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Workshop „The Abilities of Groups“ February 21-23, 2022 Online, Zoom Meeting (Central European Time)

Organized by: Niels de Haan and Herlinde Pauer-Studer,
Department of Philosophy – University of Vienna
ERC Project: “The Normative and Moral Foundations of Group
Agency”, Grant No. 740922

Zoom meeting:

<https://univienne.zoom.us/j/62573840515?pwd=cVRuLzRHc25TcVFpbGpvWHkvN2ludz09>

Meeting ID: 625 7384 0515

Passcode: 479460

Day 1	
Monday February 21, 2022	
16:00 (s.t.) – 16:15 (CET)	Opening/Welcome
16:15 – 17:15	Barbara Vetter (FU Berlin) & Maike Albertzart (University of Mainz)
17:15 – 18:15	<i>“The Metaphysics of Joint Abilities“</i> Niels de Haan (University of Vienna) <i>“Collective Moral Agency: A Minimalist Account“</i>
18:15 – 19:00	Break
19:00 – 20:00	Kendy Hess (College of the Holy Cross) <i>“The Possibility of Corporate Character“</i>

Day 2	
Tuesday February 22, 2022	
16:00 – 17:00	Gunnar Björnsson (Stockholm University)
17:00 – 18:00	<i>“Abilities for Group Obligations“</i> Anne Schwenkenbecher (Murdoch University) <i>“Corporate Ignorance“</i>



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18:15 – 19:00	Break
19:00 – 20:00	Carolina Sartorio (University of Arizona) “A Good Cause”

Day 3	
Wednesday February 23, 2022	
16:00 – 17:00	Bill Wringe (Bilkent University) “Exploring Co-Agential Attunement “
17:00 – 18:00	Kenneth Silver (Trinity College Dublin) “Corporate Abilities: Foundations and Scope”
18:00 – 19:00	Closing Discussion

30 to 40-minutes presentations followed by discussion.

This event is funded by the ERC project "The Normative and Moral Foundations of Group Agency" (no. 740922).

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Abstracts:

Barbara Vetter (FU Berlin) & Maike Albertzart (University of Mainz) – The Metaphysics of Joint Abilities.

In this talk, we will investigate the abilities of unstructured groups (which we will call “joint abilities” in what follows). According to the dominant conception of joint ability, a joint ability is best understood as the ability of a plurality of agents. Since a plurality of agents is not itself an agent, this plural property account of joint ability breaks with the canonical concept of abilities as powers of agents. As a result, a plural property notion of joint ability is ill-suited to capture the notion of control underlying the widely accepted principle that ‘ought’ implies ‘can’. We will make a fresh start on joint abilities by considering them in the metaphysical context of the wider class of properties which we call ‘potentialities’: dispositions, powers, capacities, potentials, and so on. Some potentialities are ‘joint potentialities’, possessed by a number of objects together; and some potentialities are abilities. But what are the conditions for a potentiality to be both joint and an ability? By considering (i) the general metaphysics of joint potentialities and their relation to the potentialities of the individuals involved, and (ii) the question of which potentialities qualify as an ability, we will arrive at a new proposal on the nature of joint ability.

Anne Schwenkenbecher (Murdoch University) – Corporate Ignorance

The greater an organisation’s (or corporate agent’s) complexity, the greater is the potential for internal doxastic inconsistency. And there is a special corporate type of doxastic inconsistency that can only occur in complex structures: where one part of the organisation does not ‘know’ what the other part ‘knows’ – in other words, where knowledge (here understood as true belief) is not distributed in the right way and hence beliefs are not held by the corporate agents in the right way to ensure it is acting on its relevant beliefs. It is this particular type of corporate doxastic inconsistency that appears to have occurred within mining corporation Rio Tinto when it took the (in many ways) disastrous decision to destroy two ancient rock shelters at Juukan Gorge in the Pilbara in Western Australia in May 2020. A parliamentary inquiry identified severe shortcomings in the mining corporation’s communications structure as responsible for the destruction of the site, which experts considered of the ‘highest archeological significance’ in Australia. Using this example, I will explore the epistemic foundations of corporate or group agency.

Kendy Hess (College of the Holy Cross) – The Possibility of Corporate Character

Contra Hasnas 2018 and other skeptics, firms and other corporate agents are fully capable of developing their own character traits, and of shaping their characters or having their characters shaped by external influences. My presentation begins with the claim that firms qualify as sophisticated rational agents in their own right. I will not argue for this claim here; instead, I open with a quick sketch of the Aristotelian metaphysics that support claims of existence and of the mechanics that enable rational agency, as those same mechanics make it possible for firms develop their own character traits. A firm’s traits need not reflect or derive from the traits of its members; a firm can itself be greedy or generous, regardless of the greed or generosity of its members. The more interesting question is whether we would *want* them to be “virtuous” in the Aristotelian sense of possessing character traits that are excellent for their kind. According to Aristotle, a virtuous person should be honest, generous, and magnanimous, not because these things are good in themselves (in the broadest sense) but because they are good things for *humans* to be. Given the nature of the modern firm, it might seem that a “virtuous” corporation, possessing the excellences



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of its kind, should be dishonest, callous, and rapacious. I close by outlining a response to this concern.

