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Groups as pluralities

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Abstract

We say that each social group is identical to its members. The group *just is* them; they *just are* the group. This view of groups as pluralities has tended to be swiftly rejected by social metaphysicians, if considered at all, mainly on the basis of two objections. First, it is argued that groups can change in membership, while pluralities cannot. Second, it is argued that different groups can have exactly the same members, while different pluralities cannot. We rebut these objections, and argue that our plural view is superior to alternative reductive proposals which would identify social groups with the sets or fusions of their members. Finally we deal with some further potential challenges for the view of groups as pluralities. Thus we aim to establish it as a serious contender in the metaphysics of groups.

Keywords Social ontology · Social groups · Reductionism · Identity · Social roles · Plural terms · Flexible terms · Metalinguistic negation · Higher-level plural logic

1 Introduction

What are groups? More specifically, what are social groups—such as Monty Python, the U.S. Supreme Court, the Catalan people, or women? The answer is not so straightforward, it might seem.

Within social metaphysics, some theorists of a more "reductive" bent have proposed to identify each social group with something of a kind that we supposedly already have independent theoretical reason to recognize: a material object composed of people or temporal parts thereof (see Quine 1950; Oppenheim and Putnam 1958; MacDonald and Pettit 1981; Mellor 1982; Copp 1984; Hawley 2017), or a complex mathematical set constructed from people, times and possible worlds (see Bennett 1975; Effingham 2010; Pearson 2011). Meanwhile, other theorists take each social group to be an

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entity of a perhaps less theoretically familiar kind: something non-mereologically "constituted by" some people or a set thereof (see Barker 1992; Uzquiano 2004a; Jansen 2009; Hindriks 2013; Epstein 2015, 2019; Thomasson 2019), or a "structured whole" that comes into being when a suitable social structure is realized by some people (at least, when the group in question counts as "organized"; see Ritchie 2013, 2015, 2018, 2020). A shared assumption here, it may be observed, is that each social group is a single thing. Let's call this assumption *singularism* about social groups.

In contrast with the above views, we wish to defend a very direct and straightforward form of reductionism: each social group is identical to its members. The group *just is* them; they *just are* the group. We can also express this view by saying that each social group is identical to the *plurality* of its members, and it will be convenient to speak this way; bearing in mind that, by stipulation, a plurality of Fs is just two or more Fs, and to be a member of a plurality is just to be one of them. Gabriel Uzquiano (2004a, p. 141) has named this view of social groups the *plural identity thesis*. We'll mostly call it the *plural view* of groups. (While our focus here is on social groups, we expect this view to successfully generalize beyond the social, however that realm is delimited, as will be discussed later.)

Using his example of the U.S. Supreme Court, Uzquiano initially characterizes the plural identity thesis as "the thesis that the Supreme Court is nothing over and above the justices serving as Supreme Court Justices" (*ibid.*). However, while Uzquiano's intended meaning is clear enough in context, this phrasing is somewhat ambiguous. For many of us would say that, in some good sense, something can be "nothing over and above" some *other* things. For instance, we might say that a mereological fusion of the current Supreme Court Justices (i.e. a scattered material object composed of them) is nothing over and above the current Supreme Court Justices, insofar as the fusion inherits its intrinsic character, causal powers and location from the justices. But, we take it, the fusion is not identical to the justices. For the fusion is one thing, and the justices are many things, and despite what "composition as identity" theorists have argued (see e.g. Wallace 2011a, b), we do not accept that one thing can be identical to many things. Instead we submit that the Supreme Court is not one thing, but rather many things. The expression "the U.S. Supreme Court" is syntactically singular, yet semantically plural; and when used in the present tense, it plurally denotes the contemporaneous U.S. Supreme Court Justices. In this sense the Supreme Court is identical to its justices and, more generally, each group of people is identical to those people. Syntactically singular group terms are disguised plurals. And syntactically plural group terms—like "the Supremes"—are undisguised plurals.

In fact, even those group terms that primarily behave as syntactically singular are sometimes treated as syntactically plural in everyday discourse, albeit more often in British English than in American English, as in "Barcelona win again", "Monty Python were irreverent", "The cabinet are split", "The faculty are always at each other's throats", and "The crowd sang their hearts out": a phenomenon that has been called *plural override* (cf. Black 1971, pp. 631–632; Barker 1992; Schwarzschild 1996, pp. 171–173, 182–183; Payne and Huddleston 2002, pp. 501–504; Pearson 2011, pp. 161–162; Cotnoir 2013, p. 298; Oliver and Smiley 2016, pp. 305–306; Ludwig 2017, pp. 47–49; Grimau 2019). However, given the independent presence of disguised singular expressions in natural language—so-called *pluralia tantum* such

as "trousers", "sunglasses" and "scissors"—the fact that syntactically singular groups terms are sometimes allowed to take plural verb and pronoun agreement doesn't really tell us much about whether those terms are semantically singular or plural. Although we usually talk about a pair of scissors as if it were two things, it is in fact a single thing with two prominent parts. Similarly, a singularist about social groups might claim that although we sometimes talk about a football team as if it were several people, it is in fact a single thing which has those people as members. Accordingly, we won't give observations of plural override any dialectical weight here. As will be seen, there are far better reasons to favour the plural view of groups.

Despite its current unpopularity among social metaphysicians, the view of groups as pluralities has some pedigree. Decades ago, it was endorsed by Max Black (1971), and it has more recently been defended by Dan López de Sa (2007) and Daniel Korman (2015, pp. 139–150), while others have indicated their sympathy for the view in passing (see Lewis 1991, p. 64; Rosen and Dorr 2002, p. 172; Hewitt 2012, p. 866, fn. 24; Cotnoir 2013, pp. 297–298). Here we aim to give the plural view a more thorough defence. We'll advertise its virtues in comparison with singularist accounts of groups, and expand on previously published discussions to explain why the usual reasons given for dismissing it are insufficient. We'll also consider some further potential challenges, insofar as these are foreseeable, although more work will likely remain to be done to answer less obvious objections. In any case, by the end of this paper it should become clear that the plausibility of the plural view has been severely underestimated. Thus we hope to establish it as a serious contender in the metaphysics of groups.

We proceed as follows. In Sect. 2 we give some initial reasons for endorsing the plural view. In Sect. 3 we reply to the objection that groups can change in membership, while pluralities cannot. In Sect. 4 we reply to the objection that different groups can have exactly the same members, while different pluralities cannot. Notably, our replies to those two objections could also be used to defend alternative reductive proposals that identify social groups with the sets or fusions of their members. In Sect. 5 we explain in more detail why we nonetheless believe the plural view to be superior, all things considered, to those singularist alternatives. Finally, in Sect. 6 we discuss some further issues: which pluralities count as social groups, what to say about distinctions between different kinds of social group, and how to accommodate groups of groups.

2 Why go plural?

Why think that each social group is identical to its members? To start, the identification strikes us as commonsensical, grammatical subtleties aside. It may be doubted that a group term such as "the Supreme Court" is semantically plural, precisely because it is syntactically singular. But again, and as others have pointed out in connection with this point (Cotnoir 2013, p. 297; Oliver and Smiley 2016, pp. 76, 306), such a mismatch between syntactic and semantic number is clearly possible in the other direction. This is shown by our previous examples of pluralia tantum: all syntactically plural, yet semantically singular. Her trousers are a single garment, his sunglasses are a single item of eyewear, and those scissors are a single tool. In the light of such linguistic evidence, there is no good reason to deny that the same mismatch between

syntax and semantics may occur in reverse. Indeed, it would sound quite natural to point at a photograph of the nine current Supreme Court Justices and say: "Those nine people in the black robes are the Supreme Court." And we take it to be evident that the expression "those nine people in the black robes" does not function to denote a single thing. (If you doubt this, see the arguments of Boolos 1984; McKay 2006; and Oliver and Smiley 2016.) Rather, the notion of identity involved here is *plural identity*: the *A*s are the same things as the *B*s if and only if each of the *A*s is one of the *B*s and each of the *B*s is one of the *A*s.

(Notice that a singularist about social groups will likewise have to postulate a mismatch between syntactic and semantic number here, since, according to singularism, every syntactically plural group term—like "the Supremes"—is semantically singular. So the plural view has no disadvantage against singularism in this respect. A possible intermediate view is that group terms are semantically singular just when they are syntactically singular, and semantically plural just when they are syntactically plural, so no such linguistic mismatch occurs. However, a social group—a musical group, say, or a sports team—can evidently change its name from a syntactically singular term to a syntactically plural term, or vice versa, without thereby *becoming* many things or *becoming* one thing. Indeed, a group may even have two names simultaneously, one syntactically singular and the other syntactically plural, as with "Monty Python" and "the Pythons". But again, as we and most others assume, one thing cannot be identical to many things. So any such intermediate view of group terms appears to be a non-starter.)

The plural view also offers a straightforward account of group membership: something is a member of a group if and only if it is one of them. Granted, the plural view is not the only view of social groups with such a virtue. Assuming we understand the mathematical notion of set membership (although this may be disputed; see Black 1971; Lewis 1991, Chap. 2), we could obtain a similarly straightforward account of group membership by identifying each group with the set of its members. Then we could say that something is a member of a group if and only if it is a set member of that group. Nonetheless, as discussed later (in Sect. 5), there are other reasons to prefer the plural view to any view of groups as sets.

Another virtue of the plural view is that it allows us to straightforwardly explain how groups are located in space and time, and causally interact both with each other and with non-groups. As Katherine Hawley (2017, p. 398) says: "A book group fits into the kitchen and makes enough noise to wake up the baby." Indeed, and whenever this is so, the people who are the members of the book group will likewise fit into the kitchen and make enough noise to wake up the baby. So, given that the members *just are* the group, there is no mystery here. Again, the plural view is not the only view of social groups with such a virtue. In particular, on Hawley's mereological view the book group is a material object composed of its members (in other words, a *fusion* of its members; or more long-windedly, something that has each of them as a part, has all of their parts as parts, and has no part that doesn't share a part with at least one of them). So Hawley can also explain how the book group fits into the kitchen and makes enough noise to wake up the baby, assuming that any such object will inherit its location and powers, as well as its materiality, from the people who compose it.

Nonetheless, as discussed later (also in Sect. 5), there are other reasons to prefer the plural view to any mereological view of groups.

Further, the view of groups as pluralities is indifferent to the existence of the various entities that singularists have identified with social groups. To accept our view, it doesn't matter whether you believe in scattered fusions or sets of people—or indeed, in any sets at all—or in additional entities allegedly generated by non-mereological forms of material constitution. We might have independent reasons to believe in some of these things, but as far as the plural view is concerned, you can take them or leave them as you please. This will suit mathematical nominalists and restrictivists about composition, who deny the existence of sets and scattered fusions of people respectively, perhaps for reasons of ontological parsimony, or because they find such entities unfathomable, or because they simply find them hard to believe in. And it will also suit those of us who, for similar reasons, disbelieve in non-mereological forms of material constitution.

