



## Article

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# Collective Action and Social Ontology in Thomas Aquinas

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**Abstract:** In this paper I argue that there are resources in the work of Thomas Aquinas that amount to a unique approach to what David P. Schweikard and Hans Bernhard Schmid’s call the “Central Problem” facing theorists of collective intentionality and action. That is to say, Aquinas can be said to affirm both (1) the “Individual Ownership Claim” and (2) the “Irreducibility Claim,” coherently and compellingly. Regarding the Individual Ownership Claim, I argue that Aquinas’s concept of “general virtue” (*virtus generalis*) buttresses an account of the way in which individuals act collectively *qua* individuals, i.e., without invoking hive minds or other scientifically problematic phenomena. Further, with respect to the Irreducibility Claim (2), I argue that Aquinas’s concept of “common good” (*bonum commune*) offers an account of the way in which some powers and acts of social groups are importantly irreducible to those of their members. Considered together, I argue that these two positions in Aquinas are correlative, and therefore amount to a coherent account of collective action and group agency, respectively.

**Keywords:** Aquinas, social ontology, collective intentionality, metaphysics, virtue ethics

## 1 Introduction

Collective intentionality is a term of art in contemporary analytic social ontology. In rough terms, it denotes the principle by which individuals intend and act

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*together*, as opposed to “individual” intending and acting.<sup>1</sup> To cite a standard example from the literature, it is easy to see that going shopping *together* with others is importantly different from just going shopping, i.e., in a manner that is relevantly indifferent to the presence of others—even others who happen to have similar or identical intentions in spatio-temporal proximity (Bratman 1999; Gilbert 1989; Searle 2010; Tollefsen 2017; Tuomela 2013). What is not easy to see, among other things, is precisely what the English adverb *together* means in such contexts. Whether we are interested in individuals forming spontaneous, informal shopping groups – or large-scale, highly organized institutions – intending and acting together is a fundamental, pervasive feature of human experience that calls for explanation. Collective intentionality and action are concepts designed to account for this “together-ness” (Schloßberger 2016).

There is such a plethora of positions and methodological approaches in the expansive literature on collective intentionality and action that it makes useful generalizations hard to come by. Yet there does seem to be at least one point of consensus: namely, that theorists of collective intentionality ought to abide by two fundamental constraints mentioned by Schweikard (2013) in their *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on the subject. That is to say, theorists of collective intentionality and action ought to affirm both of the following claims:

1. *The Individual Ownership Claim*: “Collective intentionality is had by the participating individuals [of a given social group], and all the intentionality an individual has is his or her own.”
2. *The Irreducibility Claim*: “Collective intentionality is no simple summation, aggregate, or distributive pattern of individual intentionality” (Schweikard 2013, p. 2).

These two claims are intuitive when taken individually, but appear to be in tension or even contradictory when considered together. Thus, the “Central Problem” (2013, p. 2) faced by theorists of collective intentionality concerns how to affirm (1) and (2) together coherently—or, at the very least, to account for their respective intuitiveness in some way.

In this paper I argue that there are resources in the work of Thomas Aquinas that, when considered together, amount to a unique approach to Schweikard and

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<sup>1</sup> Here I am basically following Michael Schmitz (2016, p. 56): “We want to understand how the members of a group are bound together, what turns them into a group... It’s useful to distinguish attempts to accomplish this balancing act in terms of where they solely or predominantly locate *collectivity*.”

Schmid's Central Problem with respect to collective *action*.<sup>2</sup> That is to say, Aquinas can be said to affirm both (1) Individual Ownership and (2) Irreducibility claims, coherently and compellingly.<sup>3</sup> Regarding the Individual Ownership claim, I argue that Aquinas's concept of "general virtue" (*virtus generalis*) buttresses an account of the way in which individuals act collectively, i.e., without invoking hive minds or other scientifically problematic phenomena. Further, with respect to the Irreducibility claim (2), I argue that Aquinas's concept of "common good" (*bonum commune*) offers an account of the way in which select powers and acts of social groups are importantly irreducible to those of their members. Considered together, I argue that these two positions in Aquinas are correlative, and therefore amount to a coherent account of collective action and group agency, respectively.

The argument proceeds in two major sections: (1) an interpretation of the role of general virtue in Aquinas' analysis of collective action; and (2) an interpretation of Aquinas' notion of common good, especially as it pertains to the irreducibility of social groups.

## 2 Aquinas on Collective Action

I begin with some ground-clearing regarding Aquinas' view of intentional action in general, especially insofar as it involves the phenomenon of *virtue*. I argue that, for Aquinas, collective acts are those qualified by a "mode of action" caused by general virtues—that is, virtues that are conditioned by and ordered to the common good of a given social group. What follows is a brief overview of the basic principles undergirding Aquinas' account of intentional action generally, and collective action specifically. The resulting picture of collective action, I argue, amounts to Aquinas' unique theoretical expression of the Individual Ownership Claim.

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<sup>2</sup> Aquinas' doctrine of intentionality obviously goes far beyond just action (see, e.g., Lisska 2016), but for focus' sake in this essay I limit my attention to collective action, as opposed to collective intentionality more broadly.

<sup>3</sup> Therefore my thesis is certainly anachronistic in the sense that it reconstructs a single, unified theoretical approach drawn from mostly disparate remarks in various works of Aquinas. It is important to note that the phenomenon of collective action and group agency as theorized by contemporary philosophers never comes up as a singular item of reflection to be pursued for its own sake by Aquinas. This is the case for many characteristic philosophical positions Aquinas takes throughout his career (see Deely 2002). This point notwithstanding, I do claim that the following reconstruction of Aquinas' position is nevertheless faithful to what he *does* say about these and related questions—as well as adequately representative of inferences that are available therefrom.

## 2.1 General Principles

Many commentators have noted that Aquinas' doctrine of intentionality raises significant difficulties for modern readers given its reliance upon classical Aristotelian metaphysical categories such as, e.g., the principles of act and potency, form and matter, etc. (Anscombe and Geach 1961; Haldane 2010; Kenny 1994; Lisska 2016). In fact, perhaps the most important thing to recognize about Aquinas' doctrine of intentionality, generally, is that it is above all else a metaphysics of mind. That is to say, rather than conceiving of the "philosophy of mind" as a more or less unique philosophical discipline that involves its own distinctive principles and categories, Aquinas' approach instead operates on the assumption that intentionality is first and foremost the unique *mode of existence* enjoyed by objects insofar as they are perceived and known—what Aquinas calls "intentional existence" (*esse intentionale*).<sup>4</sup> To have an account of intentionality in light of Aquinas' approach, then, is to have a metaphysics of intentional existence—an "ontology of the knowing [intentional] situation" (Lisska 2016, p. 33). In short, the principles undergirding Aquinas' account of collective action are general metaphysical principles, albeit applied to the context of intentional agents.

