

In ordinary language it is customary to speak as if we attributed mental states to pan-individual entities: we are informed that “Google believes that open source is good” or that “markets fear the coming elections”. This way of speaking is also pervasive in legal language, where talk of firms, courts, or parliaments which intend something or think something is ubiquitous. In more theoretical contexts, many people have wondered if corporations etc. can be truly responsible for their actions in the sense that they can be seen as being genuine agents.

The philosophical question which arises in this context is whether such ascriptions of beliefs and similar mental states to large institutional groups such as corporations, courts, etc. can be understood as being literally true. From an intuitive point of view, such claims might seem completely implausible: from a pre-theoretical point of view, group agents do not seem to be the kind of subject which is capable of possessing genuine thoughts.

However, an increasing number of philosophers have recently claimed that we should accept a realistic stance towards group beliefs, i.e. they claim that we should treat ascriptions of beliefs to corporations as literally true and not reducible to the beliefs of individual people. This means that we should think of corporations as being real agents that are capable of having their own unique thoughts. Realists often motivate their position by invoking theories in philosophy of mind which state that what a system is made of is not important when we decide if it is capable of thinking: what is important is the functions that it serves (in this way, computers might be able to think). Thus, it might be thought that groups as a whole might serve as information-processing agents that are capable of thinking.

The general aim of the project is to critically engage with these views. The primary aim is to determine whether contemporary views on the nature of mind really support the realist views on group minds. Secondly, it is important to engage with current philosophy of law to see what we should think about the status of legal entities in order to determine whether we could plausibly ascribe thoughts to such things. The third aim of the project is to apply some non-standard philosophical approaches to analysis of expressions in which we attribute beliefs to institutions. One example of such a non-standard approach is one according to which attributions of beliefs to institutions are useful fictions; another example is the approach that sees them as attempts to change the norms of use of the concept of belief.

The most important outcome of the project is a better philosophical understanding of the meaning of statements in which we describe institutional entities as if they possessed genuine mental states such as beliefs. Although I do not plan to engage directly with normative questions in the course of the project, I believe that answering foundational questions about the possibility of group, institutional, and corporate thought might have important consequences for the debate about the limits of responsibility of institutional agents in both ethical and legal discourse.