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# Can social groups be units of normative concern? Normative individualism, futurity, causality, social ontology

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## Abstract

In social justice theory, it seems both important, but also potentially normatively and metaphysically suspect, to treat social groups as units of normative concern. This is also the source of much current controversy surrounding social justice politics. I argue that normative individualism is a (correct) metaethical clarification, but not necessarily a binding guide for all other (non-metaethical) normative theory or practice in the way we might assume. Supra-individual social entities can, in fact, be the irreducible subjects of concern in valid normative evaluations or prescriptions, owing to future-relevant causal properties. However, this idea is complex and requires careful elucidation. I address likely objections pertaining to group definitions, social ontology, conceptions of causation, counterfactuals, and the non-identity problem.

## Keywords

social justice; social ontology; normative individualism; relational egalitarianism; groups; collectives

## 1. Normative individualism and the quandary of group-based social justice

Robeyns (2017, 57) states approvingly that

*[Normative individualism] makes a claim about who or what should count in our evaluative exercises and decisions. It postulates that individual persons, and only individual persons, are the units of ultimate moral concern.*

In my view, the stance described in the second sentence of this excerpt is correct, but the first sentence is not necessarily in consonance with it. The second sentence indicates a deep-level metaethical clarification: human individuals are the *ultimate* source or ground of normative value and ‘ought-ness’. This clarifies a conceptual point, namely the source of normativity in ‘our evaluative exercises and decisions’. But it

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<sup>1</sup> I am very grateful to two anonymous reviewers for excellent constructive criticism; to the participants of the workshop ‘Rethinking social justice and the public realm’ at the University of Manchester in November 2018 for stimulating discussion; and, for formative inputs, to Sam Hickey, Armando Barrientos, Christian Schemmel, and Cathy Wilcock.

doesn't necessarily entail that those evaluative exercises and decisions should only allow individuals to 'count' – to be units of normative concern.

As it happens, this reflects an important philosophical quandary bubbling under the surface of many current public-political debates, where social justice politics is increasingly subject to a sceptical backlash. One sore point spurring the backlash appears to be the practice of talking in terms of groups rather than the individual in normative discussion.<sup>2</sup> As such, if there is a sense in which social groups *can* be units of normative concern – philosophically and in practice – then we would benefit from having a clearer account of what that sense is, the better to be able to counter such scepticism and to remedy misunderstandings.

In political philosophy, the quandary arises thus: It is important to be able to talk about social groups, because, empirically, social injustices seem typically to be group-based, affecting particular identifiable subsets of a larger population, and normally concerning the comparatively durable relations that a group is situated within vis-à-vis others and social institutions; this is what makes them *social* injustices, rather than individual infractions. Therefore, groups, and structural relations, are an important part of the analytical picture and need to be included ontologically, so methodological individualism will not do. However, it seems metaphysically wacky to treat groups as if they are normatively salient beings existing beyond the existence of any individual, and which themselves are bearers of rights and sufferers of injustices. Moreover, this may also entail wrongly lumping the interests and experiences of widely diverse individuals into homogenised wholes.

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<sup>2</sup> To give a flavour: Columnist Natalie Nougayrède laments the loss of “the sacredness of the individual as opposed to the community or group they belong to” (‘Ditch Identity Politics: Fight for One Person’s Rights at a Time’, *Guardian* 29.08.19). Prominent author Steven Pinker decries “the syndrome in which people’s beliefs and interests are assumed to be determined by their membership in groups” (Interview, *Weekly Standard*, 15.02.18). Neuroscientist and well-known podcaster Sam Harris has said “everyone has to be treated as an individual, we have to get past thinking about groups” (*Making Sense* podcast #123). Similar arguments are regularly voiced by intellectual celebrity Jordan Peterson on a YouTube channel with over 125 million views. Finally, but significantly, the notorious ‘Grievance Studies’ hoax targeted academic journals allegedly peddling unscientific and morally questionable articulations of social group-based ‘grievances’ (see James Lindsay, Peter Boghossian, and Helen Pluckrose, ‘Academic Grievance Studies and the Corruption of Scholarship’, *Areo* magazine, 2018). This is just a snapshot of a sprawling culture war. It could be objected that this agenda, largely advanced through ‘pop science’ books, journalism, and social media, does not merit scholarly engagement. However, I disagree, because by all appearances it has gained great traction and is stoking public scepticism regarding research on social justice topics. Indeed, a key trope of this discourse is that academia is so much in thrall to ‘social justice politics’ that it won’t even entertain critical examination of relevant ideas – a further rationale for this article.