For Aquinas, a person's identity endures over time by virtue of her soul, which is understood as the substantial form of the body. The soul's powers together account for the distinctive acts proper to a human form of life (*Sent. De An.*, I.14).<sup>5</sup> The most important of these distinctively human powers for our purposes is "will" (*voluntas*), since it is the individual's person's will that is the ultimate subject of her collective acts. At the most general level, the characteristic act of will is "desire" (*appetere*), which encompasses many other intentions and acts which, taken together, constitute a lifelong, ecstatic inclination toward its ultimate end: namely, "happiness" (*beatitudo*) (*S.th.*, 1-2.2.8c). This is Aquinas' "big picture" of intentional action, and it is from this larger picture that individual intentions and acts are ultimately individuated as parts.

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<sup>4</sup> The distinction between "intentional" and "natural" existence occurs many times throughout Aquinas' corpus to denote objects existing "in the mind" and "in reality," respectively (see, e.g., *QD de Ver.* 22.3 ad 4).

<sup>5</sup> I use the following abbreviations throughout to refer to the texts of Aquinas: "*Sent. De An.*" = *Sententia libri De anima* (Leonine Ed.); "*S.th.*" = *Summa theologiae* (Leonine Ed.); "*Sent. Pol.*" = *Sententia libri Politicorum* (Leonine Ed.); "*Sent. Ethic.*" = *Sententia libri Ethicorum* (Leonine Ed.); "*De Reg.*" = *De regno ad regem Cypri* (Leonine Ed.); "*In Met.*" = *In duodecim libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis exposition* (Marietti Ed.); "*QD de Ver.*" = *Quaestiones disputatae De veritate* (Leonine Ed.); "*QD de Virt.*" = *Quaestiones Disputatae de virtutibus*. All English translations mine unless otherwise noted.

Note that it is *desire*—not “choice,” construed as spontaneous movement toward one or more “options”—that is the most fundamental act of will here.<sup>6</sup> The primacy of desire with respect to choice undergirds his position that intended ends are (final) *causes* of individual intentions and actions (*S.th.*, 1.82.4c). Even if the will is relatively “self-moving” as compared to bodily passions (*S.th.*, 1.82.2 *ad* 3), its individual acts of desire are nevertheless specified by their objects or ends. Thus, according to Aquinas, it is of course true that I am perfectly capable of “choosing” one or more options from a dinner menu, but only insofar as I understand my chosen meal *as good*, i.e., as the end of my particular act of desire (*S.th.*, 1.82.4 *ad* 3). If there were no object presented to the will as desirable, there would be no corresponding act or the will's desire ends (*S.th.*, 1.77.3c).

However, reasons Aquinas, because we do not obtain our various desired ends immediately, we are in need of *means*. This leads us to Aquinas' doctrine of intentional action. Properly speaking, for Aquinas, the will's act of *intending* (*intendere*) is uniquely characterized by its “tending toward” an end *by means of* something else (*S.th.*, 1-2.12.1 *ad* 4). It is precisely this act of ordering means to ends that constitutes intending, in Aquinas' sense.<sup>7</sup> At the restaurant, again, there is a sense in which I *desire* a falafel salad absolutely; however, more specifically on Aquinas' analysis, I *intend* the falafel salad (i.e., to consume it) to the extent that I make use of my various means of obtaining it (e.g., using language for the purposes of ordering, my implicit agreement to pay for the meal, etc.).

Now of course it is also the case that I also intend some other end for which the falafel salad is chosen as a means (e.g., a pleasant dining experience, bodily health, etc.), but the falafel salad is not both a means and an end in some sort of contradictory sense. Rather, in such a case, there are simply two distinct ends in one larger “order” of intention (see *S.th.*, 1-2.12.3c).

So the soul's power of will is specified by its distinctive acts, and acts are in turn specified by their distinctive objects or ends. But there remains one more core principle in Aquinas' schema that is especially important for his account of collective action: namely, the concept of virtue (*virtus*). For Aquinas virtues are *habits* that play a direct role in the moral growth of human beings (*S.th.*, 1-2.55.1sc). They are patterns of human desire and intention that are built up over time by successive choices. They order the subject's passions, practical understanding, and choices in

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<sup>6</sup> For Aquinas, choice is a subsidiary act of will that indicates a movement towards one *means* (among others) to an already intended end (*S.th.*, 1.82.1 *ad* 3).

<sup>7</sup> Thus ‘intentionality’ as theorized by contemporary philosophers denotes something more all-encompassing than Aquinas' *intendere*. For a consciously Thomistic account of the virtues that operates with a more holistic notion of intentionality, see Wilkins 2011.

psychologically healthy ways (cf. Annas 2003).<sup>8</sup> In short, they are principles of right living—comparable to what we today might characterize as practical expertise or “skill” (e.g., in music, painting, sports, etc.) in that they amount to a sort of *skillful* ordering of means to ends. Unlike intentional powers such as intellect and will, virtues do not follow upon the “natural” necessity of human nature as such (*S.th.*, 1-2.55.1). Rather, they have to be *acquired* through successive choices that we may or may not make. As it happens, these properties make virtue—distinct from powers and acts—a good candidate for the primary locus of collective action insofar as acting *qua* a member of a particular group requires habituation into one’s role or function in the context of a social group’s distinctive common good. In other words, on Aquinas’ analysis, what it takes for a soldier, citizen or family member to act collectively is precisely to acquire and develop the virtues necessary for her function as part of her social group. As we will see, Aquinas’ notion of virtue plays a role similar to what some contemporary philosophers (Epstein 2015; Tuomela 2013) have called the “social glue” binding groups together in a way that is (in paradigmatic cases, at least) not easily broken.

