THE EASY APPROACH TO GROUP AGENCY.
A SIMPLE REALIST VIEW ON GROUP AGENTS

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ABSTRACT. We talk about groups as *doing* something, we talk as if groups have agency. Is our talk legitimate? Are there group agents? Is there something like group agency? In this paper, I discuss two ontological frameworks concerning existence questions: the Quinean framework and the Thomasson-Carnap framework. I apply them to the problem of group agency. I review the Quinean-oriented literature debating the existence of group agents and its methodological background. I argue, via Thomasson's easy approach to ontology, that deflationism can simplify the debate surrounding group agents. Thus, I argue for a Thomasson-Carnap framework and show that it is better suited to answer the particular question whether there are group agents. More specifically, I argue for a non-reductive simple realist view on group agents, i.e. I argue for the truth of "There are group agents," via analytic entailments, by truths about the actions and deeds of groups.

Keywords: *Analytic Entailments, Deflationism, Group agency, Group agents, Simple Realism*

1. Introduction

When discussing political matters, we often say that the Parliament or that the Government did this and that. We also talk about corporations, saying that their decision to focus on a certain product is good or bad for their production. For short, we talk about these entities and their actions in an analogous way to the way we talk about the different deeds of individuals. When discussing individual actions, we also talk about individual agents who performed those actions. Then, if we keep the analogy, when discussing actions performed by groups (institutions, corporations), we must also talk about group agents who performed and are responsible for those

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actions. As soon as we leave behind our colloquial talk about institutions and corporations and their deeds, and enter in a philosophical realm, our attribution of agency to such entities becomes problematic. Can we attribute to such entities conative and cognitive states? Do they also have a moral status?

There is a substantial literature on the epistemology and the moral responsibility of group agents. However, there is also a metaphysical side of the problem: Are there group agents? Is there something like group agency? I show two ways in which we can discuss group agency: as a property (agency) predicated of an entity (groups), or as a property whose extension is non-empty, i.e. group agency, and as a class of entities which have this property, i.e. group agents. I differentiate between the question whether there are group agents and whether there are social groups. In this paper, I discuss the first question.

Thus, I tackle the metaphysical discussion surrounding the existence of group agents. Namely, whether such entities exist, whether reference to such entities can be explained away, whether reference to such entities is a metaphor, whether they are entities *per se*, or whether group agency is just individual coordinated agency. I argue for a *non-reductive simple realist view* concerning group agents and group agency. Thus, I argue that group agents exist and they are entities *per se*. I provide a metaphysical background to think of group agents as non-reducible to other entities, such as individual agents.

I follow Thomasson (2015a, 2015b) on her simple realist view and her general easy approach with respect to existence questions. In this paper, I show how the easy approach to group agency and group agents should deliver an easy answer to the problem whether group agents exist. Thus, there will be two important layers of the discussion.

The first layer concerns the traditional framework in which existence questions are discussed. Thomasson (2015b) argues that existence questions are asked in a Quinean tradition. In addition, I show how the traditional debates concerning the existence of group agents and group agency is framed in a Quinean manner. As opposed to a Quinean framework, Thomasson (2015b) argues for a Carnap-oriented ontological discussion of existence questions, defending the view that existence has a simple nature. I side with Thomasson and argue for a Thomasson-like ontological framing of the discussion regarding group agency and group agents. Furthermore, I hold that this Carnap-Thomasson framework simplifies the debate concerning group agents and group agency. Thus, I argue for a Thomasson-like metaontological deflationism with respect to the debates concerning group agency.

The second layer consists in applying the easy arguments and analytic entailments as formulated by Thomasson (2007, 2015b) to show that there are group agents and group agency. I rely on her analytic entailments (2007) and her

easy arguments (2015b) to argue for a simple realist view concerning group agents and group agency. Given an uncontroversial truth, such as "The Parliament adopted that bill," by analytic entailments, we can argue there are group agents, and no other further specification is needed, i.e. that they are reducible, or that they should be explained in individual terms. Here I rely on a deflationist view on existence, i.e. existence has a simple nature. The analytic entailments are paired with application conditions in order to deliver existence statements. Analytic entailments derive the truth of certain sentences in virtue of the meaning of the terms in the premises, while application conditions are rules of use for the terms in our language.

The paper is structured in the following way. In Section 2, I discuss the problem of group agency. Why it is a problem and how we should approach it: as a property or in terms of entities, i.e. group agents. I argue that the existence question whether there are group agents is different from the question whether there are social groups. In Section 3, I present two ontological frameworks in which existence questions are discussed: the Quinean framework and the Thomasson-Carnap framework. In sections 4 and 5, I present Thomasson's easy approach to ontology, her deflationist view of existence, and her ontological views of social groups. In Section 6, I discuss the Quinean-oriented literature on the existence of group agents and some of its methodological traits. I show how a deflationist approach can simplify the debates. For instance, in Section 7, I show how List and Pettit's (2011) approach to group agents can be an easy one, without the complications inherited from the Quinean tradition. In sections 8 and 9, I provide three easy arguments or analytic entailments for the existence of group agents and argue for a simple realist view on group agents. Finally, in Section 10, I consider a possible criticism and provide an answer to it.

