

CHRISTOPHER WOODARD

## GROUP-BASED REASONS FOR ACTION

**ABSTRACT.** This article endorses a familiar, albeit controversial, argument for the existence of group-based reasons for action, but then rejects two doctrines which other advocates of such reasons usually accept. One such doctrine is the *willingness requirement*, which says that a group-based reason exists only if (sufficient) other members of the group in question are willing to cooperate. Thus the paper argues that there is sometimes a reason, which derives from the rationality of some group action, to play one's part unilaterally in that group action. This seems implausible only because we tend wrongly to accept a second doctrine, *monism about the unit of agency*. Monism claims that, for any given deliberative problem, there is only one unit of agency to which reasons attach. If we are monists who believe in group-based reasons, the willingness requirement will seem necessary in order to avoid recklessness. We should reject monism, and if we do so we can recognise genuine conflict between individual-based and group-based reasons, and in doing so we can explain, without endorsing the willingness requirement, why we should not act recklessly.

**KEY WORDS:** cooperation, group-based reasons for action, monism, pluralism, unit of agency

### 1.

Groups can act, and individuals can participate in group action. This must be true in some sense, unassuming enough, of 'group action'. We can dance the tango, for example, or together push the car with the flat battery up the hill. In doing so we act as a group, and each of us participates in a group action, in the sufficiently unassuming sense.

Moreover, it can be rational for individuals to participate in group action. It can be rational for us to dance the tango, or to push the car up the hill. Notice that this is quite different from saying that it can be rational to act for the sake of the group. The two issues cut across each other: you can act alone *for* the group, and it is also true that you can act *as part of* a group for your own purposes. You could help me push the car up the hill, for example, to stay fit, rather than for the sake of helping me get it started. So we should try to keep issues about acting as part of a group distinct from issues about acting for the sake of a group.

Uncontroversially, there are individual-based reasons to participate in group action – that is, reasons attaching directly to the individual act of



participation. These reasons can be selfish or altruistic; their defining feature is that they attach directly to the individual act of participation. What does 'attach directly' mean? I shall be concentrating on consequentialist reasons, and so 'attach directly' means something like this: the consequences of the individual act of participation provide the reason to participate.

It is controversial whether there can also be group-based reasons to participate – that is, reasons deriving from the rationality of the group action of which the participation is a part. Again concentrating on consequentialist reasons, we can say that such a reason would be provided by the consequences of the group action, of which the participation is only a part.

One question is: are there such group-based reasons? I shall answer yes, along with some other philosophers. Although this is a controversial view, the reasons that I shall offer for supporting it are not at all original. They have been very well explained by, for example, Regan, Parfit, and Hurley, so I shall merely give a brief summary of them.<sup>1</sup>

But another question is: are group-based reasons *interesting*? I think that they are, and here my view is perhaps more unusual. On most views, an individual has a group-based reason to play her part in a group action only if (a sufficient number of) the other members of the group are willing to cooperate. Those who accept the existence of group-based reasons tend to adopt this *willingness requirement*. But this requirement tends to make group-based reasons less interesting. I shall reject it, and so claim that an individual can have a group-based reason to participate in a group action even when no other member of the group is willing to cooperate. This makes it possible for group-based reasons to conflict properly with individual-based reasons, and so increases their interest.

## 2.

As I've emphasised, the idea of acting as part of a group is quite distinct from the idea of acting for the sake of a group. In order to avoid being distracted by the latter idea, it is helpful to consider, in the first instance, cases in which there is no conflict of interest between parties, so that we are not diverted by thoughts about whether such and such really is best for the group.

---

<sup>1</sup>See especially Regan (1980, chapter 2), Parfit (1987, chapter 2), Hurley (1989, chapter 8).