In fact, even if virtues are built up by successive choices, it is important that they are not just identical with those choices considered as an aggregate. In fact, says Aquinas, the most important feature of virtue is that it is a *principle of action* (*S.th.*, 1-2.55.2 *ad* 1) insofar as it “makes for an ordered operation” (*facit operationem ordinatum*) in the agent who has acquired the virtue. In other words, once acquired, virtues play a causal role with respect to virtuous acts. So virtues are *effects* of successive intentional acts in that the latter are necessary conditions for the acquisition of the former. But virtues are *causes* of in that they condition the “mode of action” (*modus actionis*) of the agent (*S.th.*, 1-2.55.2 *ad* 1) once they are acquired. It is this “mode of action” that distinguishes virtuous acts from acts that merely happen to be good (*QD de Virt.* 1.9 *ad* 13).<sup>9</sup> For, unlike such

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**8** It is important to recognize that one’s *grasp* of moral self-understanding is itself an integral part of virtue. As Julia Annas (2003) remarks, “[I]n many societies the obvious models for courage are macho ones, and focus on sports or war stories. A boy may grow up thinking that these are the paradigmatic contexts for courage, and have various views about courage and cowardice which take this for granted. But ... [f]urther reflection will show that the macho grasp of courage was limited and isolated, and will drive him to ask what links all these very different cases of bravery. As he comes to understand what bravery is, he becomes more critical of the views that he first was taught, or found obvious, and modifies or rejects some of his original judgements and attitudes.”

**9** In this passage Aquinas distinguishes acts that are virtuous “with respect to what is done” (*quantum ad id quod agitur*) from acts that are virtuous “with respect to the mode of acting” (*quantum ad modum agendi*). The former (what I call “merely good” acts) can be produced by persons who are not yet virtuous, whereas the latter can only be produced by someone who has successfully acquired the relevant virtue.

merely good acts, a virtuous act is systematically related to the acquisition of habits acquired by successive choices in a given domain of moral experience.

We can tell the difference between merely good and virtuous acts, says Aquinas, by identifying the latter's proper mode of action: "before acquiring the habit of virtue someone does not do the works of virtue as the virtuous one does, namely, promptly and without doubt and with pleasure and easily" (*QD de Virt.* 1.9 ad 13). The upshot here is that virtuous acts are not a distinct *species* of intentional act; rather, they are virtuous because of the *mode* in which they are carried out, i.e., with assurance, pleasure and ease. It is this mode of action that is the primary "evidence" of the act's being an effect of virtue.<sup>10</sup>

For Aquinas, then, virtues are habits that play an integral role in the desires, practical self-understanding and acts that, together, constitute a lifelong process of moral formation. Virtues are not natural capacities, and so they have to be acquired by skilled habituation (*S.th.*, 1-2.66.1-2). However, virtues are nevertheless *principles* of desiring, intending and acting insofar as they dispose their respective powers to perform such operations in a virtuous mode.

So Aquinas' account of intentional action involves four main metaphysical building blocks: (1) intentional *powers* such as the will, which are the proper causes of intentional acts; (2) intentional *acts* such as desiring and choosing, which are specified by their distinctive objects or ends; (3) intentional *objects* such as the consumption of food or a sonata successfully played, which serve as final causes for intentional acts; and finally (4) *virtues*, which condition the unique mode in which intentional acts are carried out. But if this brief sketch concerns Aquinas' account of intentional action in general, what about *collective* intentional action? After all, the abovementioned "Central Problem" of collective intentionality concerns the way in which individuals intend and act as members of social groups. Aquinas' answer, I argue, comes in the form of an analysis of the notion of "general virtue": properly *collective* intentional acts are those conditioned by general virtues. Therefore we now turn to Aquinas' distinction between "specific" and "general" virtue, with special reference to the virtue of *justitia* as a case study.

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**10** Julia Annas (2011, 13–14) captures something close to what Aquinas means by "mode of action" in her analogy of "skill" and "skilled action": Suppose I am learning to play the piano.... I need first to work out consciously what is the right thing to do and then get used to doing it over and over again. This goes on from learning notes to learning scales and arpeggios and then learning how to play sonatas. As I become a skilled piano player (here the 'I' becomes fictional) I can play sonatas and other pieces in a way that, as with driving, proceeds without conscious thinking." The point is that virtuous acts are similar to skilled acts in that they are carried out in a way that evidences the cultivation of habit.

## 2.2 General Virtue and Collective Action

So virtues are principles of acting in that they are acquired habits in the exercise of a given power. In short, to desire, intend and act *virtuously* is to do so in a “skilled” mode. Yet this on its own is not enough to account for the primary desideratum collective action: namely, the aforementioned phenomenon of intending and acting *together*.

Specific virtue (*virtus specialis*) is more familiar in popular renderings of virtue ethics than is general virtue (*virtus generalis*). Specific virtues are habits pertaining to the moral formation of individuals *qua* individuals. Like all virtues, they are specified by their distinctive acts, which are in turn specified by their objects. The virtues of temperance and courage are good examples of specific virtues, since they pertain to operations individuated by *specific* domains of human moral experience—in this case, the healthy management of pleasure and fear, respectively.<sup>11</sup>

General virtues are different—and importantly so, for the discussion of collective action. Although they are also specified by their object, general virtues are unlike specific virtues in that they pertain not to one specific domain of moral experience among others, but rather to the *whole* of human moral experience insofar as it can be ordered to the common good of a given social group. This is important for our thesis, since the common good turns out to be the ordering principle of collective action in Aquinas’ schema.

In order to appreciate this point, we turn to the discussion of justice in *Summa theologiae* 2-2.58.6, in which Aquinas details what makes general virtue “general”:

A thing is said to be ‘general’ in two ways. First, by predication [*per praedicationem*]: thus ‘animal’ is general in relation to ‘man’ and ‘horse’ and the like.... Secondly, a thing is said to be general according to power [*secundum virtutem*]; thus, a universal cause is general in relation to all its effects. (*S.th.*, 2-2.58.6c)

The former meaning of “general” is not relevant here. *Virtus generalis* is not a “genus” or “set” to which specific virtues such as temperance and courage belong as species or members. Instead, the way in which a given *virtus generalis* is “general” with respect to specific virtues concerns generality “according to power” (*secundum virtutem*)—that is, as a principle is general with respect to that

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<sup>11</sup> For Aquinas, specific virtues are distinct insofar as they each have a distinctive *materia circa quam* or “matter about which.” For example, as Austin remarks in Austin 2017, p.112, “Anger can be a well-ordered and entirely reasonable passion, as when someone is duly angered by an injustice.... [So] anger can be considered as capable of being manifested either way. Anger considered thusly, as potentially either morally good or bad, is the matter of the virtue of gentleness.”



of which it is the principle (*Sent. Pol.*, III.3.7). Other examples of this sort of generality include the way in which a Euclidean point is general with respect to a line, or indeed the way in which God is general with respect to his creation (*In Met.*, XII.12.37). That is, something is general *secundum virtutem* if it stands to what is specific as a formal condition of possibility and ordering principle. Without Euclidean points, a line cannot exist; without God, creation cannot exist; and, in the same way, without general virtue, specific virtue cannot exist.