2. The problem of group agency

Why is group agency a problem? Group agency seems to be problematic because there cannot be any group agents in the sense there are individual agents. Let's take for instance the following two examples. "I've made a decision" and "The Parliament has made a decision." The "I" in the first sentence is an indexical which refers to the singular subject of the sentence. In a similar manner, "the Parliament" refers to the subject of the second sentence. If the first sentence is true, then we can safely say that the subject to which "I" refers exists. In the second case, there is a vast literature on whether institutions (or other kind of social groups exist) and

their status[1]. An easy approach to ontology grants the existence of institutions and other kinds of social groups (Thomasson 2016). However, there is something more concerning the two sentences—both sentences express something the subject did, i.e. that they've made a decision. In the first case, as an expression of her agency, the subject decided something. The second case is also an expression of the subject's agency (of the Parliament) that it did something, i.e. it made a decision. Thus, since actions require agency, we must have the following symmetry: if we predicate agency to the individual, then we must also predicate agency to the institution as well[2]. If the individual is an agent, then the institution is an agent as well, namely a group agent. Granting that institutions exist in the same sense individuals exist, it is important to keep in mind that we are predicating the property of being an agent to the institution, and not to the individuals composing the institution. Thus, the question whether there are group agents and whether there is group agency is different (and with other metaphysical commitments) than the question whether there are social groups. Arguing for group agents appeals to other conceptual resources than arguing for the existence of social groups, i.e. arguing for group agents or group agency implies that groups have certain cognitive and conative states, that they are morally responsible etc. Group agents are groups with intentional states, while social groups are not necessarily endowed with such intentional states, for instance, the group constituted by the people who had secondary reactions to the COVID-19 vaccine. Institutions, on the other hand, are described as having intentions and performing actions. Of course, many social groups are group agents, but they aren't necessarily so. Thus, arguing that there are social groups does not necessarily entail that there are group agents, since some social groups are not described with intentional states.

There are two ways the sentences expressing group agency can be approached. First, we can frame it in terms of a property, i.e. agency is a property which can be or cannot be predicated about groups. Is this a legitimate ascription? If it is, then we can say there is a certain property, i.e. group agency. Thus, the theses would be: a) we can predicate agency about groups; b) there is a certain kind of agency, i.e. group agency. Second, we can approach sentences expressing group agency by asking whether there are group agents. This is also how the problem is formulated in the debates concerning group agency. For instance, Schmitt (2003) talks about a supraagent in case of joint actions, with the supraagent being additional to the individual agents taking part in the action. Ludwig (2016, 2017) talks about an agent over and above the individual agents taking part in the collective action (singular group agents like institutions, corporations, mobs). List and Pettit (2011) talk about

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1   (Uzquiano 2004), (Effingham 2010), (Ritchie 2015).
2   This symmetry is invoked and discussed by Ludwig (2016, 2017) and Chant (2018).

group agents. Thus, we get a third thesis, namely that there are group agents. Group agents are the entities falling under the concept of group agency. They are those groups on which we can predicate agency.

Why are these theses problematic? Our talk about group agency shows we are somehow compelled to accept there are group agents. On the other hand, an agent must possess some mental states (cognitive and conative) to be considered an agent, and it is problematic whether institutions do have such states. Therefore, we have the tension between our use of language and our intuitions, the intuition being in this case that a group cannot be an agent on its own right as an individual is. However, authors such as Gilbert (1989) and Pettit (2011) argue that group agents are capable of cognitive and conative states. Furthermore, corporate agents are attributed a moral status, they are ascribed moral responsibility, and even reactive attitudes (Björnsson and Hess 2016), even though there is also the other side of the coin, attributing moral status to non-agential groups (Bloomberg 2020). Such views tell us that the intuition that groups cannot be ascribed an intentional content seems to be problematic and that it is not trivial that we should rely on this intuition after all.

It is not the incredulous stare that seems to bother us concerning the existence of group agency and group agents, but there is something else. What seems to bother us is how we understand existence when talking about group agency and group agents. What does it mean that group agents *exist*? In the next section I will deal with two frameworks in which existence questions can be formulated and in which the nature of existence can be explained: the Carnapian and the Quinean approaches to existence questions.

3. Two Ontological Frameworks

The central questions of the paper are whether there are group agents and whether there is group agency. These are existence questions and they are part of a wide gallery of such concerns regarding different entities. Is there a possible child of Wittgenstein? Are there unicorns? These questions are treated in a somewhat analogous manner, and the reason for this is that our concern can be taken to a higher order and ask what does it mean that something exists and how should we answer existence questions. A great deal of philosophical inquiry disputes both specific existence questions, and the nature of existence as well. Thomasson (2015b) argues that this philosophical inquiry has gone on a wrong path which will only lead to more entanglements and difficulties. In her view, the seeds of these entanglements are to be found in Quine's view on ontology, while the metaphysical meadow can

be reached with the help of Carnap's view on ontological questions. Thus, Thomasson proposes a different framework in which these questions should be treated: an easy approach to existence questions. This is a Carnap-Thomasson framework, while the difficult path framework is the Quine framework[3].