It turns out that group-based reasons manifest themselves most clearly in such ‘pure coordination problems’. They help to explain our intuitions about what is ‘obviously’ correct in games such as High-Low.<sup>2</sup>

		HIGH-LOW	
		Player 2	
Player 1		High	Low
		High	10
Low	0	6	

Suppose we are concerned only with individual-based reasons. Then, for each player, we ask what the best act is given each possible way that the other player could behave. In doing so, we compare outcomes within *each column* (for Player 1), or *each row* (for Player 2). What we don’t do is compare outcomes that are *diagonally* related to each other, since diagonal comparisons involve comparing (a) the outcome of a certain action by the actor, given a certain action by the other player, with (b) the outcome of the alternative action by the actor, given a *different* action by the other player. That is, diagonal comparisons compare different *patterns of action by the whole group*, not different individual actions by a single player. So individual-based reasoning can tell us that High is the best response to High, and that Low is the best response to Low, but it does not tell us whether each player should play High or Low. It is, in this sense, indeterminate between the two best-reply solutions to this game.

Of course, it is ‘obvious’ that High-High is better than Low-Low. But this seems explicable only if we ask what pattern of action by both players is best. Then we can compare diagonally, and see that High-High is better than Low-Low. If we believe in group-based reasons, we can then explain why each player should choose High: doing so is rational because it is part of the best pattern of action by the group.

This is the basic argument for the existence of group-based reasons, as expounded by Regan: accepting the existence of group-based reasons seems

<sup>2</sup>See Regan (1980, pp. 18–21). The name ‘High-Low’ is taken from a very helpful discussion by Michael Bacharach (unpublished manuscript).

necessary to explain something that we are strongly committed to, namely the superiority of High-High. The main objection to it is that subtler forms of individual-based reasoning can, after all, explain the superiority of the High-High solution. This objection usually takes the form of suggesting that information about the *probable* behaviour of the other player can explain the superiority of playing High. However, the objection fails to remove the need to appeal to group-based reasoning. In some cases information or assumptions about the probable behaviour of the other person is sufficient to explain the rationality of convergence on the superior solution – but not in all of the cases in which group-based reasoning explains this.<sup>3</sup>

There are three points to make about this *argument from indeterminacy*. Firstly, although the argument is clearest in pure coordination problems, where there is no possible distraction by concerns with partiality of interests, it applies also where the agents concerned do *not* share the same evaluation of outcomes. Wherever there is indeterminacy, the argument applies.

Secondly, although indeterminacy is by no means a trivial problem, we should be careful not to misrepresent it. As Regan and Parfit both emphasise, individual-based reasoning does not *lead us away* from the optimal solution, but simply fails to *guarantee* it – in the sense of providing reasons to converge on this solution rather than on an alternative solution.<sup>4</sup> In the High-Low game, for example, High-High is individually rational for each player; the problem is not that individual-based reasoning leads us away from this solution, but instead that it could equally lead to the other, inferior, solution. This is a very important point, which I shall come back to shortly.

Thirdly, however, we advocates of group-based reasoning should admit that it, too, is not a complete solution to indeterminacy. As Michael Bacharach has pointed out, problems of indeterminacy can reappear for group-based reasoners, in their dealings with outsiders (non-members of the group in question).<sup>5</sup> These problems may perhaps be reduced by identifying successively larger groups, but on most views of which groups are relevant, they are not likely to be extinguished altogether.<sup>6</sup> However, it

<sup>3</sup>Regan discusses and rebuts a number of possible objections along these lines. See Regan (1980, pp. 21–53), Hurley (1989, pp. 153–155).

<sup>4</sup>Regan (1980, pp. 9–10, 54–55), Parfit (1987, p. 54).

<sup>5</sup>Bacharach (unpublished manuscript).

<sup>6</sup>One might add that there might be problems of indeterminacy even internally to the group – that is, there may be many possible patterns of action by the group, each of which generate outcomes of *equal optimal* value, amongst which we simply have to ‘pick’ arbitrarily. Such problems are not troubling in the same kind of way as indeterminacy involving solutions of unequal value, however.

remains true that recognising group-based reasons reduces the incidence of indeterminacy, and it is this that is crucial to the argument for their existence.

### 3.

We might ease acceptance of group-based reasons by noting their relationship to what we might call plan-based reasons, which most of us accept. Plan-based reasons are reasons to perform an individual action that derive from the rationality of a larger plan of action to be performed by the agent herself. Like group-based reasons, they derive the rationality of a part – the individual action – from the rationality of a larger whole. But whereas the larger whole in the case of group-based reasons is a group action, in the case of plan-based reasons it is an extended sequence of action by the individual actor. Of course, there may also be reasons deriving from action that is extended in both ways, intrapersonally and interpersonally – from a plan of action that a group may have.