This formal point about generality is illustrated in Aquinas' rendering of the traditional Aristotelian distinction between general and particular justice.<sup>12</sup> On the one hand, all forms of justice are properly "social" in the sense that all just acts are acts that render *unto another* her right according to some mode of equality (*S.th.*, 2-2.58.2). The nub of the distinction between particular and general justice, however, has to do with its proper object. As Aquinas remarks in the previous article,

Justice ... orders someone in relation to others. Now this may happen in two ways: first, as regards his relation with individuals; second, as regards his relations with others in general, insofar someone serves a community, serves all those who are included in that community.... Now it is evident that all who are included in a community stand in relation to that community as parts to a whole; while a part, as such, belongs to a whole, so that whatever is the good of a part can be directed to the good of the whole. It follows therefore that the good of any virtue, whether such virtue directs one in relation to oneself, or in relation to certain other individual persons, is referable to the common good, to which justice directs: so that all acts of virtue can pertain to justice, in so far as it directs one to the common good. It is in this sense that justice is called a general virtue. (*S.th.*, 2-2.58.5c)

This passage gets to the heart of Aquinas' account of justice, and general virtue, by extension. Particular or "specific" justice is that habit of will by which we relate ourselves to others in a way that is befitting to the respective dignity of other individual members of society (*S.th.*, 2-2.61.1). Acts of "commutative" justice are paradigmatic in this regard, since commutative justice "consists in mutual dealings between two [or more] persons" in such a way as to be "blind" to social status, honor or other qualities intelligible only in light of a given social group. Acts of commutative justice include, for example, economic transactions that are obedient to some sort of "just price," i.e., a price that adequately reflects the respective needs

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**12** The *locus classicus* of this distinction in Aristotle is *Nicomachean Ethics* (Aristotle 2012, 1130b–1131a): "the actions that spring from virtue in general are in the main identical with the actions that are according to law, since the law enjoins conduct displaying the various particular virtues.... Particular Justice on the other hand, and that which is just in the sense corresponding to it, is divided into two kinds. One kind [i.e., distributive justice] is exercised in the distribution of honor, wealth, and the other divisible assets of the community.... The other kind [i.e., reciprocal justice] is that which supplies a corrective principle in private transactions."

of individual buyers and sellers in a marketplace (*S.th.*, 2-2.77.1). Still, ultimately the virtue of specific or particular justice pertains to the perfection of *oneself*, i.e., insofar as one's moral perfection must include one's ability to relate oneself unto others in accordance with their dignity as persons.

General justice is importantly different. It too orders acts as they pertain to the respective dignity of others. Yet it does so not *qua individual*, but rather *qua part* of a social whole.<sup>13</sup> This point lies behind an oft-made refrain in the Aristotelian tradition: “the virtue of the good [individual] is not the same (*simpliciter*) as the virtue of the good citizen” (*S.th.*, 2-2.58.6sc). Whereas acts of commutative justice belong properly to individuals, acts of general justice belong properly to *citizens*, i.e., *parts* of a social *whole*. In other words, general justice is the acquired habit that is an individual's functional membership in a community. In the next section, I will work to get clearer about the precise sense in which individual citizens (and various institutions comprising the political community) can be called “parts” belonging to a properly social “whole”.<sup>14</sup>

As the aforementioned passage indicates, it is because the common good orders individual goods as their principle and their end that general virtue is general. This is the sense in which collective acts are collective, i.e., insofar as they are causally conditioned by general virtues. While the same (specific) acts might be individual or collective in a given context, the “together-ness” of collective action lies in its uniquely social mode—that is, a mode of action conditioned by general virtue and thus ordered to the common good, which among other things is the collective good of a given social whole that relevant individuals intend as parts.<sup>15</sup>

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**13** Aquinas is not clear about what conditions must be in place for there to exist a social group that is a “whole” in the sense relevant for collective action; however, the sorts of social groups he mentions as examples (political communities, armies, families, etc.) are all distinctive on account of their formal diversity of functions/roles. On this point, see below for the discussion of Aquinas' distinction of heterogeneous and homogenous wholes.

**14** It may be objected that this account cannot accommodate the existence of general justice between citizens belonging to different *civitates*. But the account can accommodate this sort of situation as long as there is a larger whole in which these citizens might exist as parts, i.e., in the way that two cities might belong to a province, or two nations might belong to the same international political unit. The key point for Aquinas is that general justice involves what the part owes to the whole (whatever that whole might be). Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising this point.

**15** It should be noted again that Aquinas' account of general justice resonates strongly with contemporary mode theorists of collective action (e.g., Searle 2010; Tuomela 2013) insofar as he identifies its unique social aspect with the *mode* in which the act is carried out (i.e., as opposed to the “subject” or “content” of the intentional act).

## 2.3 The Individual Ownership Claim

So the basic building blocks of Aquinas' theory of intentional action in general are powers, acts and objects. Powers are specified by their distinctive acts, and acts are specified by their distinctive objects or ends. However, in addition to these building blocks, there is the "intermediate" principle of virtue, which I have defined as an acquired habit that plays a causal role with respect to properly virtuous acts. But virtues are specific and general. Unlike specific virtues, which concern one specific domain of moral experience, general virtue is marked by a person's acquired ability to order the entirety of her intentional acts to the common good insofar as she is part of some social group. It is this modality of intentional action that makes it "collective" in the relevant sense.

It should be noted that all four of these building blocks are properties of individual souls, not groups. Only individual souls have wills, and so ultimately the intentional acts that proceed therefrom by way of *efficient* causality are proper to those individuals. Thus even collective action—i.e., acts produced by general virtues—are carried out by individuals with the relevant virtues. An individual group member who acts for the common good of a social group does not cease to be an individual—even when she is acting *qua* part of a social whole.

Therefore Aquinas can affirm that it is the individual group member who acquires general virtue, and thus also engages in collective action. There is no danger of positing a single group hive mind or otherwise violating the theoretical constraint set by the Individual Ownership Claim. However, as I will now try to show, there is also a sense in which Aquinas' account of collective action is also anti-reductionist in its implications for the ontology and agency of social groups considered as objects in their own right.

## 3 Aquinas on Social Groups

Having sketched this account at the level of individual members of social wholes, we are now in a position to turn to the difficult question of the unity of social wholes *as such* in Aquinas' analysis. Insofar as he consistently holds that at least some social groups are importantly irreducible to their individual members, Aquinas can be said to affirm the Irreducibility Claim. In fact, I argue that Aquinas does offer such an account.