The Carnap-Thomasson framework is argued by Thomasson (2015b) to be more faithful to the philosophical endeavour pioneered at the end of the 19th century by Frege or Husserl. The distinctive feature of philosophy was the method of conceptual analysis, in contrast to science, which was concerned with the empirical world. Thus, there is, for Thomasson (via Frege, Husserl etc.) a clear distinction between science and philosophy.

Unlike the Carnap-Thomasson framework, the Quine framework is based on blurring the borders between science and philosophy (Thomasson 2015b, 51). There is not a clear distinction between philosophy and science, and we need to see which are the ontological commitments of any theory. This framework is based on the idea that ontological disputes are meant to establish what ontology a theory must adopt and that there is an ontological standard to which a theory must conform.

> "The issue is clearer now than of old, because we now have a more explicit standard whereby to decide what ontology a given theory or form of discourse is committed to: a theory is committed to those and only those entities to which the bound variables of the theory must be capable of referring in order that the affirmations made in the theory be true." (Quine 1948, 33)

Quine discusses about rival theories between which we need to adjudicate. The ontological standard is meant to help us choose between them. Quantification and the value of the bound variables within a theory tell us what there is according to that theory. But, unlike Carnap, who would stop here, Quine says that the ontological disputes are meant to establish which ontology is to be adopted. A theory is judged by its conformity with an ontological standard.

The core of the Carnap-Thomasson framework is that we do not need to go into ontological disputes. Carnap (1950) says that they are problematic. There, he distinguishes between internal and external existential questions, and argues that

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[3] Thomasson acknowledges that the way ontological questions are disputed now is different form what Quine initially proposed, even though he is responsible for the initial push. For this reason, the proper label would not be a "Quine framework," but a "(Pseudo)Quine framework." However, for reasons of simplicity, I will continue to label the framework as a "Quine framework," and hope that I am not making an injustice to Quine.

only internal questions are answerable, since only such questions are meaningful (Carnap 1950, 22). They are meaningful because they are asked within a framework and they can be answered by conceptual or empirical means. The world of things, for instance, is one of these frameworks. Is there a table on which my laptop stands? The internal question is provided with an easy empirical answer. However, asking whether there *really* is a table on which my laptop sits, whether the table is just something reducible to a configuration of atoms, or just the sum of its parts, is to ask external questions. Well, why are external questions meaningless and why should we give up on them? Why should existence questions be only internally asked? An answer is that every existence question should be formulated within a certain language framework, and external questions are meant to be formulated outside any such language.

> "To accept the thing world means nothing more than to accept a certain form of language, in other words, to accept rules for forming statements and for testing accepting or rejecting them [...] But the thesis of the reality of the thing world cannot be among these statements, because it cannot be formulated in the thing language or, it seems, in any other theoretical language." (Carnap 1950, 23)

It seems that Carnap would say that accepting that something exists means to accept a certain form of language. We cannot accept that something exists outside a certain language. The general question "Is the thing world/our world real?" exceeds the semantic and syntactic rules of our language. Providing an answer to this question means going beyond the world of things framework. I will argue that, in a similar manner, asking existence questions concerning group agency falls outside the world of social facts, and the easy approach to existence questions Thomasson proposes seems suited to answer these questions.

4. Thomasson's easy approach to ontology

On Carnap's theoretical background, Thomasson (2015a, 2015b) constructs an easy approach to ontology. Her approach is based on the internal/external questions distinction with respect to existence, since existence questions can be answered only by conceptual and empirical means. Thomasson deflates in this way our views with respect to problematic entities. What are the coordinates of her account, besides the Carnapian views already mentioned?

Her main idea is that existence has a simple nature and existence questions can be answered easily. She rests on a univocal meaning of existence, since otherwise, its simple nature would be diminished. The simple nature of existence also excludes any substantive criteria used to establish whether a certain entity exists: mind-independence, causal-efficacy etc (Thomasson 2015b, 82). This approach to existence and the meaning of 'exist', thus, rejects the traditional debate that existence questions should be answered on the basis of existence criteria, since 'to exist' does not refer to "a substantive property the nature of which we can investigate and hope to discover" (Thomasson 2015b, 87).

Thomasson proposes "a fixed, formal rule of use" (2015b, 82), and that is the following: "K's exist iff the application conditions actually associated with 'K' are fulfilled" (2015b, 86). The rule for existence is not meant to tell us whether a certain entity exists or not, it is meant to state that existence is linked with the application conditions of terms. This further leads to the idea that there is no general and shared criterion of existence, a criterion that all existing things should share: "the conditions under which things of different kinds exist will be as various as those application conditions are" (Thomasson 2015b, 89).

The key term here is "application conditions." What are they? Thomasson (2007, 2015b) argues that terms are associated with application conditions. These are rules of use that are meaning constituting for terms[4] (Thomasson 2015b, 89) and they tell us when a term refers or not. To use a similar example with Thomasson's (2007, 39), if I am an explorer and I search for new species, if I classify a certain being in the animalia regnum and call it "schkangaroo," when it is actually just a robot left there by an unknown civilisation, then the application conditions fail to fulfil[5] for "schkangaroo" when I speak about the animal classified as schkangaroo. What about fictional characters such as Sherlock Holmes? If I use "Sherlock Holmes" in a game to name the best detective in the history of humanity, then the application conditions fail to fulfil since he is just a novel character, and I am under the confusion the he really existed. On the other hand, if I am asked "Who is the novel character whose best friend was Watson and whose nemesis was Moriarty?" and my answer is "Sherlock Holmes", the application conditions do fulfil and I do not fail to refer.

