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A Short Survey
of the Accounts of Social Groups **

Abstract: In this paper I provide a short review of the recent literature concerning social groups. The authors I am considering here either provide a metaphysical approach towards social groups, for instance Uzquinano, Effingham, Ritchie, or propose a departure from this kind of treatment (Thomasson). In Section 1 I provide an outline of the theories of social groups. In Section 2 I discuss the features of a metaphysical account of social groups, continuing in Section 3 and 4 to discuss Uzquiano and Effingham's metaphysical approaches to social groups. The last two authors provide a unitary account of social groups. In Section 5 I continue with Ritchie's metaphysical account. Unlike Uzquiano's and Effingham's, this account proposes a division in the treatment of social groups. Finally, in Section 6 I present Thomasson's treatment of social groups and its departure from the metaphysical views.

Keywords: social groups, *sui generis* groups, sets, norms, metaphysical account, naturalist account.

1. Introduction

This paper deals with social groups. Is there (metaphysically) such a thing as a social group[1]? If there is, how are we to describe and define it? These are the main questions addressed by the recent literature on the notion of a social group. For instance, Ritchie discusses both problems (Ritchie 2015), while Thomasson, assumes the existence of social groups and focuses on their description (Thomasson forthcoming). My aim in this paper is to review the recent discussion in the literature on what social groups are. There are two main approaches. The first is a stronger, metaphysical one. The second is a naturalist one, as in Thomasson's pluralist view. The strong accounts of what social groups are usually hold that social groups are *sui generis* entities or sets of a special kind[2].

Another classification of the accounts of social groups can regard whether we have a unitary treatment or a pluralist treatment of social groups. A

metaphysical approach is consistent with both a unitary treatment of the concept of social group or a pluralist one. Ritchie proposes a pluralist treatment (Ritchie 2015). She accounts for two categories of social groups, but the theory appeals to metaphysical aspects, such as structures. Thomasson's pluralist account consists in treating social groups as a plurality of norms promoted through social groups and proposes a departure from a metaphysical treatment (Thomasson forthcoming).

The metaphysical discussion is articulated in (Uquiano 2004), (Effingham 2010), (Ritchie 2015; forthcoming). They stick with a metaphysical orientation towards this problem, while Thomasson reshapes the discussion in less committal terms. Effingham provides an account of social groups as special types of sets (Effingham 2010). A social group is a set of ordered pairs consisting in a world index and an ordered pair consisting in a time index and a set of individuals. Ritchie goes with a pluralist view that there are two types of groups, one defined by a common feature, the other being defined by the relation established between the members of the group (Ritchie 2015). The second type of social groups depends upon the structure in which the group consists of. The metaphysical component of this approach consists in appealing to social structures in order to define social groups.

The more naturalist approach provided by Thomasson pertains more to our linguistic practice concerning social groups. Her view relies on our practice of referring to different social groups in our daily discourse, providing in this way an answer to the question whether there are social groups. The naturalist approach also consists in going for a treatment of instances of social groups rather than the general term of "social group". For Thomasson, a definition of the general term such that all its instances fall under it is not needed. The approach rather goes to the function that different social groups are exhibiting or in terms of which they are understood (Thomasson forthcoming, 9).

I propose an exposition of the accounts of social groups given by the following themes: the metaphysics involved in the corresponding accounts, the difficulties and puzzles raised within, and the sufficiency of a naturalist account as proposed by Thomasson.

2. Metaphysics and Social Groups

The metaphysical orientation towards the treatment of social groups can be indicated by the question we ask regarding such issue. Thomasson labels the question "what are social groups?" as a metaphysical question (Thomasson forthcoming, 8). The metaphysical component of the question is related to the setting in which one should look for an answer. The expected answer should consist in the conditions something has to satisfy in order to be considered a social group. Besides the conditions, one also has

to explain what kind of entity a social group is. The explanation may appeal to entities metaphysicians usually work with. For instance, groups may be reduced to sets. Other accounts may explain social groups as irreducible entities of a special kind (Uzquiano 2004). An appeal to entities such as structures may be made as well in order to account for what kind of entity a social group may be (Ritchie 2015).