Three explicit convictions on the subject are especially important for Aquinas' account of social groups: (1) social groups are formally irreducible to their members as individuals; (2) social groups have emergent causal powers; and (3)

social groups enjoy a certain numerical unity, as opposed to mere qualitative unity. As we will see, these three convictions turn out to be correlative, and together they amount to the most important features of Aquinas' social ontology.

### 3.1 Social Groups as Heterogenous Wholes

An important position that Aquinas endorses with respect to the ontological constitution of social groups is that they are “heterogenous” rather than “homogenous” wholes (*S.th.*, 1.11.2). Responding to an objection arising out of the commentary tradition on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, Aquinas remarks,

There are two kinds of whole: namely, (1) the *homogenous* whole, which is composed of similar parts; and (2) the *heterogenous* whole, which is composed of dissimilar parts. For in any given homogenous whole, the whole is constituted by parts having the form of the whole, just as every part of water is water.... [By contrast] in any given heterogenous whole, every part is lacking in the form of the whole, for no part of a house is a house, and neither is any part of a human a human. (*S.th.*, 1.11.2 *ad* 2)

Here Aquinas notes two features proper to homogenous and heterogenous wholes, respectively. First, the parts of homogenous wholes are “similar” in the sense that they share the same form. “Every part of [a given amount of] water is water,” he remarks, because each part of the given amount is identical in terms of its substantial form. By contrast, the parts of heterogenous wholes are “dissimilar” in the sense that they do *not* share the same form. The parts of a house (e.g., floor, walls and roof) are formally distinct from one another. That is to say, the parts of heterogenous wholes are *different kinds of thing*.

The second distinctive feature of homogenous and heterogenous wholes again pertains to the formal diversity of parts—not just with respect to each other, but with respect to the form of the whole. In homogenous wholes (e.g., the given amount of water), parts *share* the form of the whole. That is, in the given amount of water, the form of the entire amount is again identical to the form of the “parts” of the amount. In heterogenous wholes (e.g., the house), by contrast, parts *lack* the form of the whole. Walls and roofs are not houses. Only in homogenous wholes is the whole “predicable of the parts”. Aquinas takes this observation to imply that the distinctive integrity of the heterogenous whole is something qualitatively “new” or “emergent” with respect to its parts—a position that is further justified by the whole's “emergent” powers or features that are not proper to the parts (Stump 2006).

This technical distinction at the level of general metaphysics is important for Aquinas' social ontology. Indeed, he explicitly holds that some human communities

are indeed *heterogenous*—not *homogenous*—wholes. In his commentary on a suggestive, yet relatively undeveloped passage in Book III of Aristotle's *Politics*, Aquinas goes beyond the letter of the text in order to “clarify” (i.e., creatively interpret) the Philosopher's abovementioned claim that the virtue of the good individual person is not *simpliciter* the same as the virtue of the good citizen.

[Aristotle] says that every city consists of heterogeneous parts, just as an animal is composed of dissimilar parts: namely, soul and body. And similarly, the human soul consists of dissimilar parts: namely, rational and appetitive powers. Indeed, the domestic society consists of dissimilar parts: namely, man and woman, and [the art of] possession requires a master and a slave. But the city consists of all these diverse parts and many others. (*Sent. Pol.*, III.3.4)

There are at least two important implications of this passage. First, although he is obviously referencing the work of Aristotle, Aquinas appropriates the aforementioned distinction between homogenous and heterogenous wholes, holding that the political community is a heterogenous whole in precisely the aforementioned sense. That is to say, the political community considered as a whole (a) contains parts that are formally distinct from one another and of the whole (e.g., man and woman; master and slave); and therefore also (b) emergent powers and acts. While this may already be a plausible implication of the Aristotelian text, it is notable that Aquinas is using his own distinction to interpret the view—a view that he clearly holds himself in other non-commentary texts (e.g., *De Reg.*, I.1.9).

The second important implication is that Aquinas clearly holds that the heterogeneity of the *civitas* as a whole—and therefore its distinctive formal integrity—is *generalizable* in the sense that at least some other human communities (e.g., domestic societies) also enjoy this special mode of unity (see Pakaluk 2001, p. 66 and the discussion below).

Finally, the third important implication of this passage is its relative indifference with respect to the question of whether the wholes at issue are “natural” or “artificial”. This is evident in the passage cited in the sense that Aquinas holds that slavery as an institution is not grounded in “natural law,” but rather “consequent utility” (*utilitatem consequentem*) following some particular social arrangement.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, at least to the extent that this commentary represents his own view,<sup>17</sup> Aquinas appears to hold that even artificial wholes are heterogenous and thus emergent. This

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<sup>16</sup> Aquinas draws an analogy between the institutions of slavery and private property, respectively, in *S.th.*, 2-2.57.3c. Each is natural “not ... absolutely, but according to something consequent,” i.e., in the realm of human decision-making.

<sup>17</sup> Again, if it is objected that there is no way to tell whether Aquinas is speaking in his own voice here, i.e., instead of as a mere expositor of Aristotle's text, I respond by saying that other passages in Aquinas' explicitly systematic work evidence his acceptance of this Aristotelian view—most notably, his account of the various species of justice (*ST* 2-2.61.1c) discussed below.

is obviously an important claim for the purposes of understanding Aquinas' social ontology, since most social groups—though perhaps not all—are “ontologically subjective” in the sense that their emergent being and powers are constituted (at least in part) by the creative capacities of human intentionality.<sup>18</sup>

So Aquinas explicitly holds that social groups are heterogenous wholes, which is again to say that they are constituted by parts that are formally distinct from other parts and from the whole. In short, regardless of whether they are artificial or natural, social groups have irreducible powers and acts and are, therefore, “emergent” in a strong sense.<sup>19</sup> However, this begs a further question: if indeed social groups are heterogenous wholes with irreducible, emergent forms, what is distinctive about the end or “final cause” to which such entities are ordered? The answer to this question lies with the Aquinas' aforementioned Aristotelian conviction that “the virtue of the good [individual] person is not the same (*simpliciter*) as the virtue of the good citizen”.

### 3.2 Emergent Powers of Social Groups

We have already seen that Aquinas' account of the virtue of *justitia generalis* is distinct from other virtues on account of the end to which it is ordered: namely, the common good. Yet we have said little about this slippery notion. What does Aquinas mean by *bonum commune*, and what could it mean to say that it is formally distinct from the respective goods of individuals?