The application conditions will play a key role in my arguments that to the question whether there are group agents and whether there is group agency there is a simple affirmative answer.

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[4] However, they are not the only meaning constituting rules.

[5] Thomasson (2007, 39) uses the example in order to show how application conditions are used to ground reference. In this example, she shows that some conditions (application conditions) must be fulfilled in order to ground reference for a term.

5. Thomasson's easy approach to social groups

How should we treat the entities of the social world within the framework of easy ontology? How should we treat our reference to social groups, institutions, and to the deeds of those social groups and institutions? Thomasson (2016) argues that to the question whether there are social groups we can provide an easy affirmative answer. She approaches this question as well in (Thomasson 2015b) arguing that entities such as institutions or corporations exist. The basic idea is that we can answer affirmatively to the question whether the Romanian Parliament exists: "[f]or example, institutional terms typically come with application conditions enabling us to say, for example, that if such and such paperwork is filed and the relevant fees paid, a corporation comes to exist (and 'corporation' comes to refer) […]" (Thomasson 2015b, 100).

However, what sort of entities are social groups? As exemplified above, some social groups take decisions that cause different changes in the world, they act. The Romanian Parliament adopted some new changes in the laws regulating this and that aspect of our social world. If we can provide an easy affirmative answer to the question whether social groups exist, does it mean that we can also provide an easy answer to the existence question regarding group agency? The answer is not obvious, since one can accept that groups exist, without accepting they are endowed with agency.

For Thomasson it does not follow trivially either that if groups exist, they also have agency, and the problem is still open to debate:

> "[o]f course many in recent years (Gilbert 1989; List and Pettit 2010) have laid out senses in which it seems apt to ascribe intentional states of certain kinds to social groups (states not reducible to those of its members) in a way that is non-spooky […]." (Thomasson 2016, 4832)

In order to say there are group agents, then, we must accept that social groups display an intentional content that is not reducible to individual intentional content. It follows then that if there are group agents, then we must also accept collective intentionality. The argument for group agents can be approached from another point of view as well, namely from that of collective actions. Arguing that there are groups who do this and that allows for an argument that there is group agency and there are group agents.

I will discuss the argument that if groups act, then groups have agency and there are group agents. I will show that the actual debate concerning the existence of group agents is formulated within a Quinean framework, based on the Quinean

methodological features. I will show how the easy approach to ontology deflates the debate and argue for a simple realist view with respect to group agents and group agency.

6. The Quinean framework: rival ontologies of group agency

How should we approach the questions whether there are group agents and whether there is group agency from a metaontological level. I will review the debates concerning group agency and discuss their Quinean methodological features. The metaphysical discussions regarding group agency have been shaped within a Quinean framework, and the features of the framework that I will discuss are the following: there are rival ontologies and theories differ over ontologies, a theory must conform to an ontological standard, the ontological disputes establish that ontological standard (Quine 1948), and existence has a substantive nature[6]. These features can be found in the different theories taking part in the ontological debates concerning group agency and group agents. A short map of the theories is provided by List and Pettit (2011). Consider the following:

> "But how should we analyze the ascription of attitudes, intentions, or agency to them [groups]? Should we understand it literally, taking it to impute a group agency that replicates the agency of individuals; and if so, should we endorse this imputation or treat it as an error? Or should we understand the language metaphorically or figuratively, taking it to suggest that while groups can simulate agency, they cannot really replicate it? On the latter view, the reference to a group's attitudes, intentions, or agency might serve useful shorthand purposes but would not have any ontological significance; it would be a mere *façon de parler*." (List and Pettit 2011, 1)

We see then that language and our use of language refers to collective attitudes and intentions. If language is taken literally, then we can either say that our use of language is correct, and this is List and Pettit's thesis, or consider it wrong, using false sentences when attributing attitudes and intentions to groups. Another approach is to take our use of such attributions as metaphors. The idea is that we cannot explain away this usage, but it should nevertheless be taken just as a manner of speaking. We can also have a redundant realist approach to language, holding that our reference to group agency is reducible to that of individual agency

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[6] The last feature of a Quinean methodology in metaphysics is discussed in (Thomasson 2015a, 2015b).

(see List and Pettit 2011, 7). Our attributions of such attitudes and intentions are correct, but they can be explained away through logical analysis. In the following lines I will provide a short overview of such theories.

Schmitt (2003)[7] argues that we must accept joint action and joint agency[8], that there is an agent over and above the individuals who perform the action. However, this acceptance is only conceptual, just a *façon de parler*. Thus, we should accept joint agency at a conceptual level because we cannot eliminate our reference to it. However, at an ontological level, there is no joint agency. Moreover, it is more economical to speak in this way, but this does not mean that this is how things really are.