Only dogma can prevent us from accepting the existence of plan-based reasons. Individual refusals of cigarettes, or doughnuts, can be rational because of the rationality of the larger plan of abstinence of which the individual act forms a part. The literature which demonstrates that such pre-commitment cannot be rationally justified if we focus only on the value of single actions taken one by one ought to be understood as a *reductio* of that approach to understanding practical rationality, rather than a reason for us to revise our ordinary intuitions about the rationality of plans such as diets.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, once we reflect on the existence of plan-based reasons, we ought to feel less nervous about group-based reasons. If the rationality of an individual action can derive from its membership in some larger pattern of action in the case of plans, why cannot the same be true in the case of group actions?

---

<sup>7</sup>A useful survey is provided by Hollis and Sugden (1993, pp. 13–19). They also discuss the problem of indeterminacy in pure coordination problems, pp. 7–13. One advocate of what I have called plan-based reasons is McClennen (1990), who develops an account of what he calls *resolute choice*.

## 4.

The existence of group-based reasons remains controversial, but as I have explained, several philosophers accept some version of the argument from indeterminacy for their existence. However, these philosophers tend to accept what we might call the *willingness requirement*:

WR There is a group-based reason to participate in group action only if sufficient other members of the group are willing to cooperate.

Regan, for example, endorses it as part of what he calls “co-operative utilitarianism”, according to which each agent ought to “*co-operate, with whoever else is co-operating, in the production of the best consequences possible given the behaviour of non-co-operators*”.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Hurley claims that “collective action . . . involves first identifying those willing to act collectively, and then *together* doing what’s best, given what the non-co-operators do (or are likely to do)”.<sup>9</sup>

The willingness requirement may seem compelling, but I shall argue that we should reject it. Moreover, rejecting it has the happy consequence of making group-based reasons more interesting than they otherwise would be.

Why does acceptance of the willingness requirement threaten to make group-based reasons less interesting? The answer is that it removes the possibility of genuine conflict between individual-based and group-based reasons. Now it is not true that it removes the possibility of conflict between the conclusion of a piece of individual-based reasoning in response to a certain problem, and the conclusion of a piece of group-based reasoning in response to the same problem. We saw this in relation to High-Low: individual-based reasoning may recommend playing Low, while group-based reasoning recommends playing High. This is itself important. But it is not a case of conflict in the deeper sense, according to which it is not possible to follow the recommendations of both kinds of reasoning at the same time. As noted, individual-based reasoning does not lead away from High-High. It is compatible with it, and so we may regard group-based reasoning in this kind of case as a *supplement* to individual-based reasoning, which may lead us to revise some particular judgements, but does not generate conflict in the deep sense.

<sup>8</sup>Regan (1980, p. 124), emphasis in the original.

<sup>9</sup>Hurley (1989, p. 146), emphasis in the original.

Supplements are interesting, but less interesting than conflicts. So long as we accept the existence of group-based reasons only in cases where the other members of the group are willing to cooperate, then *acts recommended by group-based reasons will also be individually rational*. Group-based reasoning will perform the important role of helping to resolve many cases of indeterminacy, but it will not come into genuine conflict with individual-based reasoning.

However, we should reject the willingness requirement. First I'll describe one case where rejecting it seems intuitively correct, then I'll try to explain why the requirement is mistaken, which will involve confronting two of the most obvious reasons for insisting on it.

## 5.

Consider the case of George the chemist.<sup>10</sup> George is newly qualified, and is seeking a job to help support his young family. His only offer of employment is in developing the technology of chemical warfare. If he accepts, he gains the benefits of employment, including the benefits to his family, but participates in developing a technology that he abhors. However, his refusal would not impede the development of this technology. A string of other newly qualified chemists are willing to take the job, and would perform it with *equal* vigour and competence.

Would it be rational for George to refuse the job? I think that it would, and that a good explanation of this is that accepting the job would mean participating in an irrational, or wicked, group action. Refusal, on the other hand, is George's part in the best pattern of action open to the group, which is a general moratorium on this kind of research. Hence he has a group-based reason to refuse the job. But note that the willingness requirement is not met: the other chemists are unwilling to play *their* parts in the best group action.