Perhaps the best way to approach this question, initially, is to consider a qualification Aquinas offers to his abovementioned point about social groups being heterogenous wholes. Commenting on Book 1 of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aquinas says the following:

It is known that this whole, i.e., the civil multitude or domestic family, only has a *unity of order*, according to which it is not something one *simpliciter*. And thus a part of this whole can have an operation that is not the operation of the whole, just as a soldier in an exercise has an operation which does not belong to the whole exercise. (*In Nic. Ethics*, I.1.5)<sup>20</sup>

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**18** In his prologue to his commentary on the *Politics* (Aquinas 2007, Prol.), Aquinas clearly recognizes the importance of what John Searle (1998, p. 45) has called the “ontologically subjective,” i.e., the domain of reality that is dependent for its existence upon human intentionality. He does so via a creative use of the Aristotelian principle that “art imitates nature” (*ars imitatur naturam*), the upshot of which is that there are sciences whose objects are artifacts.

**19** By emergent “in a strong sense,” I mean more or less what Tony Lawson means in Lawson 2012, p.349: namely, that the emergent entity under consideration is both causally and ontologically irreducible to that of its parts considered in aggregate.

**20** Lest it be objected that this is not Aquinas' own voice, it is important to note that the concept of “unity of order” (*unitas ordinis*) as distinct from that which is “one *simpliciter*” (*unum simpliciter*) is

So, while both social groups and human bodies enjoy the distinction of being heterogenous or emergent wholes, they do so in different ways. Unlike proper substances such as human beings, which are “one *simpliciter*”, the formal intelligibility and, therefore, the particular acts performed by individuals constituting a social group are not necessarily attributable to the whole (see discussion in Keys 2006, p. 85). In short, while social groups are indeed heterogenous and therefore emergent unities, they are so only “relatively” (*secundum quid*), not “simply speaking” (*simpliciter*).<sup>21</sup>

Indeed, as one might anticipate given the brevity of the passage, the exact sense in which social groups are irreducible in Aquinas is unclear. Mary Keys (2006, p. 85), following others such as Russell Hittinger (2007, p. 271), infers from this point that a social group “is not understood by Aquinas as an organism or a thing but rather, most fundamentally, as an association whose unity comes from human action and interaction, and from common action with a view to a common end or ends”.

Yet, even on these commentators’ own terms, it is not clear how social groups could fail to be things in some sense.<sup>22</sup> After all, the very next point Aquinas makes in the same passage of his *Nicomachean Ethics* Commentary is that “this whole [i.e., the whole social group] does have an operation that is not proper to its parts but to the whole—for example, an assault of the entire army” (*In Nic. Ethics*, I.1.5). Crucially, for Aquinas, only armies carry out “assaults”—not individual soldiers *qua* individuals, however mighty they may be. If there is a clear sense in which a social group is a unique or qualified heterogenous whole, there can be no denying that Aquinas holds that social groups are not only things, but *agents*. Indeed, the *Nicomachean Ethics* Commentary is clearer on this point than even the *Politics* Commentary.<sup>23</sup>

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nowhere to be found in the Aristotelian text at issue. At the very least, this suggests that Aquinas is creatively interpreting Aristotle so as to avoid potential objections. It seems to me that this implies something like a defense of Aristotle’s position.

**21** The distinction between *secundum quid* and *simpliciter* may ring *ad hoc* and unrigorous to modern ears, but in Aquinas it takes on a technical meaning to denote a particular relationship between analogically related senses of a single term (i.e., *pros hen* equivocation). For an extended discussion of this distinction in Aquinas, see Klima 1996.

**22** It should be noted that, for Aquinas (Aquinas 1976, 1.1c), the term ‘thing’ (*res*) is “transcendental”—that is, it is predicable of everything insofar as it has ‘being’ (*ens*). Therefore even a mere aggregate is a ‘thing’ in the sense that it has sufficient being and unity to be a subject of predication in the first place. *A fortiori*, then, for social groups. For a full account of the technical notion of *res* in Aquinas, see (Vidal 2020).

**23** If there is a tension between Aquinas’s two commentaries regarding the unity of social entities (i.e., whether they are “things in their own right” or not), it may signal two different emphases.

It is precisely this point—namely, that social groups have emergent powers and acts—that occasions the question of whether the common good is formally distinct from individual goods. Aquinas puts the matter succinctly: “The common good of the city and the good of one singular person differ not only in accordance of ‘many’ and ‘few’, but rather according to a formal difference” (*S.th.*, 2-2.58.7 *ad* 2). That is to say, because citizens are parts of the heterogeneous whole that is the city, the respective goods of citizens and cities do not just differ *numerically*, but also *in kind*.<sup>24</sup> For our purposes, what this clearly implies is that *common* goods (read: ends) are precisely those which individuate acts belonging properly to social groups. To say that social groups are capable of such acts *just is* to admit the aforementioned phenomena of “emergent powers” in social groups.

For Aquinas, then, it is quite clear that social groups such as political communities and armies have distinctive, emergent powers that correspond with formally distinct objects. To put the same point another way, there are acts whose subject must be a social group—if for no other reason than that an individual acting *qua* individual could not even perform the act or accomplish the end. No individual soldier—or commander, for that matter—can properly carry out assaults or achieve victory in war. If we do say that the commander does and achieves these things, it is because the commander acts as the “soul” (i.e., a governing *part*) of the army.<sup>25</sup> Properly speaking, assaults and victories are things that *armies* do and achieve, respectively.

Aquinas’ view has interesting implications. For example, no individual—even the statesperson or king *qua* individual—can properly perform acts of distributive justice (*S.th.*, 2-2.61.1c) or achieve “peace and concord” (*De Reg.*, I.3), “communal happiness” (*S.th.*, 1-2.90.2c), all of which are expressions of the *bonum commune* proper to the political community as such (*S.th.*, 1-2.99.2c). It is a condition

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After all, in the *Politics* Commentary (*Sent. Pol.*, I.1.4–5), Aquinas’ main concern is to establish the unique subject-genus of the practical science of politics; whereas in the *Nicomachean Ethics* Commentary, his concern is to establish the same for “moral philosophy” and its parts (*Sent. Ethic.*, I.1.3). Importantly, in neither case does he reject the formal unity of social entities as such; indeed, on the contrary, to do so would be to compromise the dignity of politics as a science.