Normative individualism provides the most common answer to this quandary. For instance, while Schwartzman (2006) critiques individualist liberalism, Anderson (2009), replying, distinguishes between methodological individualism and normative individualism, arguing the former would be a problem, but not the latter. A first stab at the distinction might say that methodological individualism involves the ontological assumption that individuals – their characteristics, subjective states, and choices – are the sole type of entity (fundamentally) relevant to social explanation, while normative individualism involves the parallel moral claim that individuals are the sole type of entity that matters normatively. And, importantly for Anderson’s argument, the latter stance does not entail the former.

However, extrapolating from widespread usage – plausibly, normative individualism is foundational to the entire tradition of liberal political thought<sup>3</sup> – I believe ‘normative individualism’ should actually denote a slightly more complex two-part thesis:

(1) Real human beings are what ultimately matter normatively; their lived experience, dignity, suffering, freedom, and so on, is why normative questions matter. (‘Real’ here simply means actual people; it doesn’t denote only people who *currently* exist at the time of speaking, and can include those who will exist in the future. For reasons that will become evident, this is an important clarification.)

(2) Every individual human being is of prima facie equal moral importance.<sup>4 5</sup>

Part one establishes the principle that people (rather than, say, a deity’s satisfaction or a statistic measuring economic growth) are what matters, while part two disallows arbitrary exclusions from the realm of normative consideration.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> E.g. Rawls [1971] 1999, 233-34; nn.4 459-60; Pogge 2001, 246-53; Nussbaum 2001, 55-59; Hindriks 2014, 1577; Smith 2017, 54-58.

<sup>4</sup> Perhaps this prematurely disallows inegalitarian normative individualisms: “individuals are value-bearers, but some are more valuable than others” (e.g. ethnic supremacism, or some kind of Nietzschean ‘greatness’ criterion). However, my point is to extrapolate from the vast majority of contemporary political discourse, where such views can reasonably be assumed to be beyond the pale.

<sup>5</sup> Of course, this leaves aside the question of normative concern for non-human animals. However, I don’t believe this affects any of the arguments made here, especially since they relate to questions inherently about the internal relations of human societies.

<sup>6</sup> It doesn’t mandate universal inclusion at all times for all questions; relevance or ‘affectedness’ criteria can apply.

However, neither (1) nor (2), nor their conjunction, precludes *per se* that it is sometimes acceptable to take supra-individual entities as units of normative concern in making evaluations and comparative assessments – which is the position I wish to examine, and cautiously defend. After an initial statement of this position in Section 2, the rest of the paper attempts to unpack and defend its underlying assumptions. There are tricky questions about both *identifying* and *defining* social groups (Sections 3 and 4), the possibility of a reductionist-individualist social ontology (Section 5.1), the theory of causation involved (5.2), counterfactuals (5.3), and the non-identity problem (5.4).

## 2. Groups as units of normative concern: the basic thesis

The empirical, explanatory *relevance* of groups to social justice has been proposed more convincingly than I can here (Young 1990, 42-48; Anderson 2010, 13-21; Mills 2017, 15-19). I am indebted to, but also, I hope, significantly extending or clarifying, arguments of the type offered by Young (2001) and Schwartzman (2006).<sup>7</sup> <sup>8</sup> Here I am interested in a further question: how to justify, to sceptics, groups being units of normative concern in ‘our evaluative exercises and decisions’, when we prescribe, critique, campaign, evaluate policy, etc. Can it be legitimate for groups to be the ‘value-bearer’ in prescriptive or evaluative statements? <sup>9</sup>

As a simple and familiar illustration, say that the following social-scientific thesis is correct: the vast majority of human children are, on top of their biological sex, socialised into one of two gender groups, female or male. These groups exist in a relational, co-constitutive situation; ‘female’ can’t be understood without ‘male’. Much of what it means to be in one group is that a constellation of norms, practices, institutions, and material arrangements situate an individual in a particular relation to members of the

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<sup>7</sup> Another significant literature considers how collective entities (typically more purposive, associational groups like states, churches, or corporations) can be moral *agents*, subject to blameworthiness, duties, etc. (e.g. Smiley 2010; List and Pettit 2011; Collins 2017; Pettit 2018). This is a slightly different question.