It seems that a question such as "what are social groups?" should be interpreted along a commitment to a metaphysically oriented answer. The answer either tries to provide a reduction to other sorts of entities or it posits groups as entities taken at face value[3]. The identification condition (I) is stated by Effingham as one condition that a theory of social groups should satisfy, namely that "[g]roups should be identified with entities we are already committed to" (Effingham 2010, 252). The satisfaction of this condition should be considered, given the requirement of parsimony. Namely, groups as *sui generis* entities inflate the ontology with additional entities named "social groups". However, condition (I) can also be seen as criterion for a classification of the metaphysical accounts of social groups. The classification should be between reductive theories and face value theories.

3. Social groups taken at face value

I will start with a face value account of social groups. Social groups as *sui generis* entities is a view proposed by Uzquiano as an alternative to the theories which identify such objects with sets (Uzquiano 2004). The view proposed by Uzquiano places social groups in the category of artifacts. The relevant aspects of artifacts that allow for this treatment of social groups are the material constitution and the persistence of the artifact despite changing its components. The analogy is the following: both artifacts and social groups persist through change of components. Artifacts are distinct from the material they are made of and distinct from the sum of its components; thus, they should be distinct from the material object constituted from the material and the sum of the components. There are other features that should persist such that the artifact persists as well. For instance, Uzquiano takes the shape as a feature that guarantees the persistence of some artifact (Uzquiano 2004, 152). In the same way, social groups should be distinct from the sum of its parts, or the set of elements that constitutes the group. If we distinguish between the group and the set of elements that constitutes the group as two distinct entities, then one can account why the group survives as the same entity even though its elements change. In this way, there is no one-to-one correspondence between the group and a unique set of elements, but there is a relation of a group-constituency (Uzquiano 2004). This relation is established between the members of the group forming a set at a time index. Since the relation is time indexed, more than

one set can enter in a relation of group-constituency with a group. Moreover, the relation of group-constituency can be established between a set and more than one group.

What Uzquiano (2004) proposes is an alternative theory to the reduction of social groups to sets of elements having some common property. The set reduction is criticized on two grounds. First, sets are essentially defined by the elements that constitute it and any change in its elements results in the formation of another set. However, a change in the elements of a social group does not result in the formation of another social group. Second, distinct social groups may be constituted from the same set of elements.

We have seen that Uzquiano defines the relation of group-constituency between the set of members and the group relative to a time index as well. The definition for group-constituency between a set S of elements and a group G has the following two conditions as stated by Uzquiano:

(i) *∀x (x ∈ S ↔x is a member of G @ t)*
(ii) *∃x[x is a member of G @ t ∧ □(x ∈ S) ∧ ◊∃t' (G exists @ t' ∧ ¬ (x is a member of G @ t'))] ∨ ∃x'[¬ (x' is a member of G @ t) ∧ ¬ ◊(x ∈ S) ∧ ◊∃t''(x' is a member of G @ t'').* (Uzquiano 2004, 150)

The two conditions state the relation between the set of members constituting a group and the group *per se*. The first condition states that an element belongs to the set of members of the group if and only if the element is a member of the group at a given time t. The second condition states that for every member of a group at a given time t, that member is necessarily an element of the set of members constituting the group. However, there may be a time t' such that it is not a member of the group at that given time t', or there may be a person that is not a member of the group at time t, and it is not possible for him or her to be an element of the set constituted by the members of the group. However, there may be a given time t" such that the same person is a member of the group which stands in a relation of group-constituency with another set of elements.

The isomorphism between the artifact and its material constitution, on the one hand, and the group and the set of its members, on the other hand, goes in the following way. The artifact is constituted by the sum of its parts. However, there may be a time t such that one of the parts does not enter in the constitution of the artifact anymore, and there may be another material part at that time t which does not enter in the constitution of the artifact, but it may at a following time t'. It is also the case that a part is necessarily a part of the sum of parts constituting the material at a time t, and a part which, if not a part of that sum, then it is not possible for it of be part of that sum, but it may be, at a following time, part of another sum of parts constituting the same artifact.

The *sui generis* groups proposal accounts for the relation between the entity named 'group' and the set of members of the group. Since it is not an identity relation, it is explained why the identity of a group does not have its members necessarily, and it admits changes in its constituency. It also explains why the relation of group constituency between the group and the set of its members it is not enough to explain what a group is since the same set can enter in a relation of group constituency with another social group. Since a social group is different from the set of its members, then we have additional entities besides the set of elements. In this way, this nonreductive approach does not conform to the condition (I) stated by Effingham, namely, every identification and explanation should be made in terms of entities that we already work with in our theories.