On my view, George's dilemma is explained by a conflict between individual-based reasoning and group-based reasoning. The individual action with the best consequences is acceptance of the job; but playing his part in the best group action involves refusing the job. The conflict arises because group-based reasons exist even when others are *unwilling* to cooperate.

---

<sup>10</sup>This case is taken from Williams (1973, pp. 97–98). Jonathan Glover discusses it in Glover (1975, pp. 171–190).

Of course, other explanations of this conflict are possible. But note that we are here interrogating the plausibility of the willingness requirement, not of the whole idea of group-based reasons. For those who accept group-based reasons, because of the argument from indeterminacy or for other reasons, I claim, cases like George should encourage rejection of the willingness requirement.

Incidentally, note that dilemmas similar to George's are quite common, especially in market transactions. For in such transactions the consequences of individual actions are often smoothed-out, as are George's, by the willingness of another agent to take one's place. The rationality of 'ethical investment', for example, may be as difficult to explain in terms of individual-based reasoning as is George's refusal to take the job.

## 6.

*Anyone* who believes in group-based reasons, then, believes that an act can be rational because of the rationality of a pattern of action of which it is a part. This is not such an odd idea – we are used to the idea that consequences can have value because of larger wholes of which they are a part. If we also reject the willingness requirement, however, we believe that an action can be rational because of its membership of a larger pattern of action, the other parts of which *will not be* realised. On such a view, for example, unilateral arms reduction gets part of its character, and value, from the unrealised whole of universal arms reduction. George's refusal gets part of its character, and value, from the unrealised general moratorium on chemical warfare research. Note that these *aren't* "hypothetical consequences" of the individual acts in question: they are (otherwise) unrealised patterns of action of which the individual actions are parts.

## 7.

The first obvious reason for insisting on the willingness requirement is an objection to this very idea. It says that appealing to unrealised (or mostly unrealised) patterns of action to explain the rationality of a constituent part is mistaken – either because unrealised wholes just cannot contribute to the rationality of parts, or because the appeal to unrealised possibilities has to be circumscribed in ways that are arbitrary. Let me take these two versions of the first objection in turn.

"Unrealised wholes just cannot contribute to the rationality of parts." Why not? It cannot be because it is senseless to speak of the value of hypothetical things, since standard views of practical reasoning, including

consequentialist views, depend on comparing the value of actual things with the value of hypothetical things, as in such claims as “this option had a better outcome than any other option available in the circumstances”. The less valuable outcomes of the other options are unrealised things, yet we are not embarrassed by that.

Perhaps the objection is that hypothetical things can *show* the value of actual things, by comparison with them, but cannot *contribute* to their value. Suppose the discussion is about the value of taking an umbrella on a certain day; the umbrella was taken, and it rained. Now the value of taking the umbrella, actually staying dry, is contrasted, admittedly, with the value of the merely hypothetical outcome of not taking it, getting wet. But the hypothetical alternative does not *contribute* to the value of taking the umbrella, it might be said; it merely *shows* the value of doing so.

But this appeal to the distinction between showing value and contributing to value is unconvincing. The hypothetical alternatives do not merely give us information about the value of taking the umbrella; they contribute to its value. We can see this by imagining changes to the hypothetical outcome that do not affect the facts about the actual outcome, taken by itself: suppose that, if the umbrella is not taken and it does rain, the rain will entirely miss the actor, by fluke. This change in the hypothetical alternative affects the value of taking the umbrella: it diminishes it. So the value of hypothetical alternatives is generally held to affect, not merely to show, the value of actual things.

In George’s case, of course, it is not true that refusing the job has no actual consequences at all. It has the actual ‘consequence’ (in the broad sense now standard in discussions of consequentialism) that the group act of general moratorium is *partly* realised. The whole moratorium, of course, is not within his power, but his part in it is, and he can realise this. Since we are elsewhere not embarrassed by talk of the value of hypothetical things, or by the idea that such value affects, and does not merely show, the value of actual things, and since we are elsewhere not embarrassed by the idea that the character of a whole contributes to the character of its part, why not say that his refusal is made rational by the unrealised moratorium? It is a real part of this otherwise unrealised whole, and the whole contributes to the character of his act. There is nothing obviously wrong in the mere idea that actions can be made rational by their membership of (otherwise) unrealised patterns of action.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup>In a somewhat similar vein, Nozick asks: “. . . why is actually leading to something so much better than symbolizing it that symbolization should not count at all? “Because that’s the bottom line, what actually occurs; all the rest is talk.” But why is this bottom line better than all other lines?” Nozick (1993, p. 30).