<sup>8</sup> Readers may suspect that I am simply talking about ‘structural injustice’ (Young 2008; Jugov and Ypi 2019; Atenasio 2019). Certainly, one reason for desiring the ability to take groups as units of normative concern is its necessity for thinking about and addressing structural injustice in the future, i.e. ‘from now’. But this is not the only reason, and the normative status of groups is (at least conceptually) a distinct question.

<sup>9</sup> It may be the case that some authors, especially in critical-theoretic traditions, do habitually and implicitly speak in this fashion. But I am unaware of attempts to explicitly justify this practice. Thus, this paper explores that path, considering why we might have reason to affirm this controversial and perhaps counter-intuitive position.

other group. Since this applies across significant expanses of time and space, we can speak of such relations as being social and durable (Tilly 1999). These durable relations are supported by surrounding social phenomena such as laws, policies, norms, widespread beliefs, ideas, traditions, patterned distributions of goods, recorded knowledge, and so on, that are, likewise, durable at scale. These phenomena shape the implications of being within a certain social category group, including the relations one is likely to have with members of other groups. This furnishes a significant part of what we can call the 'conditions of life', by which I mean those things that provide surrounding context to agents' choices: constraints and contexts they operate within and that shape their proclivities and perceptions of choices. Such factors – e.g. very strong social mores, long-lasting economic opportunity structures, a city's social geography – are not immutable, of course. But for an individual at a given time they appear almost so; certainly not things one could simply choose, individually, to change or ignore.

If this thesis is correct, then for some purposes (*not* all) it will be appropriate to evaluate what is the case for women or men as a group, not for each individual woman or man (the latter assessment would uncover a diverse plethora of cases). Why?

The reason is that the durable social phenomena and relations that produce (some of) the conditions of life, affect *causally* what is likely to come to pass in the lives of most individual women and men. Changes, in social relations, that occur at time  $t$  affect the conditions – the enabling and constraining factors – that individual agents at time  $t+n$  find themselves presented with. When women in some mid-to-late 20<sup>th</sup> century societies managed to re-forge durable social phenomena shaping the roles of men and women at home and at work, this meant that agents (women and men) after this time came into the social world to find themselves presented with possibilities and constraints different to those they would have faced in the counterfactual world without those changes. Consequently, many individual people's lives almost certainly go differently to how they would have done. These differences (a) are normatively interesting, and (b) were not precisely calculable *ex-ante*, affecting as they did both extant individuals in their lives years into the future, and yet-to-exist individuals who were at  $t$  unknowable and indeterminate.

Thus, the caveat contained in my extrapolated formulation of normative individualism – that it can include those who *will* exist – is an important one. It is a feature of the

phenomenon of social group relations that they will have a causal impact on a) currently-existing individuals in their lives in the future (i.e. from now), and b) individuals not yet born. It is because of this future-relevant causal importance that it makes sense to take supra-individual phenomena like social groups as units of normative concern. (Although note that that is not enough by itself to establish normative importance; it must also be the case that the status or relations of groups is potentially alterable by agency, making normative interest worthwhile rather than futile; see section 3.1, below.)