**24** Pace Maurice Wulf, who argues in Wulf 2008, p. 236: “[B]onum commune, the commonwealth which the state has to provide, results from the sum total of activities performed to unite and to harmonize.” If *bonum commune* really were the result of a “sum total” of individual activities, then it is very difficult to follow Aquinas’ clear (Aristotelian) recognition of a formal distinction between common and individual goods.

**25** Aquinas does say that the good of the commander is prior to the intrinsic order of the army (*In Met.*, XII.12.4), but this is true only insofar as the commander is the principle of unity for that order in the first place. In short, the army exists “for” the commander in a way that is analogous to the way in which the body exists “for” the soul.



of possibility for these properly common goods that they be “secured” amongst citizens who correctly understand themselves as *part* of a whole that is formally distinct from themselves as individual persons. In short, these activities can only be carried out *together*, i.e., in a non-distributive sense.

In fact, according to Aquinas, if the common goods associated with these various social groups were mere aggregates of individual goods, then we would not be able to distinguish the so-called “natural societies” (e.g., political community, Church and family) except by virtue of the trivial fact that each tends to involve greater and lesser numbers of people standing in different, accidental relations to one another. Such a conclusion is taken by Aquinas to be absurd on its face, since the way in which, e.g., a father relates to his children is obviously qualitatively different from the way in which a king relates to his subjects.<sup>26</sup> The obviously correct view, says Aquinas, is that these two social relations differ according to species, from which it is inferable that the two social groups each have common goods that are formally irreducible to the individual goods of their members. It is a different thing to intend and act *as a father* than to do so *as king*, and this is because fathers and kings intend and act as parts of different social wholes.

Finally, it is worth noting that Aquinas sometimes distinguishes between “intrinsic” and “extrinsic” common goods. In his commentary on Book Λ of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, he remarks, “[A]n end is *extrinsic* to that which is ordered to it, as when we say that a place is the end of something that is moved to a place. And also it is *intrinsic*, as a form is the end of the process of generation or alteration; and [this] form already acquired is a kind of intrinsic good of the thing whose form it is” (*In Met.*, XII.12.1). This distinction applies directly to the case of social groups, and again Aquinas is fond of the example of armies: “for the good of the army is found both in the order itself of the army and in the commander who is in charge of the army ... namely, his will to attain victory” (*In Met.*, XII.12.4).<sup>27</sup>

Thus the intrinsic common good of an army (its unique composition of structural features, e.g., ranks, branches, and other roles/functions) functions as a quasi-formal cause<sup>28</sup> in the sense that it accounts for the army’s distinctive arrangement of

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<sup>26</sup> In his *Politics* Commentary, Aquinas reads Aristotle as offering a *reductio*-style argument against the (false) judgment that common goods are mere aggregates of individual goods. The absurd conclusion of this position, argues Aquinas (*Sent. Ethic.*, 1.1.6), is that the rule of kingship is not qualitatively different from “political” and “despotic” rule, among others.

<sup>27</sup> Aquinas draws (*ST*, 1-2.111.5 *ad* 1) on this Aristotelian distinction to account for the relationship between God’s gratuitous and sanctifying graces. Whereas the former is ordered to the common good of the Church (*bonum commune Ecclesiae*), the latter is ordered to the “separate common good” (*bonum commune separatum*), which is God himself.

<sup>28</sup> I say “quasi-” because Aquinas is clear that social groups enjoy only a “unity of order,” as opposed to unity *simpliciter*, i.e., the unity that belongs to substances such as individual persons.

parts; and, correlatively, the army's extrinsic common good (the establishment of victory conditions in war) functions as a quasi-final cause. Political communities also have intrinsic and extrinsic common goods, according to Aquinas, since it is possible to distinguish among different kinds of (legitimate and illegitimate) regime-types (e.g., monarchy, aristocracy, democracy, etc.) that have peace and virtuous living as their ultimate aim (*De Reg.*, I.15). To make such distinctions, however, is precisely to imply that there are intrinsic and extrinsic common goods (as discussed in Goyette 2013, p. 153). Without this fundamental principle—namely, that common goods differ from individual goods formally rather than numerically—these familiar categories of political science in Aquinas' Aristotelian tradition would be ultimately unintelligible.

### 3.3 The Common Good and the Numerical Unity of Social Groups

There is a third and final core conviction shaping Aquinas' account of social groups: namely, that (intrinsic and extrinsic) common goods are not merely *qualitatively* identical as intended by individual members, but also *numerically* identical. This conviction is important because it rules out the possibility that the Thomistic concept of common good is simply an end “common” to members of a social group in the way that, e.g., “health” is commonly desired by individual persons: namely, as the same “type” of end is instantiated by different “token” instances of individual desire (see Goyette 2013, p. 138).<sup>29</sup> In fact, Aquinas' position is that the common good proper to a given social group is numerically identical—even as it is desired and intended by different individual members. That is to say, the common good is not “instantiated” by the minds of individuals merely in the way that a universal concept is instantiated in particulars. On the contrary, the common good—intrinsic and extrinsic—is quite concrete (*S.th.*, 1-2.90.2 *ad* 3). However one puts the matter, at least this much is clear: according to Aquinas, there is numerically one common good precisely to the extent that there is, numerically, one social group.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Aquinas' concept of common good is therefore distinct from what contemporary philosophers call “content” accounts of collective intentionality: namely, accounts that locate the collectivity of intentions and acts in “*what* the subjects believe, intend, hope, feel, and so on” (Schmitz 2017, p. 37).

<sup>30</sup> Now of course nothing prevents there being common goods of the same social group that are ordered in terms of proximate and ultimate. The point here is simply that a given common good is not a conceptual “type” that merely happens to have exactly as many “token” instances as minds of individual citizens. In this respect, Aquinas' account of common good resonates strongly with Hans Bernhard Schmid's “token identity” view of collective intentionality in Schmid 2014, p. 11.

Earlier we took note of the apparent peculiarity of Aquinas' distinction drawn in *Summa theologiae* 2-2.58.6c—that is, the distinction between two modes of generality: “by predication” and “according to power”. *Justitia* is a “general” virtue, says Aquinas, in that its object (*bonum commune*) is general in the latter sense. This may seem peculiar, since the more relevant point seems to be about the different modes of action (i.e., *qua* individual and *qua* part) that are enacted by members of social groups.