Another approach is provided by Ludwig (2016). He argues that while the surface grammar of our language appears to commit us to an agent over and above, there is actually no commitment, and this can be shown by logical analysis. Given the sentence "We built a house"[9], Ludwig distinguishes between a distributive and a collective reading of plural sentences. His main thesis is that the collective reading is not reducible to the distributive reading. Since only the collective reading of plural sentences would commit to collective action and to an agent over and above, a group agent, it follows there are no collective actions and no agents over and above. Ludwig argues that collective actions are not actions in the primary sense because he adopts Davidson's idea that only primitive actions are actions *per se*. Ludwig further develops the idea to argue that only individual actions are actions in the primary sense since they are direct causes of primitive actions, while collective actions are not.

Searle (1990) proposes a view of collective intentionality without group agency. He argues that collective intentionality is not reducible to the mere sum of the intentional states of the individuals, but he nevertheless rejects group minds and group consciousness. If group minds are understood as in (Pettit 2011), then group agency is rejected as well. Thus, Tuomela (2018, 28) argues that Searle seems to propose a conceptual irreducibility, but an ontological reducibility of collective intentionality, Thus, group agents are reduced to individual agents.

List and Pettit's (2011) account of group agency takes this talk about groups at face value. They argue that there are group agents and that our talk about groups should be taken at face value, as opposed to just a *façon de parler*. They support a strong version of realism about group agents, arguing that our talk about groups is

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[7] I have also discussed Schmitt's thesis elsewhere, in (Popescu 2020), focusing rather on his view that groups must posses a complex system of beliefs in order to accept group agency at an ontological level.

[8] This is the term Schmitt (2003) uses. I take it to be synonymous with group agency.

[9] "Each of us built her own house independently" is understood under a distributive reading, and "We built together a house" is understood under the collective reading.

not reducible to the talk about individuals, as opposed to the weaker form, redundant realism. However, they assume methodological individualism in order to block unwanted consequences such as committing to some mysterious forces which animate the parts of the group (animism). Methodological individualism holds that "the agency of group agents depends wholly on the organization and behavior of individual members" (List and Pettit 2011, 4) in an analogous manner to the one in which the agency of an individual is wholly dependent on her bodily parts. Nevertheless, group agency explains collective behaviour which cannot be explained only by the summation of individual agency.

The debates are configured in a Quinean fashion, and we shall see this by examining the features of a Quinean methodology present in these debates. Recall the Carnapian distinction between internal and external questions. The questions regarding group agents and group agency seem to be external and not internal to the framework.

First, the metaontological framework and the methodological features of a Quinean approach state that there are rival ontologies and people differ with respect to those ontologies. List and Pettit's (2011) classification shows us the ontological ramifications of the rival ontologies and how theories differ with respect to those ontologies. However, in a Carnapian approach to ontology, such external existence questions are meaningless, they cannot be answered outside the framework. The questions are not internal to the framework, i.e. our talk about the world of social facts. The ontological questions do not regard what entities exist according to the framework, but what entities the framework should accept. The rival ontologies and the disputes are possible because the questions are formulated as external existence questions. The linguistic framework of the world of social facts refers to groups, the deeds of such groups and the way the groups relate to their deeds. Thus, the linguistic framework does not question these references, and we need to step outside the framework of the world of social facts in order to debate them.

Second, since the questions are not internal to the framework of the world of social facts, there are different theories answering to the questions whether there is group agency and whether there are group agents. The theories propose different ontologies: realism with respect to group agents, eliminativism or reductionism. Let's see one of the features of the Quinean framework at work. Existence is taken to have a substantive nature. For instance, causal efficacy is one of the substantive features of existence. One theory that conforms to such a standard is the theory that only primitive actions are actions *per se* (Davidson 2001). Primitive actions are performed directly, and not by doing something else. Kirk Ludwig (2016, 2017) borrows this theory and explains individual and collective actions by means of their link with

primitive actions. Individual actions are actions *per se* since they are direct causes of primitive actions, while collective actions are not. Collective actions are not actions *per se* since a group cannot perform a primitive action (Ludwig 2019, 128). Thus, since individual actions have a direct link with primitive actions (are directly caused by them), and collective actions do not, Ludwig wants to show that our reference to collective actions is misleading since there are no collective actions *per se*. Moreover, since collective actions are not actions *per se*, there are no group agents either. The ontological standard in this case is to have a direct link with primitive actions.

Deflating the notion of existence entails deflating the metaontology (Thomasson 2015a, 2015b). Since existence does not have a substantive nature, then the existence of particular sorts of entities does not have a substantive nature either. The existence questions are now easier and the entanglement of the metaphysics of group agency gets disentangled.

What would then be the consequences of deflating the ontology and the nature of existence? For instance, a minimal ontological stance regarding group agency and the unsubstantive nature of existence helps overcoming the metaphysical discussion caused by the external questions with respect to group agency. Thomason argues that there is something wrong with the metaontology concerning existence questions (Thomasson 2015a, 2015b). The metaontology is of a Quinean fashion and assumes a certain way of treating existence questions and a certain ontology. Eliminating the assumptions and the methodological issues helps reshape the discussion concerning group agency.