The idea that each group is just its members thus seems fairly simple and attractive. Why is it, then, that there are so few advocates of this view among social metaphysicians? While the plural view is perhaps sometimes simply overlooked, recently published discussions reveal that it is also commonly thought to have been refuted by at least one of the following two standard objections. First, groups can change in membership, while pluralities cannot. Second, different groups can have exactly the same members, while different pluralities cannot. We answer these objections in turn over the next two sections.

3 The objection from changes in membership

One common objection to the plural view is that, unlike pluralities, social groups vary in membership over time and between possible worlds. For instance, Ruth Bader Ginsburg is currently a member of the U.S. Supreme Court, but she wasn't always a member of it, and she might never have been a member of it. In contrast, the corresponding plurality has never failed to include Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and couldn't have failed to include her. That is to say, John Roberts, Clarence Thomas, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Stephen Breyer, Samuel Alito, Sonia Sotomayor, Elena Kagan, Neil Gorsuch and Brett Kavanaugh have never failed to include Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and couldn't have failed to include her.

Some authors raise this objection directly against the plural view of groups (see Simons 1982b, pp. 209–210; McKay 2006, pp. 48–49; Linnebo and Nicolas 2008, p. 191; Ritchie 2013, p. 262; 2018, p. 23; 2020, p. 412; Linnebo 2016, p. 656; Hansson Wahlberg 2019, p. 4972), while others raise parallel objections against identifying groups with the sets or fusions of their members, without considering the plural view explicitly (see Sharvy 1968; Bennett 1975, p. 136; MacDonald and Pettit 1981, p. 89; Mellor 1982, pp. 60–61; Ruben 1983, p. 226; Barker 1992, p. 87; Sheehy 2006, pp. 18–22; Effingham 2010, p. 256; Pearson 2011, p. 165; Epstein 2015, pp. 137–138; Thomasson 2019, p. 4833). By parity of reasoning, the latter authors would presumably also object to the plural view for not allowing groups to change in membership. Others simply take it as a datum that groups can change in membership (see Quinton 1976,

p. 20; Copp 1984; Gilbert 1989, pp. 219–220; Hindriks 2013, p. 419; Hawley 2017, p. 399), and so would presumably be inclined to reject the plural view on the same grounds.

Uzquiano (2004a) also discusses this objection to the plural view—as well as the parallel objection to identifying groups with the sets of their members—and offers a simple but effective solution, which unfortunately has since been ignored by those who have continued to press the same objection. (Of course, Uzquiano goes on to reject the plural view in the same paper, as well the hypothesis that each group is the set of its members, but this is for another reason, i.e. the second standard objection which we'll discuss in Sect. 4.) The solution, which we propose to adopt (as do López de Sa 2007; and Korman 2015, pp. 142–143), is to recognize that the relevant group terms are plural analogues of singular social role terms such as uniquely identifying job titles, e.g. "the U.S. President" or "the U.S. Chief Justice". That is, they are *flexible* terms, in contrast to *rigid* terms such as ordinary singular personal names and lists thereof. (Uzquiano credits this idea to Earl Conee, in an unpublished defence of the set view, although it was also previously considered in print, albeit briefly and inconclusively, by Schwarzschild 1996, pp. 188–189.)

Clearly, some terms for individual people are flexible on their most accessible readings. For instance, "the U.S. Chief Justice", unlike the personal name of the current U.S. Chief Justice, denotes different people at different times and worlds of evaluation. Hence it is true to say:

(1) The U.S. Chief Justice used to be someone else.

And it is likewise true to say:

(2) The U.S. Chief Justice could have been someone else.

But, clearly, it's not the case that the *actual current* Chief Justice used to be someone else, nor that he could have been someone else. So it is false to say:

(1*) John Roberts used to be someone else.

And it is likewise false to say:

(2*) John Roberts could have been someone else.

Similarly, we submit that "the U.S. Supreme Court", unlike a list of the current U.S. Supreme Court Justices' personal names, denotes different people at different times and worlds of evaluation on its most accessible reading. Hence it is true to say:

(3) The U.S. Supreme Court used to include different people.

And it is likewise true to say:

(4) The U.S. Supreme Court could have included different people.

But it's not the case that the *actual current* Supreme Court used to include different people, nor that it could have included different people. So it is false to say:

(3*) John Roberts, Clarence Thomas, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Stephen Breyer, Samuel Alito, Sonia Sotomayor, Elena Kagan, Neil Gorsuch and Brett Kavanaugh used to include different people.

And it is likewise false to say:

(4*) John Roberts, Clarence Thomas, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Stephen Breyer, Samuel Alito, Sonia Sotomayor, Elena Kagan, Neil Gorsuch and Brett Kavanaugh could have included different people.

Granted, rigid readings of these social role terms are also available, whereby "the U.S. Chief Justice" and "the U.S. Supreme Court" do not vary in denotation between times and worlds of evaluation, but rather rigidly denote whoever occupies the relevant roles at the time and world of utterance. On these readings, it is currently true to say:

(5) The U.S. Chief Justice was born in 1955.

And it is likewise currently true to say:

(6) The U.S. Supreme Court's members were born between 1933 and 1967.

But only on the flexible readings of these terms are (1), (2), (3) and (4) true.

As discussed by Achille Varzi (2000, pp. 291–295), several controversial identifications in metaphysics may owe their controversy in large part to confusions between flexible and rigid readings of relevant terms (or, equivalently, between the corresponding *de dicto* and *de re* readings of sentences involving those terms). For instance, consider a cat named "Tibbles", her tail, named "Tail", and the rest of her body, named "Tib". Let's grant that Tibbles, by some misfortune, could fail to have Tail as a part. Further, let "Tib + Tail" denote a fusion of Tib and Tail. Then it might seem that Tib + Tail is identical to Tibbles. But the following argument, which implicitly appeals to the indiscernibility of identicals, would suggest otherwise:

> (i) Tib + Tail necessarily has Tail as a part, but (ii) Tibbles doesn't necessarily have Tail as a part; so (iii) Tib + Tail is not identical to Tibbles.

However, so far we didn't say whether "Tib + Tail" is flexible or rigid. On a flexible reading, this term may be understood as denoting anything that happens to be composed of Tib and Tail at the time and world of evaluation. Then both premises are true, but the argument is invalid, since it doesn't show how the thing that is actually and currently denoted by "Tib + Tail" differs from Tibbles. On a rigid reading of "Tib + Tail", in contrast, the argument is valid, but then its first premise is questionable, since we already granted that Tibbles doesn't necessarily have Tail as a part, and "Tib + Tail" here arguably denotes Tibbles. And to simply insist that Tib + Tail differs from Tibbles in this way would be to beg the question against the mooted identification. In sum: on a flexible reading of "Tib + Tail", both premises are reasonable but the argument is invalid; while on a rigid reading of "Tib + Tail", the argument is valid but its premises are question-begging. So any initial plausibility had by this argument is due to the ease of unwittingly sliding between flexible and rigid readings of "Tib + Tail". As we see it, the objection from changes in membership, as illustrated above, involves a similar confusion between flexible and rigid readings of the relevant group term, i.e. "the U.S. Supreme Court".

A closely related argument that might be given against the plural view of groups is discussed and disarmed by Korman (2015, pp. 134–136, 142–143). First, suppose that

in the last few decades each Chief Justice has been more liberal than his predecessor, but that nonetheless John Roberts has grown more conservative during the same period. Now consider the following argument:

> (i) The Chief Justice has become increasingly liberal, but (ii) Roberts hasn't become increasingly liberal; so (iii) the Chief Justice is not identical to Roberts.

It is clear that, on any reading where both of its premises are true, this argument is invalid, since the first premise does not predicate anything of the *current* Chief Justice, but rather tells us (roughly) that, within some contextually salient time frame, the Chief Justice at later times tends to be more liberal than the Chief Justice at earlier times. By analogy, the following would be a defective argument against the plural view of groups:

> (i) The Supreme Court has become increasingly diverse, but (ii) those nine people haven't become increasingly diverse; so (iii) the Supreme Court is not identical to those nine people.

As before, on any reading where both of its premises are true, this argument is invalid, since the first premise does not predicate anything of the *current* Supreme Court, but rather tells us (roughly) that, within some contextually salient time frame, the Supreme Court at later times tends to be more diverse than the Supreme Court at earlier times. Indeed, as Korman observes, both of these arguments parallel Barbara Partee's temperature paradox (first discussed in print by Montague 1973), which may be presented as follows:

> (i) The temperature is rising, but (ii) ninety isn't rising; so (iii) the temperature isn't ninety.

While it is a contentious matter exactly how to analyse this argument's premises so as to explain its invalidity (see e.g. Bennett 1975, p. 32; Lasersohn 2005, 2020; Romero 2008), it is clear enough that, when uttered truly, "The temperature is rising" does not predicate anything of any specific temperature, but rather tells us (roughly) that, relative to some contextually salient time frame and location, the temperature at later times tends to be higher than the temperature at earlier times. So the superficially paradoxical argument equivocates on "the temperature", just as the preceding arguments equivocate on "the Chief Justice" and "the Supreme Court".

A residual difficulty here for the plural view, touched on by some authors (Simons 1982b, p. 210; McKay 2006, p. 48; Ludwig 2017, p. 42; Ritchie 2018, p. 23; Uzquiano 2018, p. 424) and hitherto unsolved, can be illustrated with the following sentence:

(7) The same group ruled on *Dred Scott v. Sandford* in 1857 and on *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, that group being the U.S. Supreme Court.

That sounds true enough. But the Supreme Court Justices who ruled on *Dred Scott v. Sandford* in 1857 were clearly numerically distinct from the Supreme Court Justices who ruled on *Roe v. Wade* in 1973. So how can we make sense of (7)? The answer here is that expressions of the form "the same *F*" are not always used to express numerical identity, but may instead be used to indicate commonality of type relative to a suitably natural or salient typology. Thus it can be true to say "*This* is the same

fruit as *that*" while successively demonstrating two numerically distinct apples, or "Hey, we're wearing the same shirt!" even when the denoted people are not together engaged in some bizarre sartorial exercise. Similarly, with respect to (7), the earlier group (i.e. *that* plurality) was, in 1857, a social group *of the very same type* that the later group (i.e. *that other* plurality) was in 1973; provided that social groups are typed (relative to times and worlds, of course) by the specific social roles they occupy. And the relevant type here corresponds to the specific social role of the U.S. Supreme Court. So, since we are readily disposed to type social groups in just that way once prompted, (7) sounds about right.

