup> See (Gilbert 2004, 100). Here she expresses the following suggestion for a group to have a collective belief: "Roughly, it is both necessary and sufficient for the members of a population, P, collectively to believe something that the members of P have openly expressed their readiness to let the belief in question be established as the belief of P."

<sup>21</sup> See for instance the entry on *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, "Dancing Plague of 1518," author Patricia Bauer.

<sup>22</sup> I take the meaning of "sincere assent" to be that of Kripke (2011, 138)

to corruption and a deficient functioning of other institutions. However, not all protesters believe that the government should resign for the same reason. Some believe that the government took effective economic decisions, but did not improve the efficiency of other institutions. Others may believe instead that the government did not take any effective decisions at all. There are also individual beliefs that are not giving rise to the collective one that the government should resign. The participant  $x$  to the protest performed by  $G_2$  has such a belief. Her intention is to protest only against the government official involved in event  $e_1$  and her belief is that this government official should resign. She acts on her intention to do something that will result in the government's official losing her position. However, the interpretation can be further developed and consider her acting to be irrational, since the collective action is directed towards sending the message that the whole government should resign given event  $e_2$ . The irrationality here comes from explicitly withdrawing from holding the belief that the whole government should resign, and yet participating to a protest against the whole government. Her participation in such an action is ineffective, since the effect is the resignation of the whole government. Moreover, one may have to consider  $x$  to be irrational for the additional reason that her intention appears contrary to the message the protesters want to send. The comparison is made between her individual belief and disposition to act on that belief and the collective belief and the disposition the group has to act on that belief.

Another important aspect to note is the following: her action, that of protesting against the government official involved in  $e_1$ , is absorbed here by the collective action of protesting. One seeing her there would infer that she is one of the protesters asking for the government resignation. The reasoning will be economical in this sense. If you reason that she is just *probably* protesting against the government, then one should make the same inference about all the people taking part in the protest, and not hear them say explicitly that they are protesting in order to infer that they, for sure, are protesting against the government. However, even though we may be cautious in attributing the belief at an individual level, at the collective level we can drop this precaution. The reason we have when dropping this precaution is the explicit message sent by the collectivity, the reaction of the authorities when receiving the message, etc. One way to see this is through the reaction participants have when in the media they are depicted as confused or as lacking a purpose. This aspect supports Gilbert's (2004) requirement that the general belief of the group, in this case that the government should resign, is attributed to the collectivity, given its joint commitment to believe this as a body. The qualification "as a body" is relevant here since this confers the unity of the agent having the belief that the government should resign.



### Concluding remarks

The central aim of this paper was to discuss the tension between two kinds of supraindividualism concerning agency. One approach is eliminative with respect to the existence of such an agent, the other one is existentially committed to such an agent. The discussion concerning the ontological commitment with respect to agency relies on the problem of belief possession. One reason for this is that Pettit (2003) has such an ontological commitment given that collectivities are required to expose rational unity. The structure of the paper was organized to begin from Schmitt (2003b) and Pettit's (2003) approaches to collectivities engaged in the performance of an action. My intuition leaned towards Pettit's committal approach to collectivities as intentional subjects.

An important part of the paper focused on the discussion regarding the condition of complex systems of belief possession. If one commits existentially to a collective agent, then such agent must have such a complex belief system (Schmitt 2003b). I have provided an example of individual and collective belief interaction when people engage in the activity of protesting against an institution. The specifics of the example concerned the collision between individual beliefs and the beliefs of the collectivity. I have also focused on how contradictory individual beliefs support a belief expressed by the collectivity. Besides this interaction between beliefs, I have also focused on why we treat a group engaged in a protest as a rational agent and how, given this assumption of rationality, the activity of protesting can be a successful collective action.

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