7. Another consequence: how Pettit and List's realism can be an easy approach to group agency

Some considerations are in line with an easy approach to ontology, and some in line with a Quinean approach. Taking our talk about group agency at face value is a feature of a deflationist ontology. List and Pettit's (2011) realism supposes a commitment to group agents and group agency, stating that neither are they reducible to individual agents, nor to individual agency. Thus, nothing is misleading in our language and we should accept it with the ontological commitments it has. The realism they argue for is consistent with Thomasson's view on application conditions and her rule for existence[10]. Application conditions should be seen as rules of use for different terms. In this case, the application conditions are linked with our talk about institutions. For instance, we want the term "Parliament" to be meaningful and

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[10] K's exists if and only if the application conditions actually associated with that term fulfil (Thomasson 2015b, 89).

to successfully refer to an entity, since it is part of the democratic establishment. In this sense, List and Pettit's realism is in line with a deflationist ontology of group agency.

However, List and Pettit also have the assumption of methodological individualism. By this assumption, they defend themselves from accusations of animism. However, I consider the need for this assumption as a trait of a Quinean ontological approach[11] and necessary only because of the threat of the animist view. Both animism, and anti-animism, through the methodological individualism assumption, are principles which seek a substantive grounding of group agency. The existence of group agency is in need for a further explanatory principle, for instance the mysterious entity animating the parts. In a deflationist ontological framework, methodological individualism is a common-sense truth, and is not a defence against animism, since there is no need for a further principle to explain the existence of group agents.

Deflationism about existence delivers a simplified metaphysical background for the realist view that List and Pettit adopts, since animism is eliminated. Thus, the account gets rid of the residual discussion regarding whether we need to accept a mysterious force that animates the group in order to act or to endow it with agency. It also guards against any criticism that List and Pettit's view is only conceptual and not metaphysical. The deflationist view makes it an ontological view, and not only conceptual, since existence of an entity, in this case, of group agents, is in no need for a further substantive explanation of its nature.

8. One man's trash is another man's treasure. How the problematic grammar is actually an argument in an easy approach to ontology

Recall that the problem concerning group agency is the fact that in our ordinary talk about groups we attribute actions, attitudes or intentions to them. There is also a symmetry between singular action sentences and plural action sentences. Given that the subject in the singular sentence refers to something that acts and displays agency, then a plural action sentence must have the same commitments, given the similar grammatical structure and given the meaning of the terms[12].

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[11] The argument is not meant to show that the agency of group agents is not wholly dependent on individual agents. I consider it a very sensible truth.

[12] I have borrowed this talk about singular and plural action sentences from Ludwig (2016). He discusses this symmetry argument for plural agents and argues that by logical analysis, any apparent commitment to such agent is eliminated. See also Chant (2017) who criticizes a similar argumentative device used to show that there are group agents.

However, we have been told that the grammatical case for group agency is what is actually causing problems. We talk as if groups have agency, but in fact we are told they do not. This surface (for some philosophers) grammatical case for group agency is problematic because it does not seem right to accept group agents, to whom we attribute intentionality. Moreover, the metaphysical grounds for accepting group agents seem problematic and in need for further elucidations. However, what seems problematic for the Quinean-oriented metaphysician of group agency, is actually an important case for the existence of group agency and group agents. The easy approach to ontology relies on this kind of arguments to show that certain entities exist. The easy approach to existence and the unproblematic and simple nature of existence allow for easy arguments or analytic entailments regarding the existence of different entities (Thomasson 2015a, 2015b). What are easy arguments? We start from an uncontroversial truth, and a conceptual truth, and we get a derived claim proving different aspects (Thomasson 2015b, 231). Thomasson (2007), when talking about the existence of ordinary objects, appeals to analytic entailments. Easy arguments are analytic entailments. An analytic entailment supposes that given a sentence p or a set of sentences Γ, by entailment, we get to the truth of q in virtue of the meaning of the terms in p or in the set of sentences Γ and the logical principles alone (Thomasson 2007, 16). In what follows, I will employ the same kind of arguments for the claims that there are group agents and there is group agency. I consider this sort of arguments to offer the metaphysical basis for taking talk about group agents and group agency at face value. By means of this methodology of analytic entailments that Thomasson defends, I argue for a simple realist position with respect to group agency and group agents.

9. Three easy arguments (analytic entailments) and why they work. Simple realism about group agency

The first argument shows that we can predicate agency to groups. Take for instance the uncontroversial truth that "The Parliament takes decisions for us." The conceptual truth or truths used in the argument would be that a subject acts if it is endowed with agency, or simply put: action implies agency. An uncontroversial truth would also be that taking a decision is an action. Then, from the two uncontroversial truths and the conceptual truth, we get the derived claim that the Parliament is an agent. Thus, we can predicate agency about a group.

The next step is to argue for the claim that there is group agency. Group agency is a property and there are entities that belong to the extension of this concept. The easy argument would be as follows. The uncontroversial truth is "The

Parliament takes decisions for us." The conceptual truth is the fact that action implies agency. Thus, the Parliament is an agent. Then, the Parliament has the property of agency. Since it is also a group, then the Parliament has the property of group agency. Therefore, there is a property of group agency and some entities fall under the concept.

The argument for the existence of group agents starts as well from the uncontroversial truth "The Parliament takes decisions for us." Another uncontroversial truth is the fact that the Parliament is a group. The conceptual truth is that action implies agency. Thus, since the Parliament is a group and acts, then the Parliament is a group agent.