An analogy with individual social roles can also be made here. Long ago, David Hume (1739–1740, Sect. 1.4.6) observed that two otherwise dissimilar buildings that successively serve as the church building of a certain parish may rightly be called "the same church". And, even more relevantly for the present dialectic, David Wiggins (1967, pp. 9–18) once observed that two individual people who successively hold the same office, such as the U.S. presidency, may rightly be called "the same official". Indeed, the following sentence doesn't sound too bad to us, and we submit that it can be understood as true, once suitably disambiguated:

(8) The same elected official was impeached by the U.S. House of Representatives in 1998 and 2019, that elected official being the U.S. President.

Of course, it is also possible to read (8) as a false statement of numerical identity, but the same goes for (7). Admittedly, some readers with the relevant historical knowledge may find it easier to hear (7) as expressing a truth than (8), but that can be explained by the fact that, statistically, expressions of the form "the same *F*" are used to express type identity far more *often* when the expression that replaces "*F*" is a common noun for a social group as opposed to an individual person. Nonetheless, we submit, due to the general ambiguity of expressions of this form between numerical-identity and type-identity readings, (7) and (8) are relevantly analogous.

Notably, in comparison with (7), some readers may be less inclined to assent to the following slight variant:

(9) The same group of people ruled on *Dred Scott v. Sandford* in 1857 and on *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, that group of people being the U.S. Supreme Court.

In fact, we would say that (9) is also ambiguous between a false numerical-identity reading and a true type-identity reading, although the former disambiguation is somehow more accessible than the latter here. In any case, given that the U.S. Supreme Court has always been a group of people, if (9) is false when read as a statement of numerical identity, then so is (7), as predicted by the plural view of groups.

No doubt there is more to be said about the semantics of group terms. As we have characterized them so far—in particular, taking into account that they are primarily flexible but also have rigid readings—they behave somewhat like definite descriptions, yet it is not clear that they should be classified as such. "The U.S. Supreme Court" looks more like an ordinary definite description than "Monty Python", for instance. Yet by classifying such terms as proper names, we would defy the contemporary orthodoxy that proper names are always rigid. In the next section we'll say a bit more about how we take group terms to function, albeit without offering anything like a full theory

of such expressions. To give a full theory of group terms, in line with our view of groups as pluralities, may well be a challenging and complicated matter, but crucially for us here, any such complexity is exhibited by social role terms for groups and individual people alike. For, analogously, singular social role terms behave somewhat like definite descriptions, while it is unclear whether they should be classified as such. "The U.S. Chief Justice" looks more like an ordinary definite description than "Baron Byron", for instance. Yet by classifying such terms as proper names, we would defy the contemporary orthodoxy that proper names are always rigid. So the complexity of these issues cannot be avoided by rejecting the plural view of groups.

4 The objection from coextensive groups

Another common objection to the plural view is that, unlike pluralities, two or more different social groups can have exactly the same members. To illustrate this point, Uzquiano (2004a) asks us to imagine that the U.S. Senate appoints all the current Supreme Court Justices to a Special Committee on Judicial Ethics, and no one else is ever in that committee. Then, allegedly, the Supreme Court and the Special Committee are distinct, since

> [they] are in session at different times and under different official rules and procedures. They enjoy different powers, and they may, in fact, act differently. Sometimes, their actions may even enter into conflict. (Uzquiano 2004a, p. 142)

In contrast, there is only one plurality that includes all and only the current U.S. Supreme Court Justices. That is to say, there is only one plurality that includes just John Roberts, Clarence Thomas, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Stephen Breyer, Samuel Alito, Sonia Sotomayor, Elena Kagan, Neil Gorsuch and Brett Kavanaugh.

Uzquiano raises this objection directly against the plural view of groups, and also raises parallel objections against identifying groups with the sets or fusions of their members. Some other authors raise this objection directly against the plural view of groups (see Simons 1982b, pp. 210–211; Schmitt 2003, pp. 4–5; Ritchie 2013, p. 261; 2018, pp. 23–24; 2020, p. 412; Linnebo 2016, p. 662; Hansson Wahlberg 2019, pp. 4975–4976), while others raise parallel objections against identifying groups with the sets or fusions of their members, without considering the plural view explicitly (see Bennett 1975, p. 136; 1979, p. 275; Link 1983, p. 304; Ruben 1983, pp. 234–236; Lasersohn 1990, pp. 88–89; Barker 1992, pp. 80–81; Effingham 2010, pp. 259–260; Thomasson 2019, p. 4833). By parity of reasoning, the latter authors would presumably also object to the plural view for not allowing different groups to have the same members. Others simply take it as a datum that different groups can have the same members (see Quinton 1976, pp. 21–22; Gilbert 1989, pp. 220–221; Jansen 2009, pp. 34–35; Hindriks 2013, p. 428; Epstein 2015, p. 139; 2019), and so would presumably be inclined to reject the plural view on the same grounds.

However, as López de Sa (2007) has already pointed out, this objection to the plural view—as well as the parallel objections to identifying groups with the sets or fusions of their members—is open to parody. For we may elaborate on Uzquiano's example

by imagining that John Roberts, the current Chief Justice, is also elected Head of the Special Committee. Then

> it is also quite obviously the case that the Chief Supreme Court Justice and the Head of the Special Committee on Judicial Ethics chair different sessions at different times and under different rules and procedures. They enjoy different powers, and they may, in fact, act differently. Sometimes, their actions may even enter into conflict. (López de Sa 2007, p. 63)

Nonetheless, in this case, the Chief Justice is clearly identical to the Head of the Special Committee. Likewise, we say, for the Supreme Court and the Special Committee.

This quick analogy with individual social roles already establishes that the objection from coextensive groups is fallacious; unless, of course, one is willing to bite the bullet and say that *analogously in the singular case*, strictly speaking, no one ever occupies two different social roles. And presumably few would be tempted to conclude that, in our example, Roberts is not identical to either the Chief Justice or the Head of the Special Committee, but merely "constitutes" each of those officials. (For similar initial responses to this objection, as raised against other reductive views of social groups, see Landman 1989b, pp. 724–725; Hawley 2017, pp. 404–406; and Ludwig 2017, pp. 173–175.) So it seems there is no good reason to think that different groups can have exactly the same members after all.

So why have so many social metaphysicians thought that different groups can have the same members? Our diagnosis here will be twofold. To start, there is a tendency here to mistake pragmatic inappropriateness for falsehood and to mistake pragmatic appropriateness for truth. López de Sa (2007, p. 65), Hawley (2017, pp. 405–406) and Kirk Ludwig (2017, pp. 174–175) have all already hinted at such a pragmatic response to this puzzle. Here we'll give a little more detail, before presenting the second part of our diagnosis.

It often happens that an individual person simultaneously occupies two different social roles, and she performs certain actions or has certain powers or duties *because* she occupies one of those roles, and *not because* she occupies the other role. To illustrate, suppose that John Roberts is currently chairing a session because he's the Chief Justice, and not because he's the Head of the Special Committee. Then

(10) The Chief Justice is chairing the session.

is true and appropriate, while in pragmatic contrast,

(11) The Head of the Special Committee is chairing the session.

is true but *inappropriate*, as it could easily mislead the audience into thinking that Roberts is chairing the session because he's the Head of the Special Committee. And this inappropriateness could be expressed by means of *metalinguistic negation*, as in:

(12) The Head of the Special Committee isn't chairing the session.

which, in context, may be understood as conveying something along the lines of:

> Don't say: "The Head of the Special Committee is chairing the session." Even if true, this could easily mislead the audience into thinking that the denoted person is chairing the session because he's the Head of the Special Committee.

Thus (12) is *false* when straightforwardly interpreted as a declarative statement, but *appropriate* when interpreted as something like an implicit command.

(Compare: "We don't eat *tom[aː]tos* here; we eat *tom[eɪ]tos*"; "He isn't neurotic *or* paranoid; he's both"; "I haven't *deprived* you of my talk; I've *spared* you it"; "She's not my mother; she's my female progenitor". By means of metalinguistic negation, one may reject an utterance not for its supposed falsity, but instead for some other perceived defect, such as having the wrong pronunciation, connotations or register (see Horn 1985, 1989). An act of metalinguistic negation is typically marked as such by intonation, but it needn't be. And importantly for our purposes, when speakers perform metalinguistic negations, they needn't be fully aware that this is what they are doing. For instance, it may be far from obvious for a speaker that this is what she does by saying "One shouldn't make *resolutions*; one should have *goals*" (see Almotahari 2014, pp. 498–499).)

Now, analogously, suppose that some people are both the Supreme Court and the Special Committee, but they're currently in session because they're the Supreme Court, and not because they're the Special Committee. Then

(13) The Supreme Court is in session.

is true and appropriate, while in pragmatic contrast,

(14) The Special Committee is in session.

is true but *inappropriate*, as it could easily mislead the audience into thinking that those people are in session because they're the Special Committee. And this inappropriateness could be expressed by means of *metalinguistic negation*, as in:

(15) The Special Committee isn't in session.

which, in context, may be understood as conveying something along the lines of:

> Don't say: "The Special Committee is in session." Even if true, this could easily mislead the audience into thinking that the denoted people are in session because they're the Special Committee.

Thus (15) is *false* when straightforwardly interpreted as a declarative statement, but *appropriate* when interpreted as something like an implicit command. So if inappropriateness is mistaken for falsehood and appropriateness is mistaken for truth, then (14) may be appear to be false and (15) may appear to be its true regular negation, thus creating the deceptive impression that the Supreme Court is not identical to the Special Committee.

As discussed by Benjamin Schnieder (2006) and Mahrad Almotahari (2014), several controversial identifications in metaphysics may owe their controversy in large part to confusions between the semantic and pragmatic rules governing the use of relevant terms. For instance, suppose a Romanesque statue and a piece of alloy exactly coincide in space and time. They were created simultaneously with a mould, and will be destroyed simultaneously later. Then it might seem that the statue is identical to the piece of alloy. But the following argument from Kit Fine (2003), which implicitly appeals to the indiscernibility of identicals, would suggest otherwise:

> (i) The statue is Romanesque, but (ii) the piece of alloy isn't Romanesque; so (iii) the statue is not identical to the piece of alloy.

However, the second premise of this argument could be read either as an instance of metalinguistic negation or as an instance of regular negation. Read in the first way, it may be understood as conveying something along the following lines:

> Don't say: "The piece of alloy is Romanesque." Even if that's true, it's inappropriate to refer to the indicated object with that term while commenting on its artistic qualities.