4. Social groups as sets

Effingham proposes a set reduction theory of social groups shaped in order to grasp these features of social groups and meet the difficulties raised by Uzquiano (Effingham 2010). The desideratum of a set reduction is also oriented to meet the condition that a reduction should appeal to entities we already are committed to. The set reduction is altered in order to include the features of social groups' persistence though change of members. The theory proposed is to reduce social groups to sets of elements of a special kind. The elements are ordered pairs consisting in a possible world as a first element and another ordered pair where the first element is a time index, followed by a set of objects as a second element of the pair (Effingham 2010, 259). The first desideratum of reducing social groups to entities we already are committed to is met. The ontology is not expanded with additional entities in their own rights, and the problematic entity is explained away in terms of a accepted entities, namely sets.

How does Effingham answer to the challenge of persistence of social groups despite changes in membership and the lack of one-to-one correspondence between a set of individuals and the social group constituted of those individuals? The persistence challenge is answered by the introduction of world and time indexes as elements of the pairs building up the set. A social group is formally accounted for by Effingham in the following formal terms:

$\{< w_1,<t_1, \{x,y\}>, <w_1, <t_i, \{x,y\}>,…, <w_2, <t_1, \{x,y]>,<w_2, <t_i, \{y,z\}>,…,<w_i, <t_1, \{x,y>>,<w_i, <t_i, \{x,y\}>>…\}$ (Effingham 2010, 259).

Thus, the elements of the set are ordered pairs which include possible worlds and times. The background ontology needed in order to account for what a social group is includes possible worlds and possible time instants represented by time indexes. Since every possible world relevant for a

definition of a social group is time structured, it follows that each possible world relevant for the definition is composed of time instants as well. One can argue that an ontology of possible worlds is acceptable since possible worlds are a useful device and it is not necessary to commit to a strong ontology of possible worlds, like the one professed by David Lewis (Lewis 1979).

The set of members of the group is formed relative to a time index and a possible world and each such index has associated a set of individuals as members of the group. This premise, together with the metaphysical assumption that at other possible worlds other objects may have come into existence, implies that possible but not actual objects enter the constitution of the set the group is identified with, a problem that Effingham accepts (Effingham 2010, 260). Given the American Congress in 1975, if we think of it as a social group, we can imagine that Saul Kripke could have been a member of this institution, even though he was never a congressman. The definition for social groups allows for persons that are not members of the group, to be possible members of the group. However, if possible worlds are allowed in the definition, and possible members as well, then possible but not actual persons are allowed as well. We can imagine a possible world in which Wittgenstein had a child who became an American citizen and who also ran for Congress elections as well and won. Thus, an element of the complex set defining the American Congress is the ordered pair consisting in a possible world w_i, different from the actual world, as its first member, and a second pair, consisting in a time index, staying for the year 1975, as a first member, and a set of individuals, as a second member of the pair, one of the members of the set being the possible child of Wittgenstein.

The background ontology seems to include more than possible worlds and possible time instances, it also seems to include possible but not actual individuals as well. Thus, possible but not actual individuals enter the structural constitution of the set to which a social group is reduced. The problem with respect to this is not only the appeal to controversial entities such as the possible but not actual objects, but also that it seems there is a great distance between the American Congress as a social or institutional group and the possible child of Wittgenstein. The complex structure of the set to which it is reduced is constituted of this possible object as well, however, we seem to understand the American Congress is as a group very distant from possible objects. The second problem related to the acceptance of possible but not actual objects as components of sets to which social groups are reduced is that such objects seem to be a constant component of every set to which any particular social group is reduced. There is nothing to prevent the possible child of Wittgenstein, and other possible but not actual objects to be a component of the structure the American Congress in 1975, the British Parliament in 1980, a certain amateur football team, etc.