Now, this means, of course, that the metaethical clarification holds: the lived experience of individual human beings is the *ultimate* reason why we care about any of this. But this doesn't, by itself, stretch further to rule out supra-individual units 'counting in our evaluative exercises and decisions' as the unit of normative concern. The subject of these exercises and decisions *can* validly be the structural conditions of, and relations between, social groups, taken as higher-level social phenomena not exhaustively supervenient on particular individuals. Moreover, for purposes of theorizing social in/justice this is, arguably, often not just permissible but primary – at least in the conceivable medium-term. As Anderson goes on to clarify following the passage cited earlier, “[t]he most salient fact about disadvantage and oppression in our world is that it tracks lines of social group identity” (2009, 132-33). Particularly given the increasing turn to non-ideal theory, group relations are an important part of the ‘factual picture’ (Mills 2000) of social justice thinking. We can, therefore, form valid normative or evaluative propositions – including action-proposals – about supra-individual units: ‘black people in the US suffer injustice that political action should address’; ‘it is good that in many places being gay or lesbian no longer automatically entails social censure (and bad that elsewhere it still does)’; ‘the historically disadvantaged and less politically powerful northern region of Uganda should be the subject of government policies to address its unfairly subordinated relationship to the south’.

It might be thought that I am merely re-hashing Anderson's clarification: normative individualism good, methodological individualism bad. But examples like the above are not merely *methodological*; they have a normative and evaluative character. They suggest that while one might be normatively individualist at the level of metaethics, one could still (sometimes) be normatively relationalist or holist (supra-individualist) in moral principles, evaluations, and proposals at the level of theory-building or applied normativity. (In Section 5.1 I address the possible objection that this should simply be

deflated into an individualist rendering.) To be clear, then, I am not rejecting normative individualism, but rather making an argument about its scope and its content, to carve out a niche for the idea that social entities not reducible to particular individuals can sometimes validly be units of normative concern. On the scope, I am suggesting considering normative individualism as an ultimate, abstract answer to a metaethical question, but an answer that doesn't require all other normative thought to be isomorphic to it. On the content, I am suggesting that the doctrine of normative individualism doesn't only value the specific set of identifiable currently-existing individuals, and that this has important implications for the possibility of group-concerned political normativity. Indeed, in a sense I am attempting to defend this practice *by* showing that it is compatible with, or perhaps even required by, normative individualism.

The practical implications are that, for instance, an impact evaluation measuring a policy's effects on individual members of a population will capture many important things, but will not capture normatively important effects on future-relevant social group status and relationality – at least, not without adding extra ingredients that *do* treat groups as subjects of normative evaluation. (The latter may in fact often implicitly happen in such evaluations – in which case, my discussion offers an explicit philosophical justification for this practice.)

We now have the basic initial thesis: Individuals (current individuals in their lives from now, and not-yet-born individuals) matter normatively. Individuals fall within social groups. The meaning, status, and relations of durable social groups will causally affect the lives of both currently-existing individuals, and future individuals, in normatively important ways in the future. It is often currently indeterminate which particular individuals will fall within a social group in the future, but this doesn't mean that they (whoever they are) won't suffer injustices *qua* group that would potentially have been avoidable by social change-precipitating actions in the present. Therefore, it looks like we need the ability to form valid normative statements where social groups are the unit for which normative concern is evinced. (Further implications of this ability – e.g. whether this inaugurates concomitant obligations and rights, and of what kind – are omitted here in the interests of focus. We could say here, minimally, that such normative statements about groups would at least indicate *pro tanto* reasons for actions.)



At this point, this thesis likely generates a host of worries for many readers. The rest of the paper adds detail to, and defends, the above.

### 3. How do we *identify* relevant social groups?

One problem is knowing which social groups are relevant for thinking about social injustice in a particular context. This problem of identification can arise in several ways.

#### 3.1 What about distribution? (*Alphabet injustice?*)

One is when considering the place of *distribution* in predominantly relational accounts, which typically build themselves from critiques of methodologically individualist and distribution-centric theories (Young 1990, 15–38; Anderson 1999; Scheffler 2015; Wolff 2015; Voigt 2018).

Distribution – of economic or social goods – is normally an idea that applies to individuals. In a group-focussed approach, then, can we simply clarify that whenever we do consider distribution, we are talking about distribution between groups?