However, having come full circle on Aquinas' notion of *bonum commune*, this peculiarity dissolves. As it happens, it is crucial for Aquinas to distinguish these two senses of generality precisely in order to avoid the “individualism” that results from a notion of common good that is merely notional, i.e., a “being of reason” (*ens rationis*) or “type” that happens to have “token” instances in the intentions of individual members of a community. Aquinas' position is more strongly anti-individualist. Indeed, precisely because the common good is common *secundum virtutem*, there is a clear sense in which it is more than just one “object” of intention/desire among others. In fact, not coincidentally, to perform the operations proper to *justitia generalis* is to do so under the aspect of an entirely distinct *mode* of action.<sup>31</sup> After all, it is a unique feature of general virtues that they order not only operations, but also other virtues: “[general] justice is said to be a general virtue, namely, insofar as it directs the acts of the other virtues to its own end. This is to move [*movere*] all other virtues by command [*per imperium*]” (*S.th.*, 2-2.58.6c).<sup>32</sup>

### 3.4 The Irreducibility Claim

Therefore, with respect to Schweikard and Schmid's Irreducibility Claim, three salient points arise out of Aquinas' remarks on the ontological and agential status of social groups. The first pertains to their mereology. As we have seen, Aquinas categorizes social groups such as political communities and families as heterogeneous rather than homogeneous wholes. Heterogeneous wholes have two

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<sup>31</sup> Although his immediate concerns are quite different than ours, Pakaluk seems to say precisely this when he claims (Pakaluk 2001, p. 75) that “[g]eneral justice is, so to speak, a purely formal notion, and we cannot tell what its shape or scope is, until we know what the aim of an association is, the general justice of which is being considered.”

<sup>32</sup> Pakaluk (2001, p. 66) offers a nice example of this point: “[S]oldiers in an army have their behavior regulated by military offices, law, and command. Suppose there are two brothers in the army, one much older than the other, but the younger brother has the higher rank. When the older salutes the younger, in accordance with military law, he is observing general justice, as regards his position in the military: that is, he is doing what is required by the principles that regulate and coordinate their behavior as soldiers.”

distinctive properties: (1) that their proper parts are formally (as opposed to merely numerically) distinct from one another; and (2) that the form of the whole does not belong to the parts as such. Thus, for Aquinas, social groups are clearly “irreducible” to their members in the sense that they contain formally distinct parts whose intelligibility and existence depends on the form of the emergent whole of which they are parts.

Second, we have seen that Aquinas clearly holds that such social groups have emergent powers (e.g., a political community’s power to enact distributive justice). That is to say, there are some powers and acts for which only a social group can be the proper subject. To the extent that these powers and acts are verifiable, then, Aquinas clearly holds that the social groups that have them exist and act in the world, i.e., in a way that is not merely reducible to their members.

Finally, we have seen that Aquinas’ analysis depends importantly on his claim that the common good of a given social group is not only qualitatively but also numerically one. That is to say, far from being some intentional object that merely happens to be “shared” by its individual members, Aquinas holds that the common good functions as a principle of unity for the social group considered as an object of analysis in its own right.<sup>33</sup> Again, the clear implication of Aquinas’ analysis is that social groups are irreducible—at least to the extent to which the common good (in its intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions) serves as a principle of numerical unity.

## 4 Conclusions

I have argued in this essay that there are resources in Aquinas for dealing with the so-called Central Problem of collective intentionality and social ontology: both the Individual Ownership and Irreducibility claims seem to be intuitively true, yet mutually exclusive. However, if my reading of Aquinas is correct, such a solution is precisely what is available in the Angelic Doctor’s respectively foundational notions of general virtue and common good.

As we have seen, for Aquinas, *individuals* act collectively when they perform acts conditioned by the distinctive mode of action that follows upon general virtues, i.e., an individual’s acting *qua* part of a social group, i.e., in a way that is ultimately

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<sup>33</sup> Tuomela’s (2013, p. 22) distinction between member- and group-level descriptions is helpful here. As applied to Aquinas, it is notable that the same activity can be viewed either in terms of the agency of the *parts* of a social group (e.g., an individual soldier charges, while another provides cover fire), or in terms of the agency of the *whole* social group (e.g., the unit “takes the hill”). These examples amount to member- and group-level descriptions, respectively.

ordered to the common good that is proper to that social group. Citizens of political communities, members of families, soldiers in armies, etc., act collectively insofar as they acquire the virtues necessary for carrying out the acts demanded by their role or function for the sake of the group. Therefore virtues like general justice (*S.th.*, 2-2.58.5c) are acquired and performed by individual members of social groups, albeit in a way that is ultimately caused (in the mode of final causality) by the common good as their proper object. There is no need to posit hive minds, mind melds, or other scientifically problematic phenomena to account for this.

On the other hand, we have also seen that Aquinas' doctrine of common good implies that social groups are irreducible in important ways. Not only is it the case that individual members of groups intend *qua* parts of social groups, those social groups are *heterogenous* rather than *homogenous* wholes. When individuals act *qua* parts of a given social group, they may carry out acts proper to formally distinct roles or functions, and thus are formally distinct—both from other heterogenous parts and from the form of the social group considered as a whole. Further, insofar as this form of the whole social group is not predicated of its parts, the social group is emergent, i.e., an entity in its own right, complete with a unique principle of unity.

Indeed, beyond just the intrinsic irreducibility of social groups, Aquinas also clearly holds that some powers and acts belong exclusively to social groups considered as wholes in their own right, i.e., in a non-distributive manner. Properly speaking, only *armies* carry out assaults; only *cities* carry out acts of distributive justice and achieve peace and concord, etc. This position—especially when considered together with the position that social groups are heterogenous and therefore emergent wholes—marks Aquinas' approach to the matter of group irreducibility.

Ultimately, it is Aquinas' doctrine of common good that buttresses this entire account. At the individual level, the common good is what specifies the acts following upon general virtues. Therefore, to intend and act for the sake of the common good is to intend and act collectively. At the group level the common good has intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions. In its intrinsic dimension, it functions as a quasi-formal cause, as in the case of, e.g., the particular ordering of ranks, branches, and other roles/functions present in a military unit. In its extrinsic dimension, the common good functions as a quasi-final cause, as in the case of, e.g., victory in some war scenario. Therefore it is “common” not only insofar as it is an intentional object that happens to be shared by numerically distinct persons, but more importantly because its satisfaction conditions are irreducibly social. In this sense, a social group is numerically one to the extent that it pursues and achieves numerically one common good.

This account of collective action and group agency found in Aquinas is a reconstructed one, no doubt. Aquinas appears never to have dedicated significant theoretical effort on just these questions—not for their own sake, at least. Still, to the extent that modern readers are willing to grapple with Aquinas' decidedly un-modern principles and mode of analysis, there is insight to be wrought when it comes to dealing with central questions of collective action and social ontology.

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