If this is admitted, then the weight is put on the second version of this first objection, which asks whether the appeal to unrealised possibilities is not circumscribed in arbitrary ways.<sup>12</sup> On this view, if we dispense with the willingness requirement and consider unrealised possibilities such as the moratorium in George's case, we may lack principled reasons to exclude many fanciful possibilities that we may wish to exclude. Why not, for example, consider the relationship between an action and some pattern of action that is physically possible (does not contravene any physical laws), but could not have been done by the group in the circumstances? Or why not consider patterns of action performable by merely *possible* people?

The underlying principle is that we should consider those patterns of action that the group in question *could* perform in the circumstances, regardless of whether each of its members is willing to perform her part.<sup>13</sup> Each of the chemists in George's case could refuse to develop further this technology, but most of them are unwilling to do so. So there is a proposal about how to circumscribe the counterfactuals to be considered; but the question is whether it is arbitrary.

This attitude to possibilities is in fact just our ordinary deliberative attitude to possibilities, in the first person case, generalised to include others' actions. In the first person case, in deliberation, a rational actor does not consider a possible action irrelevant because of her own unwillingness to perform it, but instead considers the full range of things she could do. The unwillingness might be thought to give rise to a prediction about her own behaviour, which could act as a parameter on her deliberative problem, the way that predictions about the behaviour of the rest of her environment do. But this is not what we do in deliberation: in deliberating about

---

<sup>12</sup>Susan Hurley pressed this objection in discussion. Parfit makes a broadly similar point in his response to Woodward on wrongdoing, in Parfit (1986, pp. 855–856).

<sup>13</sup>This principle may need augmenting in order to reach reflective equilibrium. If not augmented, it implies that an actor often has reasons to perform her parts in very many group actions, and these implications may outrun or conflict with our intuitions. As yet I am undecided between two lines of response to this problem: to accept the implications, and reject the intuitions; or to augment the principle with additional requirements. One possibility along the second line would be to claim that group-based reasons do not exist where the other members of the group are *reasonably unwilling* to play their parts. One could think of the disjunct (either willingness or unreasonableness) as being a trigger, as it were, for group-based reasons. This would help considerably in bringing implications back into line with intuitions – but clearly it would also need motivating in some more substantial way. I am grateful to many participants of the 2002 BSET conference, especially James Lenman, Michael Ridge, and Michael Smith, for pressing me on this point.

whether or not to do  $X$  at  $t$ , or indeed about whether to perform an extended sequence of actions of which doing  $X$  at  $t$  is a part, the rational actor *ignores* any predictions she might have about whether she will do  $X$  at  $t$ . This seems to be a presupposition of rational deliberation.<sup>14</sup>

In the first person case, then, we ignore our own unwillingness, and instead ask what we could do, when considering the range of actions that are relevant to a deliberative problem. My suggestion generalises this attitude to groups: a pattern of action by the group is capable of providing a reason to perform a constituent part of the pattern, so long as the group could perform this pattern of action – where that means that each member *could* play her part. It is not relevant to this issue whether each member is *willing* to play her part. Of course, willingness may be relevant to our estimation of the *strength* of any reason to play one's own part; but unwillingness is not an outright bar to the existence of such a reason in all cases – as the example of George illustrates.

It might be thought that the generalisation from the attitude we take towards possible actions in the first person case, to the group case, is illegitimate. Here is a disanalogy between the two. One reason why it is legitimate, when deliberating about whether to undertake a diet, say, to ignore the first-person prediction “I will not stick to it”, is that the prediction is not independent of the outcome of the deliberation. The disposition to stick to diets depends, in rational agents, on the keenness with which any reasons to diet or not to do so are felt. Hence it is rational to ignore the prediction, or, perhaps better, to suspend it, when deliberating about those reasons. However, the prediction that another person will not cooperate in some group action is often quite independent of the actor's deliberation about whether she has reason to play her part. There is not the same logical connection here as in the first person case, and so it may not be rational to suspend the prediction in the group case even if it is rational to do so in the first person case.