Then both premises are reasonable, but the argument is invalid, for even if appropriate metalinguistic negations are true, the inappropriateness of referring to something as a "piece of alloy" while calling it "Romanesque" is compatible with that thing being a Romanesque piece of alloy. When the second premise is read as an instance of regular negation, in contrast, the argument is valid, but then the second premise is questionable, since we already stipulated that the statue is Romanesque, and "the piece of alloy" here arguably denotes the statue. And to simply insist that the piece of alloy differs from the statue in this way would be to beg the question against the mooted identification. In sum: on a metalinguistic reading of the second premise, both premises are reasonable but the argument is invalid; while on a regular reading of the second premise, the argument is valid but its premises are question-begging. So any initial plausibility had by this argument is due to the ease of mistaking the inappropriateness of saying "The piece of alloy is Romanesque" for the falsehood of that sentence, and the ease of mistaking the appropriateness of its metalinguistic negation for the truth of its regular negation. As we see it, the objection from coextensive groups, as illustrated above, involves a similar confusion between the semantic and pragmatic rules governing the use of the relevant group term, i.e. "the Special Committee".

Some other potential objections to the plural view of groups merit a similar response. Consider for instance the following arguments, inspired by Chris Barker (1992, pp. 71–73) and Roger Schwarzschild (1996, pp. 168, 173–174):

> (i) The Supreme Court's members were born between 1933 and 1967, but (ii) the Supreme Court wasn't born between 1933 and 1967; so (iii) the Supreme Court is not identical to its members.

> (i) The Supreme Court's members have nine different surnames, but (ii) the Supreme Court doesn't have nine different surnames; so (iii) the Supreme Court is not identical to its members.

> (i) The Supreme Court has nine members, but (ii) the Supreme Court's members don't have nine members; so (iii) the Supreme Court is not identical to its members.

As we see it, the disputed statements "The Supreme Court was born between 1933 and 1967", "The Supreme Court has nine different surnames" and "The Supreme Court's members have nine members" may all be confusingly phrased and hence fit for metalinguistic negation, but with enough interpretive effort they can all be understood as true, despite their oddity (cf. Anscombe 1979, pp. 226–227; Schnieder 2006). So

all three of the above arguments against the plural view—and other similar potential arguments—are likewise unsound.

Now, before proceeding to the second part of our explanation of the illusion of distinct but coextensive groups, let us note the availability of a couple of alternative, semantic responses to Uzquiano's argument, both of which are incompatible with the pragmatic response we have offered here. First, it could be suggested that the predicate "is in session" expresses different properties depending on which group term it is attached to. For instance, it might be suggested that, in the imagined scenario, it expresses the property of *being in session because of being the U.S. Supreme Court* when attached to "the Supreme Court", while, in contrast, it expresses the property of *being in session because of being the Special Committee on Judicial Ethics* when attached to "the Special Committee". Then, even if (13) and (15) are simultaneously true, it doesn't follow that the Supreme Court is not identical to the Special Committee. Likewise it might be suggested that the predicate "is chairing the session" expresses different properties depending on which singular social role term it is attached to. Then, even if (10) and (12) are simultaneously true, it doesn't follow that the Chief Justice is not identical to the Head of the Special Committee. Hawley (2017, p. 405) apparently favours something like this "predicational shift" response to the objection from coextensive groups, but we don't recommend it, in particular because, taking into account *how many* predicates would need to be similarly shifty for this response to work ("is debating", "will soon rule on", "is on a lunch break", etc.), the extra semantic complexity thereby posited seems excessive, especially taking into account the availability of something like our pragmatic response. For similar reasons we are not attracted to Fred Landman's (1989b) earlier semantic response to the objection from coextensive groups, according to which different properties can be truly predicated of the same individual or group relative to its different "aspects", such as its different social roles. Besides, in contrast with what is predicted by such semantic proposals, to our ears (11) and (14) both sound *true* in the imagined scenario, albeit somewhat awkward, so a pragmatic explanation of that awkwardness is naturally to be preferred. Uzquiano (2004a, pp. 142–145) anticipates and criticizes a predicational shift response to his argument for the non-identity of the Supreme Court and the Special Committee (and some of the criticisms he makes here would also apply to Landman's proposal), and Fine (2003, pp. 208ff.) likewise anticipates and criticizes a predicational shift response to his argument for the non-identity of the statue and the piece of alloy. But neither of those authors anticipates a pragmatic response. In any case, whichever detailed response to the objection from coextensive groups is preferred—be it our metalinguistic negation response, or a predicational shift response, or some other pragmatic or semantic response—it must be conceded that the reasoning behind it goes wrong somewhere, given the absurd consequences it yields with respect to individual social roles.

In fact, and as indicated before, we don't think that a confusion between semantics and pragmatics is the whole story here. There is another possible error that might lead people to think that there are distinct but coextensive groups. And this involves a confusion between what might be called *particular* and *abstract* uses of group terms, where the former occur in our previous examples (3), (4), (6), (13) and (14), and the latter are found, for instance, in written constitutions, statutes, and discussions

thereof. A similar distinction holds with respect to social role terms for individual people, although as before, such confusion is somehow less common in the individual case. To illustrate, the following argument, suitably understood, may be sound:

> (i) The Chief Justice is appointed by the President, but (ii) the Head of the Special Committee isn't appointed by the President; so (iii) the Chief Justice is not identical to the Head of the Special Committee.

However, under any plausible interpretation where this argument is sound and its conclusion is a first-order statement of non-identity, "the Chief Justice" here denotes an abstract role rather than any particular occupant of that role, as does "the Head of the Special Committee" (cf. Wiggins 1967, pp. 9, 18; Ludwig 2017, pp. 174–175). This can be seen more clearly by rephrasing the argument as follows:

> (i) Being the Chief Justice involves having been appointed to that role by whoever was then the President, but (ii) being the Head of the Special Committee doesn't involve having been appointed to that role by whoever was then the President; so (iii) being the Chief Justice is not identical to being the Head of the Special Committee.

Analogously, the following argument, suitably understood, may be sound:

> (i) The Supreme Court has the power to interpret the Constitution, but (ii) the Special Committee doesn't have the power to interpret the Constitution; so (iii) the Supreme Court is not identical to the Special Committee.

However, under any plausible interpretation where this argument is sound and its conclusion is a first-order statement of non-identity, "the Supreme Court" here denotes an abstract role rather than any particular occupants of that role, as does "the Special Committee". This can be seen more clearly by rephrasing the argument as follows:

> (i) Being the Supreme Court involves having the power to interpret the Constitution, but (ii) being the Special Committee doesn't involve having the power to interpret the Constitution; so (iii) being the Supreme Court is not identical to being the Special Committee.

Does it follow that, on our view, some social groups are the pluralities of their members, while others are abstract entities? No, for even assuming some kind of platonism about roles, that would be to equivocate on "social group". Every *group role* is arguably an abstract entity, but every *particular group* is the plurality of its members; much as every *individual role* is arguably an abstract entity, but every *particular official* is an individual person. And it is clear that our everyday use of social group terms primarily concerns particular groups rather than social roles (cf. Hawley 2017, p. 406). For the latter don't perform the actions that we commonly attribute to social groups: they don't walk, talk, sing, dance, gather, fight, vote, celebrate, or rule on legal cases. So while group roles may be of great interest for social metaphysics, and may sometimes be denoted by group terms in everyday discourse, here we are primarily concerned with *particular social groups*, and it is these that we identify with concrete pluralities.

We might understand social roles—for both groups and individuals—as properties that are instantiated relative to times, or, equivalently, as relations to times. Thus for

some people to occupy the role of *being the U.S. Supreme Court* at time t is for them to collectively instantiate that property at t, or bear that relation to t (cf. Uzquiano 2004a, pp. 138, 141). This leaves open what general account we give of properties and relations, including whether we ultimately treat them realistically, or instead account for our talk of them nominalistically. It also leaves open how the specific properties or relations that we identify with social roles should be characterized in more detail. Indeed, we might wish to have some general account of what is required to occupy social roles, what powers and duties they entail, and how they should be individuated. But, interesting and challenging as these further questions may be, they raise no special problem for the plural view of groups, since they will likewise arise with respect to individual social roles such as *being the U.S. President* and *being the U.S. Chief Justice* (cf. Hawley 2017, pp. 405–406).

Notably, the distinction between particular groups and group roles also allows us to explain any appearance of memberless groups, such as the Supreme Court at a hypothetical time when every justice has resigned, and no new justice has yet been appointed (see Bennett 1975, p. 136; Quinton 1976, p. 15; Copp 1984, pp. 266–267; Lasersohn 1990, p. 89; Pearson 2011, p. 168; Hindriks 2013, pp. 428–429; Epstein 2015, pp. 169–170; Ludwig 2017, p. 58). There are no empty pluralities, so every particular group has members. Indeed, on our account, every particular group has at least two members. Still, a group role, such as that of the Supreme Court, can certainly be temporarily unoccupied. And if this role could be occupied by a lone justice after every other justice has resigned, then the Supreme Court needn't be a group (cf. Lasersohn 1990, p. 89; Pearson 2011, p. 168; Ritchie 2013, p. 259; Ludwig 2017, p. 52, fn. 9). That is to say, the role of being the U.S. Supreme Court might not be essentially plural.

Moreover, we might regard the erstwhile puzzling sentences "The Chief Justice has become increasingly liberal" and "The Supreme Court has become increasingly diverse" as involving the same abstract uses of social role terms. Roughly as follows: the role of being the Chief Justice has tended to be occupied by a more liberal individual at later times; and the role of being the Supreme Court has tended to be occupied by a more diverse plurality at later times. Thus, it should be possible to handle Korman's aforementioned analogues of the temperature paradox without positing any further ambiguity in group terms.

To reiterate, we haven't offered a full theory of the semantics and pragmatics of group terms here. In particular, we haven't given a detailed account of what social roles are, nor of what it is for a plurality to have a certain property *because* they together occupy a certain social role. Nor have we taken a definite stance on whether abstract uses of group terms are genuinely referential, and if so, whether they succeed in referring, and if so, what they refer to—which of course leads back to the previous question of what social roles are—or whether they should instead be given some non-referential analysis. But, once again, we have seen that any such complexity is exhibited by social role terms for groups and individual people alike. So the complexity of these issues cannot be avoided by rejecting the plural view of groups.

5 Again, why pluralities?

As we'll now explain, our arguments of the last two sections can be generalized to defend alternative reductive proposals that identify social groups with the *sets* or *fusions* of their members. In this section we'll consider these views in turn, and compare their prospects with our view of groups as pluralities, before further insisting on the plausibility of our view in comparison with its rivals.