I don't think this is the end of it. To illustrate, consider a case where it transpires that a society's income distribution favours, on the whole, the 'group' of people with surnames beginning A to M, at the expense of N to Z, but that there is no conceivable explanation: it is mere coincidence. We could argue that this unequal distribution is bad, because many in the latter group are disadvantaged (let the inequality be severe enough that they live in grinding poverty in view of the lavish existences of others). This is an unsophisticated but strong-enough argument; most will, I think, intuit that something is wrong.<sup>10</sup> However, the notion of the 'group' plays no analytical role here. That the inequality cleaves along these alphabetical lines is mere happenstance; the complaint is really just that particular *individuals* are at a disadvantage. In other words, this society would not feature "Justice For N-Z Surnames!" campaigns.

So, what is different in the case of differential distributions that fall along lines of, say, gender, race, religion, or intergenerational socio-economic class? Egalitarians – even those primarily concerned with non-distributive ideals of equality – have reasons to care

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<sup>10</sup> Whether on humanitarian, sufficientarian, prioritarian, or democratic grounds, or perhaps some combination of egalitarian rationales from the menu offered by O'Neill (2008).

about simple distribution tout court (Schemmel 2011; Elford 2017). But what is the specific problem with differential distribution between groups that doesn't reduce to whatever we think is wrong with individual distributive inequalities (of such-and-such a magnitude)?

The answer, I think, relates to causality, and specifically to social causation (Kincaid 2009; and see Section 5, below). What it means for a member of a social group to face injustice *qua* group is that this situation is not coincidental, but, rather, causally explicable in terms of features of society. Unlike a coincidental assortment of individuals facing bad experiences, the disadvantaged social group is positioned in particular relations to other groups, and to society's institutions and processes at large, in a way that forms a significant part of the explanation of the negative experiences of members. It is specifically personal, rather than randomly misfortunate; membership of a group is partially constitutive of a person's identity and life experience. The relevant disadvantages or disfavoured experiences happen to people not just coincidentally but rather as (at least partly) a result of who they are, socially speaking.

This is why the above thought experiment aims to show that distribution between particular social groupings is not normatively interesting *qua* groups *unless* it reflects something else, i.e. unless the unequal distribution between group A and group B (C ... etc.) is non-coincidental, and reflects and contributes to cyclically reproducing something about the standing of group B in relation to group A and to the broader social context. This is why distributional differences between A-M and N-Z surnames – or, say, January, April, and September births – are not of concern to anyone, whereas unequal distributions between genders or ethnic groups or social castes or classes are.

Therefore, we can clarify that differential distribution between groups matters, not out of a fetish for distributional statistics, but rather as one indicator and component of the more general and more complex experience of group disadvantage, disparagement, disempowerment, etc. The idea that the latter sorts of objectionable social relations are the primary focus of egalitarian social justice, with distributions only gaining subsidiary relevance from this, is the thesis of relational egalitarianism (Scheffler 2003; Anderson

2010a; Schemmel 2012).<sup>11</sup> If adding a group focus to this, then, the groups pertinent for social justice thinking in a given historical context can be identified (in a reconstructive theoretical sense, since it is often already established in real politics) by the fact that the disadvantages or maltreatments they suffer are not coincidental; rather, individuals' group membership is part of a plausible causal explanation for these things (Young 2001). This is what distinguishes groups like 'Dalit caste people in India' from groups like 'Disadvantaged N-Z Surnames'.

Two brief clarifications about this causality-focussed explanation of normative relevance. Firstly, this is not a general theory of normative relevance for *any* sort of case, just a specific answer to the question of social justice, groups, and social-structural phenomena. Secondly, causality running in one direction – from structure to agents – is not enough to establish normative importance. A causal factor must also be potentially alterable through agency – at least through the agency of enough individuals, as in cases of major social change.<sup>12</sup> Without this, normative interest in that factor would be otiose – akin to raging at the changing of the seasons or the law of gravity.

### 3.2 *What about cross-cutting privilege and disadvantage?*

The identification problem can arise in another way. Another challenge to taking social groups as units of normative concern is the existence of individual members of putatively disadvantaged groups who seem, by any reasonable definition, to be highly privileged. Conversely, many individuals whose social group identity might appear to mark them out as enjoying privilege (or at least not suffering social injustice) in fact find themselves suffering, by any reasonable definition, serious disadvantage. Doesn't this fatally

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<sup>11</sup> Relational egalitarians also might worry about simple distributive inequality. Over generations, widening inequalities might coagulate into social classes, or wealth enclaves enjoying relations of political-economic dominance. This point can be found in Rawls's argument for a continuously redistributive basic structure rather than a 'starting gate' approach ([1971]1999, 76-77; 245; 2001, 50-52).

