

Collective Agency

Can the state be an agent? (Can the state be a person?)

By the way

This guy is the Leviathan as pictured on an early edition of Thomas Hobbes' book. It represents the state. Note how in this illustration the state is made up of many individuals.

Project outline

Observation

What is a state doing? What rights does a state have? In philosophy, the former (doing something) refers to *agency*. The latter (having rights) refers to *personhood*.

Observation: We ascribe actions and rights to states. The relation of group-actions and group-rights to individual actions and individual rights is, however, not clear.

Examples

- Germany bailing out Greece.
- "China sends woman into space".
- Realist school in IR takes states to be agents.
- States claim sovereignty and self-determination.
- States claim right to levy taxes.

Problem

Two challenges from this observation:

- 1st Understanding individual-group relationship.
- 2nd Fitting philosophical conceptions of personhood and agency to groups.

On the first: There are two opposing camps on this issue. One emphasises the individual, the properties of which are taken as primitive. The other emphasises the group. The study of complex systems with "emergent" properties might provide formalisations that are able to combine both.

Approach

On the second challenge: Philosophical conceptions of agency and personhood are difficult to be applied to groups. However, in daily life and in many academic disciplines we readily explain or justify the actions of states. This requires an investigation, and possibly a revision of the philosophical

conceptions. It will proceed in three steps. The first step is to clarify the philosophical conceptions, i.e. analysing them into their central assumptions. Those assumptions form sets of necessary and sufficient conditions. The second step is to see if those assumptions are well founded. What justifies these necessary or sufficient conditions for agency or personhood? Or in other words: what is an agent sensibly construed? The third step asks the question: can groups meet these revised conceptions of agency and personhood? The third step sees, as it were, how these conceptions can be applied in practice. It would mean giving in account of what it means to say that the state is doing something, or that the state has the right to something. This is the aim of this PhD project.

Research

This project pursues two research questions.

Positive question: what conceptions of agency and personhood are *possible* candidates to be applied to the state?

Normative question: which of these conceptions of agency and personhood should a state implement?

Summary

An explanation of the state faces two philosophical challenges:

- 1st challenge: Complexity of relationship between individual and group.
- 2nd challenge: Philosophical conceptions seem deficient.

On the first: Requires formalisation. Possibly: Multi-Agent-Models, Social Choice. On the second: Expound and adapt conceptions to fit to groups in three steps.

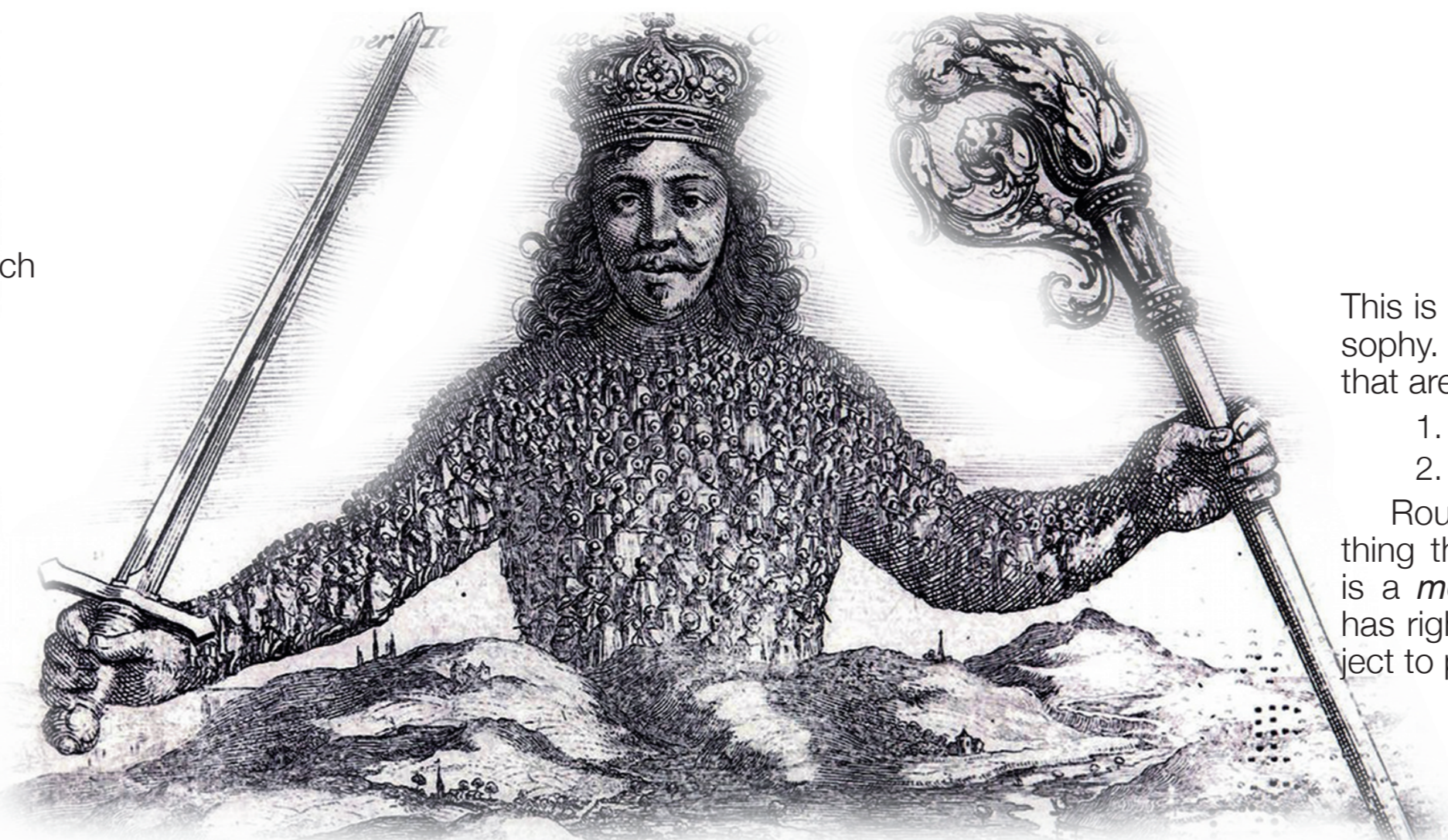
1. Clarify conceptions into necessary and sufficient conditions.
2. Evaluate conceptions, are all conditions justified?
3. Apply conceptions to groups, can they be made to fit?