5.1 Why not sets?

Consider first the view that each social group is the set of its members. As mentioned before, one common objection to this view is that, unlike sets, social groups vary in membership over time and between possible worlds. For instance, Ruth Bader Ginsburg is only temporarily and contingently a member of the U.S. Supreme Court, while in contrast, the set of the current Supreme Court Justices supposedly has her as a set member permanently and necessarily. However, our earlier reply to the parallel objection to the plural view straightforwardly carries over here. That is, on its flexible reading, "the U.S. Supreme Court" could be viewed as denoting different sets of people at different times and worlds, some of which have Ginsburg as a set member and some of which do not. Another common objection to identifying social groups with the sets of their members is that, unlike sets, two or more different social groups can have exactly the same members. But as we have seen, the reasoning that leads people to think that there are distinct but coextensive groups yields absurd consequences with respect to individual social roles. And we have also seen where such reasoning plausibly goes wrong.

In contrast with what we have argued, Nikk Effingham (2010) views these standard objections as cogent, so in order to circumvent them he proposes to identify social groups with far more complex and controversial sets, i.e. the set-theoretic reductions of functions from possible worlds to functions from times to sets of people (or "individuals" more generally), and accordingly defines group membership as distinct from set membership. So, aside from the standard infinite ontology of set theory, Effingham commits to the existence of infinitely many worlds, infinitely many times and infinitely many merely possible people, and moreover forgoes a simple definition of group membership. However, given that the above objections to identifying groups with sets have been found wanting, such metaphysical and semantic complications are unwarranted as far as social groups are concerned.

Further, Effingham (2010, pp. 259–260) declares it to be a virtue of his account that it allows there to be distinct groups with the same members, but since his account doesn't allow for any two groups to be necessarily coextensive, he simply denies that this ever happens, saying that no convincing example of this has been provided. But just as some theorists have been convinced that there are pairs of contingently coextensive groups, one might find it conceivable that there be two necessarily coextensive groups, either necessarily covarying or necessarily unvarying in membership. Indeed, Michael Bennett (1975, p. 136) once proposed much the same account as Effingham, characterizing a committee as "a function from points of reference to sets of indi-

viduals"; where a "point of reference" is understood as a set-theoretic ordered pair constructed from a possible world and a moment of time (see also Pearson 2011). However, Bennett later gave this view up (1979, p. 275), citing an earlier objection presented to him in conversation by David Kaplan, according to which Committee A and Committee B could be established in such a way that, although their members may vary together, they are bound to have the same members as each other (for similar thoughts, see Lasersohn 1990, pp. 88–89; and Linnebo 2016, pp. 662, 669). To give a less worldly example, a theologian might find it conceivable that some angels are necessarily appointed as the members of both the Celestial Chorus and the Guardians of the Virgin Mary. By the familiar reasoning of believers in distinct but coextensive groups, there would be two distinct particular groups in each of these cases, yet on Bennett's and Effingham's sophisticated set-theoretic accounts, the apparently distinct groups would turn out to be identical in both cases. So, given their motivations, these accounts yield unwelcome results in some scenarios. But of course, if, as we have argued, the appearance of distinct but coextensive groups is illusory, then in each of these cases, we should expect there to be just one particular group, not two, so no such problem arises. (We might have considered identifying *group roles* with set-theoretic functions of this sort; but such examples would seem to rule this out. For instance, the roles of *being Committee A* and *being Committee B*, as imagined by Kaplan, would presumably come with different powers and duties; yet each role would be identified with the same complex set on this view.)

So, why not identify social groups with the sets of their members? Although the two standard objections to this view considered above can be answered, there are still good reasons to prefer the plural view of groups. In particular, sets are commonly viewed as not having any spatiotemporal location or causal powers, while in contrast, social groups are spatiotemporally located and have causal powers. To repeat Hawley's example, a book group can fit into the kitchen and make enough noise to wake up the baby. More generally, social groups walk and talk, and are seen and heard, and their locations and powers plausibly coincide with the collective locations and powers of their members.

Admittedly, the spatial coincidence of social groups with their members isn't entirely uncontroversial. David-Hillel Ruben (1983, pp. 224–225) argues that the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement isn't located in any country where it has no official presence, even when some of its members visit that country; and suggests that conversely, it could be officially present, and hence located, in some country even when none of its members are there (assuming for the sake of the example that its members are just individual people, and not other groups such as its affiliated national societies). And while Ruben himself doesn't classify this organization as a social group, many would. However, as Hawley (2017, pp. 407–409) argues in response, we should be careful here to distinguish between *physical* and *official* locations. An individual person may have various official locations for work, taxation, voting rights, and so on, just by bearing different and suitable relations to those different places. She might bear the work address relation to one place, the tax residence relation to another place, and the registered-to-vote-in relation to yet another place. The physical location of that person is clearly another question. Likewise for groups. The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement has no official presence in

the Vatican, for instance, but some of its members (or members of some of its member societies) may well be there right now; and if so, that group has part of its current physical location in the Vatican.

So, social groups plausibly have the collective locations and powers of their members, while sets, at least according to orthodoxy, do not. In response, a defender of the view of groups as sets might endorse the unorthodox view that impure sets somehow inherit the collective locations and powers of their members, much as composite material objects are commonly thought to inherit the collective locations and powers of their parts. On this view, every material object exactly coincides with infinitely many sets, each of which has exactly the same powers as that object. So, for instance, whenever an individual human walks and talks, there will be infinitely many human-shaped sets walking and talking in exactly the same place. Consider her singleton, and the singleton of her singleton, and so on, as well as any set whose members mereologically compose her, and every other set that can be constructed from those things. Perhaps this is a coherent proposition, but it is certainly hard to swallow, and the plural view is in no way committed to it.

Admittedly, such a view of sets has partial precedents. Max Cresswell (1985, pp. 630–631) and Landman (1989a, pp. 566–567) both suggest that sets of people are located and causally active, albeit without endorsing the more general view of impure sets just described. Peter Lasersohn (1995, pp. 146–148) indicates his agreement with these authors on this point, yet in effect distances himself from the view at issue by rejecting singletons as distinct entities (instead identifying them with their members) and sympathetically citing Black's (1971) suggestion that everyday talk of many-membered "sets" is best understood as disguised plural talk. More systematically, David Lewis (1986, p. 83) once claimed that impure sets (understood as distinct entities) coincide with their members, and Penelope Maddy (1990, pp. 58–63) once claimed that impure sets both coincide with their members and are perceivable. However, both of these latter authors later backed off from these claims (Lewis 1991, pp. 142–143; Maddy 1997, p. 152, fn. 30). More to the point, neither of them went as far as saying that sets walk and talk. In a quest for ideological parsimony, Theodore Sider does actually go this far (2013, p. 288), proposing to ditch mereological notions and instead "identify ordinary objects—tables and chairs, planets and molecules, we ourselves—with sets, either of particles or points of spacetime", but, like Cresswell and Landman, he doesn't specify any general principles of inheritance. Meanwhile, any suitable restriction on the inheritance of location and powers by sets—still apt for identifying social groups with sets, while somehow limiting the bizarre consequences outlined above—would presumably be unattractively ad hoc.

In sum, even if there is no knockdown argument against identifying social groups with the sets of their members, there is reason to think that social groups are more credibly identified with the pluralities of their members.

5.2 Why not fusions?

Consider now the view that each social group is the fusion of its members. An occasional objection to this view is that, unlike fusions and their parts, social groups vary in

membership over time and between possible worlds. For instance, Ruth Bader Ginsburg is only temporarily and contingently a member of the U.S. Supreme Court, while in contrast, the fusion of the current Supreme Court Justices allegedly has her as a part permanently and necessarily. However, our earlier reply to the parallel objection to the plural view straightforwardly carries over here. That is, on its flexible reading, "the U.S. Supreme Court" could be viewed as denoting different fusions of people at different times and worlds, some of which have Ginsburg as a part and some of which do not. A more common objection to identifying social groups with the fusions of their members is that, while no two things have exactly the same proper parts, two or more different social groups can have exactly the same members. But as we have seen, the reasoning that leads people to think that there are distinct but coextensive groups yields absurd consequences with respect to individual social roles. And we have also seen where such reasoning plausibly goes wrong.

As noted before, Hawley (2017), in defence of a mereological view of social groups, similarly points out that the reasoning behind the objection from coextensive groups overgeneralizes with respect to individual social roles, and makes some suggestions as to where such reasoning goes wrong. However, she gives a different reply from us to the objection from changes in membership. Rather than appealing to the flexibility of group terms such as "the U.S. Supreme Court", she simply points out that material objects composed of people needn't be thought of as having their parts permanently and necessarily (recall Tibbles). She also hints (2017, p. 410) that she would more precisely favour a "four-dimensional" view of groups whereby, for instance, the U.S. Supreme Court is treated either as a temporally extended object stretching back to 1789, composed of all the temporal parts of the past, present and future U.S. Supreme Court Justices corresponding to those people's stints as Supreme Court Justices (as proposed by Quine 1950, pp. 625–627; and Copp 1984), or else as an instantaneous object with many past and future counterparts (as advocated by Sider 2001, pp. 150–152, 205; and Faller 2019; and in line with Hawley 2001). But given the flexibility of "the U.S. Supreme Court", it turns out to be gratuitous to develop a mereological view of groups in either of these ways.

So, why not identify social groups with the fusions of their members? Although the two objections to this view considered above can be answered—as can Ruben's objection that organizations can fail to share their locations with their members—there are still good reasons to prefer the plural view of groups. In particular, unlike the plural view, a mereological view of groups cannot offer a straightforward account of group membership.

One problem that is sometimes raised for the mereological view of groups is that, since parthood is transitive, we cannot take group membership to be parthood (see Ruben 1983, p. 231; Copp 1984, pp. 265–266; Schmitt 2003, pp. 5–6; Uzquiano 2004a, pp. 136–137; 2018, pp. 424–425; Effingham 2010, p. 255; Epstein 2015, p. 144). To illustrate, not every part of the fusion of the current U.S. Supreme Court Justices is a member of the U.S. Supreme Court. Ruth Bader Ginsburg is a member of the court, for instance, but her left foot is not. However, as Hawley rightly replies (2017, pp. 400–402), a defender of the mereological view needn't take *every* part of the court to be a member of it. Rather, on this view, only *some* parts of the court are members of it. We might also distinguish an additional sense of "is part of" which expresses

group membership rather than mereological parthood (cf. Ruben 1983, p. 220; Korman 2015, pp. 17, 140, 145–146; Hawley 2017, pp. 396–397). Then, in that sense, the mereological view can also accommodate opinions to the effect that Ruth Bader Ginsburg's left foot isn't part of the Supreme Court. The real difficulty for the mereological view, then, is to explain why Ginsburg is a member of the Supreme Court but her left foot isn't a member of the Supreme Court.