<sup>12</sup> It may seem that on this conceptualization, individual agents are either being causally constrained by 'the conditions of life' or are voluntaristically altering those conditions – leaving it mysterious how agents move between states to effect, and then feel the force of, social change. I believe Archer's (1995) 'morphogenetic' account of social change is helpful, where structure is essentially temporal and historical, and evolves in recurrent cycles of: <structural conditioning of agents> / <social interaction> / <either stasis or incremental structural elaboration>. 'Structural elaboration' means that the content of 'structure' (e.g. norms, material conditions, laws) at time  $t^2$  is incrementally (or very occasionally dramatically) different. Thus, "subsequent interaction will be different from earlier action because conditioned by the structural consequences of that prior action" (Archer 1982, 458).

complicate the possibility of cleanly identifying the social groups relevant for social justice, presenting a serious obstacle to making group-based evaluations? Doesn't this, therefore, present a further rationale for always making individual circumstance what counts?

The initial answer to this is relatively well-known, and points out that people may suffer injustice in one way even while being privileged in another. The classical vignette here is that of the black Wall Street banker who can't hail a cab on Fifth Avenue; or his son whose attendance at an elite prep school doesn't save him from spurious police stop-searches. (At a more macro scale, high-income African American families are far more likely, compared to other groups, to experience significant downward mobility over generations (Chetty et al 2020).) Similarly, a disabled wheelchair user may be an aristocrat, but faced with a government building without an entrance ramp is demeaningly excluded from public space – is thus 'disabled' – as any other wheelchair user would be. A village leader in a country with wide ethno-regional inequalities in development and political influence may enjoy unchallenged customary power in his locality, but still suffer from preventable famine like his neighbours. Thus, even while the individuals who fall into a particular social category group may have a wide diversity of, say, socio-economic statuses, they can still share a common experience of malign discrimination or disadvantaging, and, indeed, those things causally relate to what they have in common. The problem would be rendered mysterious by denying this commonality.

This explanation can be combined with the 'including those who will exist in the future' clause from the understanding of normative individualism offered in Section 1. A social group has, at a given time and place, a particular status and meaning, emerging out of both 'objective' aspects such as laws and historical resource distributions, and 'subjective' aspects, such as intersubjectively-shared understandings of a group, stereotypes or expectations about its members, and habituated self-understandings of members. This has causal effects on individuals who fall within that group. Being born into a working class socio-economic context in the United Kingdom in 2019 entails a particular set of likely possibilities and constraints attending the agency of the majority of members of this group in comparable ways. Being an LGBT person in, say, Saudi Arabia in 2019 likewise involves background conditions and likely experiences for most. Being a young, poor black man in a Brazilian city in 2019 involves, for people in this category, a

heightened risk of physical violence or death. Being of the cultural and/or religious Jewish diaspora in 2019 involves, in many places, pervasive risk of anti-Semitic discrimination. Thus, the argument is that social groups – their intersubjectively-understood meaning, their relations with other groups, their objective status vis-à-vis laws, institutions, historical path-dependent effects – causally affect the lives of all individuals within them. These group effects exist alongside, of course, the many ways in which individuals and their situations are different. We might say that the social group effects in question are ‘pro tanto causes’; they are not the only, nor necessarily the decisive, causal factor in how people’s lives go. Nonetheless, they at least ‘weigh on the scales’ causally, and sometimes this is in ways that are bad for or unfair to individuals. Therefore, if this objective and subjective basis of a group changes, then the implications for individuals’ lives change with it. Even if some of these individuals’ situations also feature apparent advantages of other types, addressing injustices *qua* group wherever they arise may, therefore, play a (incremental, contributory) causal role in changing the conditions of life for (any) members of that group from now onwards.<sup>13</sup>

#### **4. How do we *define* social groups?**

A second complication involves how to theorise ‘the social group’, and whether this can cover all required cases. The complication involves two main problems.