Philosophers investigate concepts. This project runs different conceptions of agency against each other and applies them to groups.

Weighing arguments from proponents of different conceptions **might appear tedious.**

Nevertheless, **there is something at stake.** Even though a concept like agency seems far removed from our everyday lives, it does figure into other concepts that we employ. It is central to explanations in the social sciences and in ethics it is a precondition for responsibility.

Summary



Philosophical method

Topic

This is a PhD research project in philosophy. It **investigates two concepts** that are central to philosophy:

1. Agency,
2. Personhood.

Roughly speaking an **agent** is a thing that *does* something. A **person** is a *moral* agent, i.e. something that has rights and duties and can be subject to praise and blame.

Concepts

Philosophy often deals with:

- Concepts: the general idea.
- Conceptions, which spell the idea out in greater detail.

The *concept* is that "agency" means "doing something". That's not good enough for philosophers. They will ask "What does that mean: 'doing something'? Will I have to move my arm for that?". An answer to such questions will be a *conception* of agency.

One short answer might be: "An agent is a thing that has beliefs and desires and that acts such that its desires are met."

Example

Assume you want to have a coffee (your desire) and you know that they sell coffee at the Garrick (your belief), you might go to the Garrick and buy yourself an Americano (your action).

This belief-desire model is the humane conception of agency named after David Hume. There are other conceptions of agency, which might talk about consciousness or "the self".

Relevance

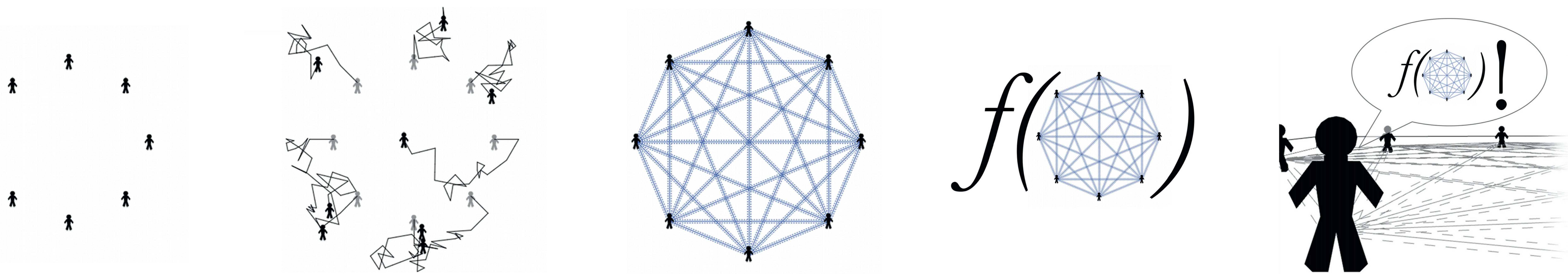
Discussions about conceptions can appear tedious. You know, philosophers don't really answer questions, ever. Nevertheless, those discussions are often important.

First, they are important for explanations. Whatever you want to explain in the social sciences, you want to know how a certain phenomenon came about. You ask: "Who did it? This is the question of agency."