One response here would be to say that a member of a social group is any mereological part of that group that is a person. However, Hawley rejects this solution, on the grounds that many social groups have members that are not individual persons. In particular, she notes that the Institute of Philosophy, officially based in London, lists philosophy departments as well as individuals among its members (2017, p. 402). It may be doubted whether this is a genuine case of group membership, though. As Hawley herself says, "we often use the language of membership—especially in commercial contexts—without implying any kind of constituenthood, either mereological or set-theoretic" (2017, p. 397). So perhaps the Institute of Philosophy's only group members are its staff, while the philosophy departments that are officially listed as "members" on its website are just formal associates of that group. (It seems that departments formerly paid for this privilege, but nowadays only individual "membership" comes with a fee.) In any case, however we characterize this specific case, we could imagine there being a group with such a mixed membership. Indeed, for a real-life example, consider any music festival line-up that includes both bands and solo artists, or a corporation that has both groups and individuals as shareholders (cf. Ludwig 2017, p. 37). Taking into account such examples—as well as straightforward groups of groups like the Trades Union Congress (cf. Ruben 1983, p. 231)—Hawley offers the following solution to the membership problem: *M* is a group member of *G* if and only if *M* is a part of *G* that counts as a member of *G* according to the formal or informal membership rules of *G*.

As Hawley subsequently acknowledges, however, this solution is inadequate without further elaboration. For consider another example she gives:

> Suppose that (1) all and only haberdashers are members of the Haberdashers' Union; (2) all and only local chapters of the HU are members of the Congress of Haberdashers' Union Chapters; (3) all and only the members of the HU are members of chapters that are members of the CHUC. Then the HU and the CHUC are the same material object, having the same parts, but they have different members (the HU has only individual members, the CHUC has only chapter members). (Hawley 2017, pp. 406–407)

Now, consider the object that is identical to the Haberdashers' Union, and also identical to the Congress of Haberdashers' Union Chapters. Call it Dash. Consider also Javier the haberdasher. Is Javier a member of Dash? Thus stated, the question seems to have no determinately correct answer. Whether Javier counts as a member of Dash seems to depend on how Dash is labelled or described. In response to this further difficulty, Hawley (2017, p. 407) suggests that "is a member of the Haberdashers' Union" expresses a different property than "is a member of the Congress of Haberdashers' Union Chapters", thanks to the different rules of membership associated with the different group terms. Any haberdasher is a member of Dash according to

one set of rules, and is not a member of Dash according to another set of rules. Thus Hawley sketches a predicational shift response to the problem of group membership. More generally, the idea here is that the predicate "is a member of" expresses different relations depending on which group term occurs in its second argument place.

To state this idea a bit more precisely, let's say that, for any x, a *division* of x is any set of things that together compose x. Then defenders of the mereological view could say that "is a member of", in the sense relevant to social groups, is context-sensitive in roughly the following way: "M is a member of G" is true in context c if and only if, in c, "M" denotes some x and "G" denotes some y, and x is a set member of the division of y that is most salient in c. Suitable relativizations to times and worlds may also be inserted here. Defenders of the mereological view could then say that each group term semantically encodes a membership criterion: a rule that determines a unique division of its denotation, for any time and world. Accordingly, one division of Dash—a set of haberdashers—is made especially salient by calling Dash "the Haberdashers' Union", and another division of Dash—a set of chapters—is made especially salient by calling Dash "the Congress of Haberdashers' Union Chapters". So the division of Dash that is most salient can vary, even within the same sentence, according to how Dash is denoted. Along these lines, defenders of the mereological view might try to explain how it is that Javier the haberdasher is a member of the Haberdashers' Union, but not a member of the Congress of Haberdashers' Union Chapters.

Nonetheless, such semantic manoeuvres seem excessively convoluted, compared with endorsing the plural view of groups and saying that, for any individual x and any group of individuals yy (where "yy" is a plural variable), x is a member of yy if and only if x is one of yy.

In fact, things are not quite so simple for us. For, by parity of reasoning, we should say that "the Congress of Haberdashers' Union Chapters" is a *superplural* term, given that it denotes a group of groups of people. So, taking into account such examples, we should also say that, for any group of individuals xx and any group of groups of individuals yyy (where "yyy" is superplural variable), xx is a member of yyy if and only if xx is one of yyy. And so on up the hierarchy of higher-level plurals (cf. Linnebo 2003; 2017, Sect. 2.4; Rayo 2006; Linnebo and Rayo 2012; Oliver and Smiley 2016, Chap. 15; Simons 2016; Grimau 2019); for surely, in principle, the Congress of Haberdashers' Union Chapters could itself be a member of another group. Thus, to give a finite non-schematic statement of our general account of group membership, we'll apparently need to introduce all-level variables, each capable of taking either a single thing or a plurality of any level as its value, as follows: for any individual or group x^* and any group y^*, x^* is a member of y^* if and only if x^* is of a lower level than y^* and x^* is one of y^*. Still, despite our appeal to higher-level plurals (to which we'll return in Sect. 6), we submit that our account of group membership is more straightforward, elegant and plausible than any account of group membership that is available to the mereological view of groups.

In sum, even if there is no knockdown argument against identifying social groups with the fusions of their members, there is reason to think that social groups are more credibly identified with the pluralities of their members.

5.3 For pluralities

As mentioned before, one might deny that social groups are sets or fusions of people due to a prior belief that there are no sets and no scattered fusions of people. But that's not why we ourselves prefer the plural view. Rather, as indicated in the last two subsections, pluralities are simply better suited to be the subject matter of our talk of groups, regardless of whether the relevant sets and fusions exist. On the face of it, to talk of a particular social group whose members are people is simply a customary way of talking about those people together—recall, the song goes: "Hey, hey, *we're* the Monkees." And contrary to what others have argued, this first impression is not undermined but rather reinforced by a suitably careful inspection of the issue. Indeed, the plural view, we submit, is just the most natural way to understand social groups in analogy with individual people occupying individual social roles. Thus it deserves to be treated as the default view of social groups: a view which shouldn't be rejected unless there are compelling reasons to do so (*pace* Hawley 2017, p. 398, who claims this status for the mereological view). And as far as we can see, there are no compelling reasons to abandon the plural view. It's just that theorists feel forced away from this intuitive view of social groups, and thus towards singularism, for the dubious reasons already discussed.

One particularly vivid instance of this phenomenon can be observed in the account of organized social groups recently developed by Katherine Ritchie. She initially (2013) characterizes social groups—the restriction to organized groups comes later—as "realizations of structures". Thus:

> Some things are members of group G with structure S at time t and world w just in case they jointly realize S. Some things jointly realize a structure if, and only if, each occupies a node (or some nodes) in the structure and every node in the structure is occupied by one or more of the things. To occupy a node is to stand in the relations required by the node. (Ritchie 2013, p. 270)

But of course, all of this is perfectly compatible with the plural view. Moreover, since the "realization" of a structure is naturally understood to be whatever realizes that structure, if it weren't for the fact that she explicitly rejects the plural view of groups in the same paper, Ritchie could easily be understood here as implicitly endorsing the plural view. Later she speaks of "systems" realizing structures, but uses this term in a semantically plural way, saying: "A system is the *entities* instantiating or realizing a structure" (2020, p. 406, our italics). She also clarifies that she takes structures to be plural properties (2018, p. 24). So the plural view can clearly accommodate this aspect of her account.

And yet Ritchie feels compelled to repeatedly reject the plural view of groups. Accordingly, she rephrases her view by saying that organized groups are "structured wholes" (2015, 2018, 2020), and makes clear that, on her view, whenever some people newly realize an appropriate social structure, something new comes into existence, distinct from both those people and the structure they realize, as well as from their set and their fusion, and that new entity is the group.

But why should we think that any such entity exists? Anticipating this challenge, Ritchie considers appealing to the following principle, which she calls *unification by property*:

> If a property F is instantiated by some things xx without it being the case that any of the xxs individually is F, then there exists something y that is distinct from the xxs and Fy. (Ritchie 2018, p. 25)

However, she immediately acknowledges that this principle is falsified by counterexamples (*ibid.*). One of her specific candidate counterexamples is dubious, though. That is, she claims that three people can surround a dog without any one thing surrounding a dog; but in that case, the fusion of those people would presumably surround the dog, much as a moat surrounds a castle. (At least this is so if material composition is necessarily unrestricted, as we and many others believe. Nonetheless, in referring to three people together, one doesn't plausibly refer to their fusion; for they are three things, and it is one thing.) More convincingly, Ritchie claims that three people can be gathered by a door without any one thing being gathered by a door. To add a counterexample of our own, some things can be three in number without any one thing being three in number. Besides, the mooted principle is clearly too weak to guarantee that, in accordance with Ritchie's view, whenever some people are appropriately organized, they spatially coincide with a distinct entity which is neither their set nor their fusion.

In the end, the only reason Ritchie gives for treating organized groups as entities distinct from their members is her belief that "[o]rganized groups have persistence and identity conditions that are different from mere pluralities" (*ibid.*). In other words, she takes the plural view to have been refuted by the standard objections from changes in membership and coextensive groups. Thus, like others, Ritchie feels forced towards singularism. But as we have seen, these standard objections can be answered. So, freed from their influence, we can fully embrace the initially attractive idea that each social group is just its members.

Further, embracing the plural view would also finally provide Ritchie with a positive account of group membership. As things stand, she rules out the plural view, as well as other reductive views whereby group membership can be defined in terms of set membership or parthood Ritchie (2013), but doesn't claim that social groups are otherwise constituted by their members, as most non-reductionists do, and specifically rejects Uzquiano's (2004a) constitution view of groups (Ritchie 2013, p. 258, fn. 1). And although she repeatedly gives a condition for organized group membership, along the lines of the quoted passage above, this condition (as evidenced by its compatibility with both the plural view and various versions of singularism) doesn't actually tell us how organized groups are related to their members. On the other hand, if she were to embrace the plural view, and say that organized groups are the plural realizations of social structures, then Ritchie would immediately obtain a simple yet informative account of group membership. That is, each social group is just its members, and to be a member of that group is just to be one of them.