The easy arguments for the existence of group agents and group agency are part of the view that existence is something that should be taken at face value, without an additional search for a deeper meaning of the nature of existence. In a Carnapian framework, the questions "Are there group agents?" or "Is there something like group agency?" are internal questions that should be answered by conceptual or empirical means. In my view, the three answers provided above rely on conceptual means, i.e. given an uncontroversial truth and a conceptual truth, we argue that there are group agents and group agency. However, we can ask the following two questions. Why is this treatment of group agents and group agency internal to a framework, and thus meaningful? For short, why are those questions internal questions? Here I think the answer should be found in Carnap's view. Second, how do we justify the easy answers to the questions? Here I think the answer should be searched in Thomasson's view on application conditions and analytic entailments. I will further treat the two questions separately.

Recall that internal questions are internal to a certain linguistic framework, whose rules for our use of terms are specified for the framework. Consider Carnap's view on internal questions.

> "Internal questions and possible answers to them are formulated with the help of the new forms of expressions [for newly introduced entities][13]. The answers may be found either by purely logical methods or by empirical methods, depending upon whether the framework is a logical or a factual one." (Carnap 1950, 22)

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[13] My addition. The more general context is the following. Carnap accepts the introduction of new entities in a language. He considers this to be the construction of a new linguistic framework. If this talk about new entities is needed, the framework is constructed with the addition of new rules of use for the new entities (see Carnap 1950, 21).

We can consider the questions of interest for us to be questions internal to the linguistic framework of the world of social facts. I consider this framework to be analogous to the world of things[14]. The world of things is the world of things, facts and events. The internal questions regarding the world of things receive answers based on observation. Internal questions regarding the existence of things in the world of things could be of the following kind: Are there mountains? Is there a desk under my laptop? But Carnap (1950, 22-23) rejects the meaningfulness of questions regarding the existence of the world itself. In an analogous manner, we can ask internal questions regarding the world of social facts. Is there a Parliament of Romania? Does it take decisions for us? Do we accept those decisions? These are internal questions that receive an affirmative answer based on our linguistic framework and rules of use. Note that accepting the linguistic framework also means accepting the framework of entities. Illustrative for this is Thomasson's (2015b) example that by filling this and that paper, some corporation comes into existence. Also, accepting the linguistic framework of the world of social facts, allows for accepting there are marriages when people give an affirmative answer to the question in front of the civil servant[15].

Are the questions regarding the existence of group agents and group agency also internal questions? They are, as long as we do not search for a substantive understanding of existence and a deeper meaning of the nature of group agency. The answers to those questions are based on the linguistic framework of the world of social facts and the entities associated with this linguistic framework. They are derivable from the fact that institutions exist, they act and they intend to do things. For instance, a judge sanctioning a certain corporation for some illegal deeds, supposes some sort of agency from the part of the corporation. On the other hand, asking whether there really are group agents or whether there really is group agency, whether they are not reducible to some more basic facts, is to ask a substantive ontological question searching for a substantive meaning of the nature of those entities, and this is meaningless, at least according to Carnap.

The second question regarding group agents and group agency concerned the justification for the easy answers. They are provided given the properties of the application conditions for the terms. Application conditions are meaning constituting for the term, they are rules of use and the entity which the term names exists if and only if those application conditions are fulfilled. Then, what are the application conditions for terms like group agents and group agency, and when are they fulfilled? Consider the following quote from Thomasson.

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[14] See Carnap 1950, 22.
[15] See also Austin's (1979) example of a performative. Thomasson (2015b) also uses marriages as a paradigmatic example.

"[R]ather than thinking of application conditions as definitions competent speakers (or anyone else) could recite, we should instead think of them as rules for when it is and is not proper to use a term, which speakers master in acquiring competence with applying and refusing a new term in various situations, and that (once mastered) enable competent speakers to evaluate whether or not the term would properly be applied in a range of actual and hypothetical situations." (Thomasson 2015b, 93)

I think here the general term whose application conditions we should consider is that of "agency." The application conditions for this term should deliver us an answer whether we use it correctly when we attribute agency to the Parliament. As seen from the application conditions for agency, it is required when performing an action. We consider it an action and not an event, if it is done in virtue of one's agency. Agency is what distinguishes actions from mere happenings (Davidson 2001, 43). Then, when we speak about someone's actions, we are entitled to say that she was the agent of those actions. In the same way, we speak about the actions of institutions and we distinguish actions from things that just happen to them. We speak about the correct or ruining decisions of the Parliament, and we distinguish them from things that happen to them, for instance, from it being dissolved by the President. We put our trust in the Parliament and we lose our trust in it. To sanction its decisions, we vote for a different party, hoping that the next time the structure of the Parliament will be different etc. Then, the term agency seems to be properly applied in case of institutions as well. Since the institution of Parliament is a group, we can then talk about group agency. We can properly say that the term agency applies to the Parliament: "for a term to have application conditions is for competent speakers to be able to evaluate, with respect to various hypothetical situations (ways the actual world could turn out to be), whether or not the term would apply […]" (Thomasson 2007, 44). As competent speakers we evaluate that the application conditions for agency when applied to the Parliament fulfil, since we talk about the deeds of the Parliament and we consider it responsible for the different good or bad consequences of the laws adopted.