Gunnar Björnsson (Stockholm University) – Abilities for Group Obligations

Questions about abilities have played an important role in discussions of group obligations. It has been suggested that certain groups lack obligations because they lack the ability to make decisions, lack the ability to change commitments in response to new information, or lack the ability to recognize and act on reasons grounding the obligation. Different positive accounts of abilities have also implicitly or explicitly required different sorts of abilities: some have required the ability to ensure that the obligation is discharged, others merely the ability to make it likely. This talk takes a systematic approach to the question of what abilities are required for an entity to bear obligations. First, I note that attributions of abilities are context dependent, and that there will be not one true substantive account of group abilities: any such account will be relative to a context. Second, as the context is that of attributing obligations to various entities, I discuss what obligations are generally, and what sorts of abilities their attribution presuppose. Finally, these general reflections are applied to questions and controversies in the literature. The main upshot is that groups need to have reasons-responsive structures to be primary obligation-bearer, but that unstructured groups can nevertheless bear obligations. Lessons are also drawn for whether group obligations require the ability to decide, change commitments, or ensure that obligations are discharged.

Niels de Haan (University of Vienna) – Collective Moral Agency: A Minimalist Account

In this talk, I first set out and defend a minimalist account of moral competence for group agents. I argue that organized groups such as corporations or universities can have group-level abilities (i) to grasp moral reasons; (ii) to relate such reasons to their available evidence; and (iii) to control its goal-seeking states and actions accordingly in light of their moral understanding. I defend my minimalist account against more demanding views involving moral policies or collective emotions. Next, I focus on whether purposive groups can have moral competence. Purposive groups are unorganized groups without decision-making procedures that coalesce around one or more goals. Some collectivists claim that purposive groups such as riot mobs, friends walking together, or the pro-life lobby qualify as agents and can have group-level moral duties as such. I argue that purposive groups do not qualify as duty-bearers even if they qualify as agents. To qualify as a duty-bearer, an agent must be morally competent. I develop the Update Argument. An agent is morally competent only if the agent has sufficient control over updating their goal-seeking states. Even if purposive groups qualify as agents, these groups necessarily lack control over updating their goal-seeking states, therefore purposive groups lack moral competence. This creates a cut-off point for groups as duty-bearers: Organized groups may qualify as duty-bearers, whereas purposive groups *cannot* qualify as duty-bearers.

Carolina Sartorio (University of Arizona) – A Good Cause

In this talk I explore the question of how to ground the responsibility of agents in some tricky cases involving multiple agents who act in a non-coordinated fashion. These are scenarios where no single agent has the individual ability to make a difference to a harmful outcome, but where the outcome would have been avoided if they had all acted as they should have. I argue that an important source of the problem is that it's hard to motivate a concept of cause that can be behind the agents'



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responsibility in these cases. I illustrate the problem with a particular example: Yablo's proportionality criterion on causation. I then sketch a possible solution.

Bill Wringe (Bilkent University) – Exploring Co-Agential Attunement

In previously presented work, I have argued that a successful account of collective agential capacities needs to appeal to the notion of co-agential attunement. A group of agents are co-agentially attuned if and only if they each possess a set of standing dispositions to look for and find opportunities to exploit the actions of others in bringing about some outcome. A group's members need not be co-agentially attuned in order to have a collective capacity, but they, or at least enough of them, must have the capacity to become co-agentially attuned with one another.

In this paper, I explore the notion of co-agential attunement in more detail. I focus on three questions: i) should we take groups whose members are capable of becoming co-agentially attuned to constitute collective agents? ii) is a group's having members who are capable of co-agential attunement sufficient to make it the kind of group that can be an obligation-bearer? iii) is the capacity for becoming co-agentially attuned an irreducibly collective capacity? I conclude by reflecting briefly on the possibility of large-scale groups having members who are co-agentially attuned with one another, and the implications of my view for the possibility of obligations falling on large, unorganized groups.

Kenneth Silver (Trinity College Dublin) – Corporate Abilities: Foundations and Scope

It is already significantly controversial whether some corporations can be morally responsible for what they do. Even granting that firms are in principle capable of being morally responsible, this tells us little of what they are responsible for. And understanding the scope of corporate responsibility requires having some idea what firms are capable of. Here, I sketch a view of corporate abilities, paying special attention to how distinctive features of firms influence the account. Taking on a dispositionalist view of abilities in terms of what the firm is disposed to do when it tries, this invites a consideration of corporate attempts. I argue that such consideration reveals that corporations do not have the worrying case of 'naked trying' exhibited by individuals discussed by action theorists, and there is a natural way to understand corporate trying and exertion in terms of the deployment of firm resources. I then move on to discuss three significant questions about the abilities of firms: Do corporations have the ability to maximize profit, as they are supposedly obligated to do? Can firms still try to satisfy all stakeholders (and should they) if this is determined to be impossible? And, might corporations be capable of developing a robust ability to do the right thing?