That said, it may be doubted whether the choice between singularism and the plural view of groups is truly exhaustive (even setting aside a mixed view of the sort we parenthetically rejected in Sect. 2). Indeed, Uzquiano (2018) has recently proposed a view of groups which, like our view and unlike his previous constitution view, is

intended to be non-singularist. But he doesn't endorse the plural view of groups either, at least not as we have characterized it (nor as he himself characterizes the plural identity thesis). Rather he identifies each group of people with a so-called *variable plural embodiment*, which is neither "something" nor "some things" as standardly conceived, but instead falls under a generalized notion of a plurality which, unlike the standard notion, allows for temporal and modal variation in membership, as well as coextensiveness without identity (along the lines of a view previously sketched by Simons 1982b, pp. 209–211; 1987, pp. 145–147; 2016). We won't examine the details of this account here, though. It suffices to say that, given our replies to the objections from changes in membership and coextensive groups, Uzquiano's innovations are unsuited for capturing the ordinary notion of a group. Rather we should identify each group of people with a plurality as standardly conceived. That is to say, each group of people is just some people, and to be a member of that group is just to be one of them.

Ludwig (2017), in his own way, also blurs the distinction between the plural view and singularism, insofar as he appears to be sympathetic to *both* of these approaches. He identifies organized social groups with what he calls *plural groups*, or *natural groups* (for now, we'll opt for the latter terminology). And, to a large extent, he characterizes these in line with how we have characterized pluralities: they have at least two members each; they are denoted by paradigmatic plural terms of natural language (such as "those people", "they" and "we"); they are individuated by their members (so no natural group could have different members, and no two of them can have the same members); one of them can be a member of another (so there can be natural groups of natural groups); and they are not to be confused with the sets or the fusions of their members (see Ludwig 2016, pp. 132–134; 2017, pp. 17–18, 36–38, 160; 2018, p. 487). These similarities notwithstanding, Ludwig's natural groups, unlike our pluralities, are characterized as objects in their own right. This commitment results from Ludwig's self-declared scepticism about the distinctive primitive notions of contemporary plural logic (2016, p. 132, fn. 2; 2017, pp. 17–18, fn. 3), and makes his account a singularist one, despite its partial affinity with our plural view. Notably, this dual aspect of Ludwig's account seems to commit him to a questionable form of many-one identity, whereby one thing can be literally identical to many things. For instance, at one point he writes: "The corporation is, in fact, literally its shareholders" (2017, p. 239). So on his account, a corporation is at the same time both one thing, i.e. the natural group formed by its shareholders, and many things, i.e. its many shareholders. As mentioned earlier, the intelligibility of such a notion of many-one identity has its defenders, especially among proponents of the contentious mereological doctrine of "composition as identity", but we take it to be an advantage of our account that it incurs no such commitment (*pace* Hansson Wahlberg 2019, p. 4970, who incorrectly claims that the plural view is committed to this). On our account, one group can be identical to many things, but, crucially, no particular group is *a thing*. So, while we ourselves can be said to accept many-one identity of a sort (as described by Oliver and Smiley 2016, pp. 306–307), we take this aspect of our view to be unproblematic.

A second important difference between Ludwig's account and ours concerns how he deals with changes in membership. Like us, he appeals to the flexibility of group terms to explain modal variation in membership (2017, pp. 68–70). So here we can all agree that to say that the Supreme Court *could have had* different members is just

to say that another particular group could have been the Supreme Court; just as we would ordinarily say that the Chief Justice could have been someone else. However, Ludwig gives a different and more complicated explanation of temporal variation in membership, and here he sharply diverges from the analogy that we have pursued between social groups and individual people occupying individual social roles. On our account, to say that the Supreme Court *used to have* different members is just to say that some other particular group used to be the Supreme Court; just as we would ordinarily say that the Chief Justice used to be someone else. In contrast, Ludwig identifies the Supreme Court with the temporally diffuse group of people that includes everyone who ever was or ever will be a Supreme Court Justice (2017, p. 66), and he accounts for the ordinary sense in which someone can *temporarily* be a member of the court by positing an additional time-indexed membership relation—in effect, a three-place relation between people (or other group members), social groups and times (2017, pp. 40, 60–68). So on his account, *numerically* the same group ruled on *Dred Scott v. Sandford* in 1857 and on *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, albeit acting on each occasion through the smaller group of people who were then its time-indexed members. Within the confines of the present paper, we cannot feasibly present rival treatments of the example sentences that Ludwig analyses by exploiting this alleged distinction between two group membership relations. However, we take it to be an advantage of our account that it incurs no such commitment. On our account, group membership can be straightforwardly understood in terms of plural membership, and we preserve a closer, and so to our minds more satisfying analogy between social groups and individual people occupying individual social roles.

6 Further issues

Before concluding the paper, we'll use this section to discuss some further issues that might appear to challenge the plural view of groups. First, we'll discuss the question of the conditions under which a plurality counts as a social group. Second, we'll discuss the issue of distinguishing between and accounting for different kinds of social group. Third, we'll discuss how the plural view can accommodate the existence of higher-level groups, i.e. groups with other groups as members.

6.1 Which pluralities are social groups?

The plural view is officially silent on which pluralities count as social groups. The view is just that every social group is the plurality of its members, and that is consistent with denying, as do many social metaphysicians, that every plurality of people forms a social group (see e.g. Gilbert 1989, p. 9). Still, such silence might seem negligent, especially if one views the metaphysics of social groups as responsible for specifying informative conditions under which some people can be said to form a social group (see e.g. Thomasson 2019; Ritchie 2020). So here we'll offer a couple of reasonable possible answers to this question. As will be seen, which of these answers one finally prefers may be a matter of terminological choice.

As a preliminary point, notice that, even if not every plurality is a social group, it may still be the case that every plurality is a group, in a suitably broad sense of "group". Indeed, there appears to be an ordinary sense of the term "group" whereby it is just a synonym of "plurality", in the sense that we have stipulated for that latter term. (The same plausibly goes for "set", not in the established mathematical sense in which we have been using that term, whereby each set is a single thing distinct from its members, but rather in its everyday, non-technical usage; as observed by Black 1971.) Thus any arbitrary plurality of things counts as a group of things, where those things may include people, non-human animals, plants, inanimate objects, arbitrary proper parts or fusions of any such things, arbitrary fusions of proper parts of any such things, or any mixture in between.

Of course, not every arbitrary plurality of things is a *social* group. However, it might seem unclear what restriction the word "social" imposes here. Almost everyone would agree that neither inanimate objects nor plants can be members of social groups. Yet it is certainly in keeping with scientific discourse to describe some cooperative groups of non-human animals, such as ant colonies or packs of wolves, as "social groups". Moreover, Effingham (2010, p. 255) claims that non-human mascots, even single-celled organisms, can be members of sports teams, and some people would count their pets as family members. Still, philosophers working in social metaphysics tend to be more concerned with groups of people, and groups of groups of people, and so on. So let's assume that in the relevant sense, every social group is a group of people, higher-level groups aside. Accordingly, a family (or team) with its dog is a group, but only the human family (or team) members are a social group. Then our question becomes: under which conditions are some people a social group?

We ourselves would be content to give a very liberal answer here. Every plurality of people is always a social group; it's just that some pluralities of people—at certain times, and spoken of in certain contexts—are more salient or theoretically relevant than others. So when we count social groups without counting all the social groups that exist, we may speak truly by suitably restricting our plural quantifiers, just as when we count material objects without counting all the arbitrary fusions that exist, we may speak truly by suitably restricting our singular quantifiers (cf. Lewis 1986, p. 213; Landman 1989a, p. 589; Effingham 2010, pp. 262–263; Hawley 2017, p. 410).

More specifically, we might restrict our quantification over groups to *socially significant groups*, as Amie Thomasson characterizes that notion, whereby a group is socially significant if and only if it falls under a concept that functions "to normatively structure our lives together: marking how we are to treat others and how we are to behave in a variety of contexts and towards a variety of people" (Thomasson 2019, p. 4838). Thus sociologically irrelevant arbitrary groups of people are excluded from our domain of plural quantification, while highly organized groups of people (such as teams, choirs and committees) and comparatively disorganized yet sociologically relevant groups (such as income groups, ethnic groups and genders) are all included.

Alternatively, if we were to reject the idea that every group of people is a social group, we might take up Thomasson's suggestion of treating her notion of a socially significant group as specifying the general conditions under which some people form a social group (*ibid.*). Thomasson takes "social group" to be a fairly ill-defined term of art, hence she proposes that, rather than seeking the one correct meaning of "social"

here, as it modifies the non-technical term “group”, we should simply stipulate the meaning that best suits our theoretical purposes. So that is what she tries to do with her notion of a socially significant group, and we might follow her lead in this. However, if contrary to Thomasson, you are convinced that “social” already imposes a definite, and perhaps different, restriction on groups of people—perhaps having to do with cooperation or the like—then this too would of course be compatible with the plural view.

6.2 Kinds of social group

Similarly, the plural view by itself provides no positive account of what kinds of social group there are. And again, such silence might seem negligent, especially if one views the metaphysics of social groups as responsible for illuminating such distinctions (see e.g. Ritchie 2015, 2020; Uzquiano 2018; Epstein 2015, Chap. 13; 2019). So here we’ll briefly comment on what can be said about social group kinds, consistently with the plural view.

First, we should allow that there are both more specific and more general kinds of social group, corresponding to comparatively fine-grained and coarse-grained typologies, where the most specific kinds correspond to specific social roles. So, for instance, there is the very specific kind *U.S. Supreme Court*, as opposed to the more general kind *supreme court*, as opposed to the yet more general kind *court of law*. At a very coarse-grained level, we can roughly distinguish organized social groups from comparatively disorganized but otherwise significant social groups, just by pointing to general differences in how their members are interrelated. Beyond that, there is no need to regard organized and disorganized social groups as being substantially different in nature (*pace* Ritchie 2015, 2018, 2020, who characterizes the former as structured wholes, as discussed above, and the latter as social kinds).

Second, and as indicated before, any given plurality of people will belong to different kinds of social group at different times and worlds, and can belong to more than one kind simultaneously, as is also the case with individual people and their social positions. For instance, the current U.S. Supreme Court Justices weren’t always a court of law, and they might have been a baseball team, a salsa band, an anarchist commune, or all of those groups simultaneously, or as they presumably once were, just a socially insignificant collection of people. Relatedly, when an organized social group of a certain kind is first formed—a special committee on judicial ethics, say—-some pre-existing people are newly assigned a certain social role. The particular group itself doesn’t come into existence at that time (*pace* Copp 1984, pp. 255–256; Effingham 2010, pp. 252–253; Hindriks 2013, p. 419; Ritchie 2018; Epstein 2019; Hansson Wahlberg 2019, pp. 4970–4971; Thomasson 2019, pp. 4830–4831). Still we can truly say that a committee is *formed* at that time, in the sense that those people are organized into a committee, and perhaps also that a committee is *created* at that time, in the sense that some people are newly given a certain specific and previously unoccupied group role; much as a baron or a minister is said to be “created” when someone is newly given a certain specific and previously unoccupied individual role. A committee or team, understood as a group role, can be aptly described as having been “created” or

"founded" on a certain date, to the same extent that a peerage or an individual political office can. So, whether such talk is literally true or better understood as figurative, its occurrence with respect to group roles and individual roles should be treated on a par.