This is true, and it is an important point about the connection between deliberation and prediction in the first-person case. But it is additional to, and separate from, the reason why we ignore these predictions in deliberation: we ignore them whether or not they are logically dependent on

---

<sup>14</sup>Where we do not suspend predictions in this way in the first-person case, we are thought to be, in that respect, not fully rational. If I give up giving up smoking because I predict that I will never be able to give up *no matter how keenly I feel the reasons for giving up*, then I am in that respect not a fully rational *actor* – although of course giving up giving up might be the rational thing *to do*.

the outcome of deliberation, just because they are irrelevant to deliberation. One can see this by focusing on the most deeply embedded use of 'could do' in practical reasoning: its use to describe a range of options between which the actor must choose. Practical reasoning presupposes that there is a range of things the actor could do *if she chose*, and predictions about how she will act during this period are not simply suspended, but are just plain irrelevant, to the specification of this range of options.

The same goes for the extension of the idea, through time and across persons. Consider the extension through time first. If the actor is deliberating about whether to commit to a period of voluntary work, extending over six months, say, her prediction that she will sometimes lack the motivation to stick to her commitment is irrelevant *to the specification of her options*, the range of courses of action open to her and to which various reasons attach. It may be relevant to her judgement of the strength of reasons for committing or not committing, but it does not make commitment cease to be an option for her, and it does not make it the case that she has no reason to commit.

Likewise, the prediction that others will not cooperate may be relevant to the strength of group-based reasons, but it does not indicate that they do not exist. It is irrelevant to the question of whether a certain pattern of action for the group is an option for the group, and irrelevant also to the question of whether it can provide any reason at all to play one's part in that pattern of action. To repeat: this is not because recognition of such a reason has any effect on the dispositions of the other members, but because such predictions are in general irrelevant. In specifying options, we simply ask what people *could do if they chose*, not what they will do.

Hence the suggestion that any pattern of action is relevant that could be performed by the group, whether or not others are willing to cooperate, can be defended. It is not arbitrary to consider just these counterfactual possibilities.

## 8.

Now let me turn to the other obvious reason for insisting on the willingness requirement, which is, I think, often the decisive reason for espousal of it. Don't believers in group-based reasons have to endorse it in order to avoid concluding that agents have reason to do things that, in many circumstances, would have disastrous consequences?

There is no doubt that participating in group action when others are unwilling to cooperate can have disastrous consequences, and that often we

ought not to act in these ways. But this is no reason to adopt the willingness requirement. The willingness requirement is a scope restriction on group-based reasons for action, and the imposition of scope restrictions of this sort is ultimately an inflexible way of responding to complex circumstances.

Rather than adopting the willingness requirement, or any other scope restriction on group-based reasons, we should recognise conflict between group-based and individual-based reasons. That is, we should be *pluralists* about the *unit of agency*: holding that, for a single deliberative problem, both individual-based and group-based reasons – and plan-based reasons – may be relevant, and may be in conflict with each other.

Pluralism in this sense offers a more attractive way of avoiding disastrous implications: we can say, for example, that Jim should accept Pedro's offer, in Williams's other famous example, because his individual-based reasons to shoot are much stronger than his group-based reason not to shoot. In doing so we reach the same conclusion as someone who endorses the willingness requirement. But we pluralists can add that George ought to refuse the job, because his group-based reason is here stronger. In short, the willingness requirement exaggerates and distorts a truth: that where the other members are unwilling to cooperate, group-based reasons are usually relatively weak. This is true, but it is not true, as the willingness requirement claims, that in such cases they are non-existent.

Pluralism without the willingness requirement thus enables us to avoid disastrous implications, without the rigidity that comes from monism plus scope restrictions. It is in any case odd to think that there must always be only one unit of agency relevant to a deliberative problem – as even advocates of group-based reasons tend to believe, when they endorse *variability* in the unit of agency from one deliberative problem to another, without endorsing pluralism. In many cases we are faced with conflicting reasons that are not generated by conflicting values, but by conflicting modes in which we may act – as individuals, with or without extended plans, or as members of groups, of different sizes and composition, with or without extended plans. It is implausible to think that the complexity of judgements that such conflicts generate can be captured adequately by merely recognising variability in the unit of agency, as other advocates of group-based reasons do.