The two metaphysical approaches discussed, groups as *sui generis* entities and groups as sets, are guided by different ontological principles. The first one employs a nonreductive proposal in which a parsimony criterion is neglected, and the ontology is inflated by an additional category of objects named "social groups". The second one, the set theoretic approach does not introduce an additional category of objects and it is guided by a reductive approach. The entities to which it appeals are sets which are already accepted in our ontology. However, the special kind of sets that Effingham employs appeals to a further category of objects, namely, the possible but not actual objects. The problem here lies in the statute of these objects and it is difficult to decide which category of objects are more problematic: groups as *sui generis* entities or possible but not actual objects. In the first case, the theory about social groups works with an inflated ontology about social groups. In the second case, the theory about social groups does not work with an inflated ontology of such objects, but its background ontology appeals to a more inflated universe containing possible but not actual objects.

5. Two kinds of social groups

A third metaphysical approach with respect to social groups appeals to features and structures. Given the criterion of a unitary or a pluralist account, Ritchie's account is a pluralist one. Thomasson considers Ritchie's (Ritchie 2015) account as one that "makes a step towards pluralism" (Thomasson forthcoming, 7). Ritchie divides social groups in two categories (Ritchie 2015). The first category of social groups is defined by a common feature that is shared by the members of the group. Such instances of social groups are defined by features of ethnic, religious, sexual orientation, etc. An instance where it is considered to be relevant to work with this kind of definition for social groups is when the membership to such a group is relevant in obtaining certain benefits or they are beneficiaries of certain policies made in order to encourage certain developments in that group. For instance, being a member of the east academic community is sometimes relevant, in the sense of being encouraged to participate to some conferences or colloquiums. The membership to such social groups is not a matter of choice for the members. This feature is seen to be relevant by Ritchie in dividing the two categories of social groups. Thus, the feature of intentionality of membership divides social groups into groups where membership is not the result of the choice of its members. The other category is defined by membership as a choice of the individual.

The other feature defining the two categories of social groups is represented by collective intentionality. Social groups formed on the basis of a shared common property have the feature that members are not members

of the group as a result of choice. In the same time, such groups are not described by a common action or decision as a result of the common intentionality.

Social groups defined as structured entities are defined by both membership as a result of the choice of its members, and collective intentionality. For instance, the government of Romania, as an institutional group has the feature of collective intentionality. There are political decisions for which the whole government is responsible. As a structural entity defined by a relation of hierarchy from the prime minister to the representatives of different ministries and given a principle of solidarity, the Romanian Constitution states that each member of the Government is politically responsible together with all the members of the Government.

The division proposed by Ritchie is, thus, between social groups defined by a shared features, and social groups as structural entities (Ritchie 2015). This division answers why some social groups are formed as a result of the choice of their members, while for others, membership is not a result of choice. The second challenge is to answer why some social groups are defined by collective intentionality and why some decisions are implemented as a result of a group decision. It also answers why the group may be responsible for the decision implemented and membership to the group is relevant in this case for being held responsible, rather than particular actions of the individual who is a member of the group.

In which way is this account a metaphysical one? The first category of social groups does not necessarily need to be defined by an appeal to a metaphysical account. As Ritchie (2015) points out, one does not need to be a realist with respect to social groups defined by membership as a result of sharing a common property. Moreover, the shared property need not be one which is grounded in the "real". Those properties may as well be considered a fabrication of the particular culture one lives in. However, this does not exclude being a realist with respect to the other category of social groups and not even with respect to the first category either, since one can be a group realist and in the same time reject that such properties pertain to the nature of the members of the group (Ritchie 2015, 312)[4].

With respect to the second category of social groups, Ritchie (2015) provides an account in terms of structures. The account is a metaphysical one given the appeal to structures in order to explain the social configuration of a group. By "structure", Ritchie means "complexes, networks, 'latticeworks' of relations" (Ritchie forthcoming, 4). Here, Ritchie develops a theory of social structures as structures having the additional property of constitutive dependency on social factors[5]. The model in which social groups are accounted for appeals, thus, to entities such as social structures and the relation of constitutive dependency. The realist positioning is kept here as well, given the way in which social factor contributes to the realization of a social

structure: by grounding it or by furnishing the metaphysically necessary ground for its constitution.

The parsimony principle is present here as well in the form of the Goldilocks Constraint. Ritchie (forthcoming) states this constraint that an account purporting to answer the question "what is a social group?" should be able to offer a definition that is adequate. The adequacy means that we have an identity relation between the term defined and the definition. Thus, no entity that we would usually not consider to be a social group should be covered by the definition of a social group. Ritchie refers to our commonsense usage and understanding of "social group" to be a criterion for a metaphysical account.