Secondly, you want to blame your class teacher for wasting your time. However, she can only be responsible for something she actually did. What did she do in wasting your time? This is where agency comes in. Before holding somebody responsible, it needs to be clear what action is we

Methods

Philosophy is actually similar to maths. You stipulate premises, assumptions, and conditions to produce results. However, the methods philosophers use and the things that they let go into their arguments are not only philosophical. Intuitions or findings from other sciences play a role in arguments. This PhD project is interdisciplinary in borrowing from models of Social Choice Theory, multi-agent-models, or models in theoretical biology.



A group

There are **five steps in a process to group agency**.

First you need a group. This is usually a collection of individuals. However, it is also more than that. For example, if you replace two individual members by two others, is it still the

same group? If your answer is yes, then there seems to be more to what makes a group than its individual members.

Unfortunately, these are two difficult questions in one: metaphysics of groups, and identity over time!

Information Search

Before making a decision, members in a group search for information. Their success depends on *how* the individuals search (will they work together?) and what the information *looks* like (it could be like a jigsaw where each individual finds a piece but you only get

the full picture once you put the different pieces together).

Questions like these are issues in epistemology, in particular in *social* epistemology, which now is taken to be a separate field within "the study of knowledge".

Information Exchange

Consider an academic tenure committee. Each committee member has reviewed the application and searched for information about the applicant. Then you meet and discuss and deliberate. Deliberation is one very common way of exchanging information.

There are good formal models of information exchange and information updating for individuals and groups. Research into such models is also a topic in social epistemology.

Aggregation

Now it is time to make a decision: will Dr. Goofy be promoted to Prof. Goofy? This could be decided by voting. However, on what to vote is not straight-forward. Do you only vote on whether the applicant should be promoted? Or do you consider whether

Dr. Goofy meets each of the different requirements?

A group's decision is very sensitive to its aggregation (or voting) procedure. This is the driving topic in Social Choice Theory and Judgment Aggregation.

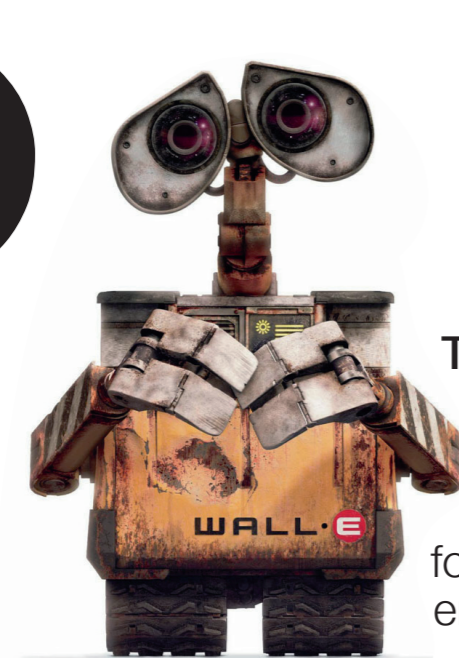
Implementation

Now the decision must be implemented. This can be done by the chairman of the committee who will send the promotion to Dr. Goofy. The chairman acts on behalf of the group. Boards in companies have spokespersons to speak on their behalf.

The phenomenon of "acting on someone's behalf" might not seem very far-fetched. However, existing conceptions of action in philosophy struggle to accommodate this.

Literature List, C. & Pettit, P. (2011), Group Agency: The Possibility, Design, and Status of Corporate Agents., OUP.

Can it be an agent?



1. Futuristic robot

YES NO

Tick according to your intuitions. Can it be an agent? Consider Wall-E, the robot. Supposedly it can perform all the cognitive and emotive processes humans

can perform. It can fall in love! Clearly, however, it lacks any similarity to human agents with regard to its material makeup. It's a machine! Can the robot still be an agent?



2. Animals

YES NO

It might sound odd that an ordinary chicken is an agent. Consider however: animal behaviour can be complex. Just think of the clever ways in which birds obtain food! Or think of your dog. We ascribe

beliefs and desires to animals to make sense of them. Also they have a biological makeup just similar to ours. Can a chicken or a dog be an agent?



3. Humans

YES NO

Now consider a regular human being. Take Bob the builder (assume he is a human being). Clearly, a builder does something, he builds a house. And something that makes things must be an agent. Also humans have a biological makeup and satisfy some rationality requirements. Often they can even be called reasonable. Can a human be an agent?



4. Agent of a powerful system

YES NO

This agent might only be called "agent". Until he breaks free he is controlled by the Matrix. Agent Smith does what the matrix tells

him. He is an agent in the sense of principal-agent theory in economics. Not being free to choose he executes or implements someone else's plans. Is he really an agent?