Also consider the following relation between application conditions and analytic entailments which deliver existence claims:

"Given the frame-level application conditions associated with singular and sortal terms, for any terms 'p' and 'q,' where the application conditions for 'p' are also sufficient conditions for 'q' to apply, claims such as '(A) p exists' analytically entail claims that '(a) q exists,' for example, the application conditions for 'house' in a situation are sufficient to ensure the application of 'building,' so 'There is a house' analytically entails 'There is a building.'" (Thomasson 2007, 44)

What I need to show here is that the application conditions for "action" are sufficient for the application conditions of "agency." We have seen, that agency distinguishes actions from mere events, and this is an uncontroversial truth accepted by philosophers. If a branch crashes on someone's car, we do not say that the branch is the agent of the car's destruction, we just consider it a misfortune and the owner can get the money from the insurance company. However, if someone intentionally drives her car into the tree to fake an accident, we get to say that she is the agent of her car's destruction, and the insurance company would sue her if it discovered the truth. In a similar way, if we talk about the actions of the Parliament, the application conditions for "action" in this case are sufficient for the application conditions of "agency," or "group agency," since we are talking about a group. If they are sufficient, then "there is a certain action" analytically entails that "there is a certain agent." Thus, if the application conditions for the term "action" apply in the case of institutions, then the application conditions for "agency" applies as well. Then "there is a certain action performed by that institution" analytically entails that "there is a certain group agent who performed the action."

In the next section I will analyse a possible response to the easy arguments concerning group agents and group agency.

10. Possible criticism: the easy arguments are not that easy

One line of criticism against the easy approach to group agency could be the following: the three easy arguments rely on controversial claims. It is not obvious that there are groups and it is not obvious that there are collective actions either. The easy arguments relied on both truths. As in the case of group agency, collective action is argued to be reducible to individual action or not to be actions *per se* (Ludwig 2016). Social groups and institutions are also argued to be something like the sum of individuals, or the sum of individuals plus certain (social) relations that establish between them or, in any case, reducible to something else (see Effingham 2010, Ritchie 2015). It seems then that the arguments showing that there is group agency and there are group agents are not that easy after all.

My response is that the previous criticism relies on a substantive view of existence regarding groups and collective actions. Thus, the claims on which the easy arguments rest are controversial if the nature of existence is not the simple one proposed by Thomasson. The second line of my response is that a competent speaker knows and can evaluate whether the application conditions for social groups and collective actions hold, and we can say there are social groups and there are collective actions *per se.*

First, there is a similar literature concerning the metaphysics of social groups, analogous to the one concerning group agency and group agents. The literature rests on the same Quinean methodological assumptions of rival ontologies, ontological standards and substantive view of existence. Should our theories regarding social groups commit to the existence of such entities? Is the ontological standard of a theory fulfilled if we accept social groups? When we say that there are social groups, do we mean a substantive view of their existence? We have seen that Thomasson (2016) argues for an easy approach to social groups. If we reject the Quinean methodology of answering existence questions, then we get an easy ontology of social groups. Then, as Thomasson (2015b) says, filling some specific papers means a certain corporation comes into existence. An analogous argument can be provided with respect to collective actions. In a Quinean methodological framework, the claim that there are collective actions or that collective actions are actions *per se*, are controversial claims. However, in an easy approach to ontology, the simple nature of existence allows to argue that collective actions are actions *per se.* Given the sentence "The Parliament takes decisions for us," the application conditions for the term "Parliament" are sufficient for the application conditions of "institution," then the existence of the Parliament entails the existence of an institution. An analogous argument can be applied to collective actions, given that we acknowledge and recognize the actions of the Parliament.

11. Final remarks

Group agents and group agency have been explained in eliminativist, reductionist or realist terms. I have defended, in line with Thomasson's approach to metaontology, the idea that the debate concerning group agents and group agency displays the traits of a Quinean framework of ontology. I have argued that the Quinean ideas of ontological standard and ontological rivalry are the fertile soil for the disputes regarding group agents and group agency. To show this, I have reviewed some of the proposals concerning group agents and group agency and I have shown in which way they display a background Quinean ontological framework.

As a positive account, I have argued that the metaphysical background for the discussions concerning group agents and group agency should be a Carnap-Thomasson framework. I have defended a simple realist view of group agents and group agency. More specifically, I have applied Thomasson's simple realist ontology to the problem of group agency and group agents. The argumentative devices used to support a simple realist view were the easy arguments and analytic entailments

designed by Thomasson (2007, 2015b). What I have tried to show is that there are perfectly reasonable easy arguments which entail that there are group agents according to the framework of the world of social facts. The arguments have the following theoretical backgrounds. First, the questions whether there are group agents and group agency should be understood as internal Carnapian questions, internal to the framework of the world of social facts. Second, I have argued that the easy arguments work, given the application conditions for terms such as group agents and group agency. As competent speakers we can evaluate that the application conditions for group agents and group agency fulfil, since we talk about the deeds and actions of different institutions and groups.

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