6. Social groups as norms providers

A consideration similar to the Goldilock Constraint can function the other way round as well. Thomasson considers that our usage of terms referring to particular social groups is sufficient for an affirmative answer whether social groups exist (Thomasson forthcoming). The positive answer to this question is also sufficient for an account of social groups. Her proposal is to redirect the discussion from an account of what a social group is to one accounting for the functions of social groups. Thomasson seems to be changing the focus of the discussion on the grounds of relevancy. The relevancy of a discussion about social groups is represented by the impact such entities have on individuals. Thus, the assumption is that social groups exist, however we choose to define them, and our membership to different social groups shapes different features we have. This is because social groups function as norm imposing means on individuals. Thomasson's idea is to look at the different functions particular social groups have. These functions are explained by three categories of norms: internal, structuring and external. The first category stays for those norms specific to a particular social group. The second one are norms that establish the relations between the members of the group, and they usually apply in the case of institutional groups. Finally, external norms are those that are imposed on members of a particular social group, either by other members of the group or by individuals that are not part of the group. Such norms refer to the features the individuals from particular social groups are expected to have.

Thomasson's proposal should also be meant to diagnose the metaphysical dispute in the sense of diminishing its relevancy. By answering what is a social group, one does not provide a better insight on how we are to characterize particular social groups. The proposal Thomasson advances is based on a theoretical consideration regarding the relation between the general concept of "social group" and particular social groups, on the one hand, and the general concept of "social group" and concepts of particular

social groups. On the metaphysical level, one, purporting to explain what a social group is, should furnish an account that encompasses all particular social groups and only what our common sense tells us to be a social group. If we look at the function of the general term of "social group", one can establish different functions of the term and relevance for defining such a term. For instance, the theoretical considerations with respect to how it is used in different social sciences. Thomasson moves the discussion from the function of the general notion of "social group" to the function of terms staying for particular social groups. The function of terms for particular social groups would be in this case to express the relation between individuals and particular social groups. This relation is constituted by the outcomes in the features possessed by an individual as a result of her membership to different social groups.

7. Concluding remarks

The purpose of this paper was to provide an overview on the recent literature treating the concept of social groups. One criterion in organizing the accounts regards the type of theory proposed: there is a metaphysical treatment of what social groups are, and a naturalist account of social group. We have seen that the departure from the metaphysical approaches means a departure from the question "What are social groups?", as proposed by Thomasson (Thomasson forthcoming). Another criterion regards whether the account is a unitary one, if we have a single definition for what a social group is, or a pluralist one, if we consider that different social groups request different approaches and a unitary account cannot grasp the relevant features of different social groups. Concerning the metaphysical approach, we have seen that one way to account for what social groups are is to take them at face value and treat them as entities of a special kind, as Uzquiano (Uzquiano 2004) proposes. The metaphysical approach is to regard the discourse about social groups to be reducible to one that replaces social groups with sets of a special kind, as in Effingham's (Effingham 2010) account that social groups are sets of ordered pairs.

Notes

[1] The discussion in the literature regarding social groups refers both to groups of people that share a relevant feature and intentionally organized groups. They can be formal (institutionalized), or informal, like an amateur football team. I will assume that by social groups we refer to both categories. I will also use "social groups" and "groups" interchangeably.
[2] In this paper I focus on these two metaphysical accounts of social groups. However, they do not exhaust the list of metaphysical accounts. One can provide a mereological account of social entities. See for instance (Hawley 2017).
[3] A somewhat similar discussion can be found with respect to the problem of possible worlds. They are either reduced to some other acceptable entities like states of affairs,

linguistic entities, etc. or "taken at face value" as in (Lewis 1979). The similarity is not complete since the term "possible world" already embeds a metaphysical sense, while "social group" does not.

[4] Ritchie (Ritchie 2015, 312) accepts the idea that properties shared by a group of individuals need not be necessary properties, or properties pertaining to the nature of the individuals and in the same time be a realist about groups, as proposed by Blum (Blum 2010).

[5] Ritchie defines the constitutive dependency of a social structure on social factors by the satisfaction of either of the following three conditions:

> *(i) in defining what it is to be S reference must be made to social factors;*
> *(ii) social factors are metaphysically necessary for S to exist;*
> *(iii) social factors gound the existence of S (or the fact that S exists).* (Ritchie forthcoming, 6)

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