Pluralism about units of agency is so much more attractive than monism that it is hard to explain why monism has such a firm grip. Pluralism is plausible in itself. It enables us to avoid disastrous implications without invoking rigid scope restrictions, or other complex formulae such as Liam

Murphy's Collective Principle of Beneficence.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, it allows us to recognise conflict in reasons, in cases such as Jim's and George's, without having to invoke the idea of integrity, or ideas of agent relativity. The only insight into monism's extraordinarily undeserved eminence that I can suggest is to point out that monism and the willingness requirement are mutually supporting: if we are monists, we shall have to impose something like the willingness requirement in order to avoid disastrous implications; and if we accept the willingness requirement, as was pointed out earlier, we will not recognise genuine conflict between group-based and individual-based reasons, since the former appear to be mere supplements to the latter. But neither element of this edifice is worth supporting, and once we reject each one we can see the limited appeal of the other.

## 9.

Let me summarise my claims. First, I have endorsed the argument made by Regan, and elaborated by Hurley, for thinking that group based reasons exist. I added, though, that their interest is limited if we insist on the willingness requirement; and I claimed that we should reject the willingness requirement, and embrace not just the idea of variation in units of agency, but also pluralism about units of agency.

The willingness requirement mistakenly construes willingness as determining the *existence* of group-based reasons for action, when it is really just one of the most important factors determining their *strength*. Cases where the consequences of playing one's part are not deleterious to others reveal most clearly the existence of group-based reasons even when the willingness requirement is not met – as in George's case, but also in other market cases, where unilateral refusal to participate often has deleterious consequences for oneself but not for others, whilst also not benefiting them. In these cases, although the individual act of refusal to participate may be suboptimal, it may be rational because it is part of an unrealised group action that is rational.

The chief motivation for the willingness requirement is probably tacit monism about the unit of agency, together with the fear of disastrous implications. But we can avoid disastrous implications by adopting a *more complex structure*, rather than *fancy scope rules* – that is, by adopting pluralism about the unit of agency, which allows us to recognise conflicts

---

<sup>15</sup>Murphy (2000, chapter 7).

between individual-based and group-based reasons. Indeed, pluralism in this sense is attractive in its own right. For example, it may help us to explain some apparently agent-relative intuitions, without falling into the paradoxes that agent-relativity has seemed to many to bring.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to the Leverhulme Trust for supporting *The Rationality of Acquiescence*, a project of which this paper forms a part. I am grateful also to Michael Bacharach, Jerry Cohen, Susan Hurley, Larry Temkin, Andrew Williams, and participants of the British Society for Ethical Theory 2002 Annual Conference, hosted at the University of Reading, for very helpful discussions of these issues.

#### REFERENCES

- Gilbert, M., *On Social Facts*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.
- Glover, J., It Makes No Difference Whether Or Not I Do It. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplement Volume 49* (1975) pp. 171–190.
- Hollis, M., and Sugden, R., Rationality in Action. *Mind* 102 (1993), pp. 1–35.
- Hurley, S.L., *Natural Reasons*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- McClellan, E.F., *Rationality and Dynamic Choice. Foundational Explorations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- Murphy, L.B., *Moral Demands in Nonideal Theory*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Nozick, R., *The Nature of Rationality*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.
- Parfit, D., Comments. *Ethics* 96 (1986), pp. 832–872.
- Parfit, D., *Reasons and Persons*. Reprint with corrections. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987.
- Regan, D., *Utilitarianism and Co-operation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980.
- Tuomela, R., *The Importance of Us*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995.
- Williams, B., A Critique of Utilitarianism, in J.J.C. Smart and B. Williams (eds.), *Utilitarianism: For and Against*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973.

*Department of Philosophy*  
*University of Nottingham*  
*University Park*  
*Nottingham NG7 2RD, UK*  
*E-mail: christopher.woodard@nottingham.ac.uk*