Finally, we can leave social scientists to provide more detailed accounts of what salient or theoretically relevant kinds of social group there are, and of their notable characteristics. After all, why should we trust philosophers to do this? As an analogy, we wouldn't expect someone who specializes in the metaphysics of material composition to provide a detailed account of all the prominent kinds of complex material object there are. Rather, if we were quixotic enough to seek such an account, we would begin by consulting with a range of non-philosophers with suitable areas of expertise: astronomers, geologists, biologists, engineers, and so on. Similarly, in our capacity as social metaphysicians, we needn't appropriate the work of social scientists.

6.3 Higher-level groups

As well as groups of people, we sometimes talk of groups of groups of people. And we might also talk of groups of groups of groups of people, and so on. For instance, FC Barcelona is a group of people, which is a member of the Catalan Football Federation, which is in turn a member of the Royal Spanish Football Federation, which is in turn a member of FIFA, an international group whose members are 211 national football associations. Peter Simons (2016, p. 56) says that FIFA is "probably" a third-level group. By our reckoning it is at least fourth-level, if we take its membership structure at face value.

As indicated before, once we recognize that each group of people is the plurality of its members, by parity of reasoning we should also recognize that each group of groups, if such there be, is a plurality of pluralities, i.e. a higher-level plurality. Every group of people is a first-level plurality, every group of groups of people is a second-level plurality, and so on. Moreover, a group with a mixture of individual people and groups of people as members—like the 1969 Woodstock line-up—can also be classified as a second-level plurality. In general, we may allow a higher-level plurality to have members from any lower level, while classifying individuals as zero-level and assigning each plurality to the level immediately above that of its highest-level members (in line with the discussion of "cumulativity" in Linnebo and Rayo 2012, albeit restricting our attention to finite levels). Hence it can be coherently said that FIFA's members include both groups of football clubs, such as England's Football Association, and a group such as the Royal Spanish Football Federation, which includes football clubs, groups of football clubs and individual players among its members.

This leaves our account vulnerable to scepticism about the intelligibility of higher-level plural denotation, predication and quantification (as voiced by the likes of Stenius 1974, pp. 173–177; Simons 1982a, pp. 187–195; Lewis 1986, pp. 50–51, fn. 37; 1991, pp. 70–71; Schwarzschild 1996, pp. vii–ix; Uzquiano 2004a, p. 146; 2004b, pp. 438–440; Rumfitt 2005, p. 102; McKay 2006, pp. 46–53, 137–139; and Ben-Yami 2013). Some authors say that, insofar as they understand plural notions, pluralities can only have *things* as members; but no plurality is a *thing*, so it is nonsense to think that

a plurality could be a member of another plurality. (A plurality of things is *included in* another plurality when each member of the first plurality is also a member of the second, but this is consistent with the second plurality also being a plurality of things, and thus not a higher-level plurality. In this way, FC Barcelona includes smaller groups of people such as its first team, its reserve team and its board of directors.) Moreover, even when it is conceded that higher-level pluralities are not supposed to be pluralities of things, some authors doubt that they could ever come to understand any higher-level plural notions that satisfy this negative characterization, since linguistic expressions of such notions appear to be absent from their native languages, and cannot be defined with first-level plural resources.

Indeed, English, like many natural languages, has no grammatical conventions for explicitly representing higher-level plural notions, so any English expressions of such notions will come in grammatical disguise, and so will be liable to be mistaken for singular or first-level plural talk. Meanwhile, explicitly introducing notation for higher-level plurals in an artificial setting is unlikely to win over any philosopher who has already decided against their intelligibility. Still, many authors—including the former sceptic Simons—have argued, largely independently of the plural view of groups, that higher-level plural notions are intelligible, and some of those authors have further argued that some actual natural language sentences demand higher-level plural interpretations (see Russell 1903, Sect. 489; Black 1971, pp. 632–633; Hazen 1997, p. 247; Linnebo 2003, 2017, Sect. 2.4; Rayo 2006; Linnebo and Nicolas 2008; Linnebo and Rayo 2012; Oliver and Smiley 2016, pp. 28, 138–139, Chap. 15; Simons 2016; Grimau 2019).

According to Øystein Linnebo and David Nicolas (2008, p. 193), a relatively clear example of superplural (i.e. second-level plural) predication in colloquial English is the following sentence, as used to describe a three-way game:

(16) These people, those people and these other people play against each other.

Here, it would seem, a superplural term is formed by listing first-level pluralities, and this superplural term is the subject of a collective predicate which, in general, accepts both first- and higher-level plural terms as subjects. So if this is right, and higher-level plural notions are already included in our ordinary conceptual repertoire, then we are free to exploit them to account for higher-level social groups, consistently with the plural view. Of course, to account for groups such as FIFA, we will apparently need more than just first- and second-level plurals, but once we have admitted the intelligibility of the latter, it would seem unacceptably arbitrary to rule out the possibility of plural talk of any finite level. Besides, it would seem that, with the use of appropriate punctuational devices, the above procedure for generating higher-level plural terms can be iterated. Second-level plural terms can be listed to form third-level plural terms, third-level plural terms can be listed to form fourth-level plural terms, and so on (see Simons 2016, pp. 57–58; Grimau 2019, fn. 37).

Uzquiano (2018, pp. 438–439) notes that his own quasi-plural view faces a similar complication concerning higher-level social groups. One option, he says, would be use higher-level plural notions to account for them (and thus rescind his former scepticism about such notions), more or less as we have just suggested, except, in his case, with the added complexity incurred by his theory of plural embodiments. However, Uzquiano

also briefly considers the option of denying that there are any such groups. Such an eliminativist stance could be combined with various explanations of the appearance of higher-level social groups, and which explanation is most appropriate might vary depending on the specific features of the case at hand. First, as Uzquiano suggests (*ibid.*), we could say that an apparent higher-level social group *G* is really a first-level group of people, each of whom has the role of representing a further group (as is explicitly the case with the European Council, for instance). Second, we could say that *G* is really a first-level group which has some other groups as formal associates (as may be the case with the Institute of Philosophy). Third, we could say that *G* is really a first-level group which pools together the individual members of some other relevant groups (as is plausibly the case with the U.S. Congress; *pace* Ritchie 2020, p. 413, fn. 24). Fourth, we could say that *G* is really a first-level group, not of people, but rather of some other entities which are liable to be confused with social groups. Fifth, we could say that *G* isn't really a group at all, but rather some such entity which is liable to be mistaken for a social group. Finally, we could simply deny that *G* exists, while characterizing talk of *G* as a useful fiction.

However, even if the appearance of higher-level social groups can, in one or another of these ways, be explained away in certain specific cases, it can in fact be argued on independent grounds that the plural view of groups supports the intelligibility of higher-level plurals. For consider the following sentences, taken respectively from Thomas McKay (2006, p. 46) and Linnebo and Nicolas (2008, p. 191):

(17) The Yankees, the Red Sox and the Tigers are competing for first place.
(18) The Beatles and the Rolling Stones gave a joint concert.

The cited authors discuss these sentences' prospects as candidate examples of superplural predication. Thus understood, (17) and (18) are both relevantly analogous to (16): a superplural term is formed by listing first-level pluralities, and this superplural term is the subject of a collective predicate which, in general, accepts both first- and higher-level plural terms as subjects. (One difference is that the resulting superplural term is apparently rigid in (16), whereas it is flexible in (17) and (18), but that difference doesn't seem to be relevant for the point at issue.) However, McKay denies that (17) is a genuine case of superplural predication, while Linnebo and Nicolas deny that (18) is a convincing case of superplural predication, both on the grounds that each of the teams or bands listed is more plausibly a single entity than the plurality of its members, since each of those groups can change in membership. Accordingly, these authors suggest treating (17) and (18) as ordinary examples of first-level plural predication.

However, in the light of our previous discussion of the objection from changes in membership, it can be seen that McKay's and Linnebo and Nicolas's reasons for favouring singularism about social groups are far from compelling. And if the plural view of groups is accepted, we may accordingly be led to conclude that (17) and (18), and many other relevantly similar sentences about first-level groups, involve higher-level plurals. Thus we would also have many commonplace examples of superplural quantification, such as the following sentences:

(19) All the teams are competing for first place.
(20) Several bands gave a joint concert.

And given the intelligibility and widespread use—albeit in grammatical disguise—of higher-level plural notions in our talk of first-level groups, these notions can be exploited to give a realist account of higher-level groups.

In sum, as well as groups of people, there appear to be higher-level groups founded in people. Perhaps some will claim that such appearances are deceptive, and correspondingly attempt to dispel them via some of the eliminativist strategies discussed above. But the plural view of groups is well positioned to take these appearances at face value, even if we remain sceptical about some specific alleged real-life examples of higher-level groups, thanks to the support its account of first-level groups lends to the intelligibility of higher-level plurals.

Finally, notice that admitting the possibility of higher-level groups would give us a principled reason to reject the possibility of one-membered groups, aside from deference to everyday speech patterns. For instance, suppose there is a one-membered group of couples. According to the plural view, that group, like any other, is identical to its members; so it is a couple. But then it has two members, contradicting our supposition that it is one-membered. To avoid such contradictions, without disallowing higher-level groups or giving a more complicated general definition of group membership, we must say that every group has at least two members, as we have indeed said so far. In any case, this should be no great cost for the plural view. For, as indicated earlier, any appearance of one-membered social groups can be explained away by saying that an individual person may sometimes occupy a social role that was previously occupied by a group of people, and more generally that, for various *n*, an *n*-level individual or group may sometimes occupy a social role that at other times is occupied by a higher-than-*n*-level group.

7 Conclusion

We conclude that social groups are identical to their members. As we have seen, the usual reasons given for dismissing this view of groups can be resisted. And while responding to those objections also makes room for defending other reductive views of groups, there are good reasons to prefer the plural view to those alternatives, and even to regard it as the default view of groups, which shouldn't be rejected without good cause. Still, there may be some apparent strengths of alternative reductive or non-reductive views, or apparent weaknesses of the plural view that we haven't considered here. To anticipate: it might be claimed that some social groups have special "emergent" properties that cannot be collectively instantiated by their members. Yet, while there is still room for debate, for now we rest content in having established the plural view as a serious contender in the metaphysics of social groups.

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