Firstly, all people have multiple memberships of various groups. Therefore, any given case features significant complexity rather than a field of neatly defined, mutually exclusive, and unchanging groups. More normatively, defining groups in essentialist terms may be inaccurate or limiting for members, or exclusive of some who should be members (Fraser 1995). Call this the problem of intersection.

Secondly, there are persuasive cases of social injustice that seemingly don’t primarily involve a recognisable social group so much as just a common experience, a particular social *position*. In some such cases, defining the people involved as a social group in the traditional sense would seem to stretch the concept beyond all meaning. Call this the problem of contingent collectives.

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<sup>13</sup> However, this depends on the features of particular cases; we should be wary of any simplistic ‘trickle-down’ model of social justice gains (Alexander 2010, 244-261; Jaffe 2013).

These problems together suggest that what is required is a more flexible and non-essentialist conception of social groups.

Young (1994) offers the idea of 'seriality', drawn originally from Sartre's attempts to understand the meaning of social class even in absence of purposive group self-consciousness. Sartre gives the analogy of a line of people waiting for a bus: they doubtless have many cross-cutting affiliations and identities, but are united in certain respects. They all need to travel on the bus; public information and transportation practice led them to this place and time; they follow socially-established procedures of queuing; they share frustrations or satisfactions with the service. Sartre calls this sort of collectivity a 'series'. Members of a series share a particular relation to external circumstances and social structure. They do not necessarily *identify as a group*, but have a latent collectiveness that could be activated given certain circumstances (arranging alternative transport in a bus's absence; protesting unreasonable fare increases) or fade in salience at other times.

Thus, for Sartre, to be a member of, say, the working class or the capitalist class, is to stand in a 'series' with others similarly positioned in relation to external processes of production and exchange. For Young, this holds a clue for thinking about women politically: as a series constituted by a shared orientation in relation to social practice and norms and objects of activity – one that may or may not activate into a more self-reflexive and purposive group.

In my view, seriality is helpful in some ways but worrisome in others. It is useful for solving the problem of contingent collectives – who the collective subject of justice is in the case of social position-based injustice. An example of such an injustice is given in later work by Young (2013, 43-48) in her account of 'Sandy', a single mother persistently vulnerable to homelessness. This arises through a complex series of factors in which no laws are broken, and everybody involved, including Sandy, is well-intentioned, responsible, and reasonable. Yet, nevertheless, she and her child find themselves facing homelessness. This seems unjust.

The point that Young wishes to draw is that the lack of agential wrongdoing, or discriminatory law, demonstrates how structural features of society itself can bring about injustice. The further point that I wish to draw is that the reason this qualifies as a *social*

injustice is that it happens to many people, through a predictable logic. As Young argues, we can say that 'vulnerable to homelessness' is an identifiable social *position*; a regular and (social-scientifically) observable relation to social processes and actors that many people come to occupy. However, to call 'the vulnerable to homelessness' a *social group* seems to stretch that concept beyond understood usage. Thus, 'series' can help. Those people who find themselves in this position amount to a series, and might under certain circumstances become activated into a more self-conscious collectivity, with mutual help networks and political campaigns. The subject of injustice, then, is this particular serial collectivity. This is helpful as a solution to how we can understand the idea that social injustice happens *qua* groups rather than *qua* individual, while considering cases that don't only centre around familiar well-defined social groups (gender, race, etc.).

However, I am less sure about Young's (1994) argument that serial collectivity can simply replace the idea of social groups. There is a long distance between, as types of entity, 'the vulnerable to homelessness' and 'women'. They both have certain external positional relations that define them: to the housing economy; to prevailing gendered institutions and practices. However, they differ in the internal effects of social structure on members. Membership of 'women' is, almost always, pervasive on an individual's life and identity from the very start, shaping that individual's characteristics, abilities, proclivities, and intentions through socialization, formal and informal education, exposure to norms in culture, arts, media, and so on. Becoming vulnerable to homelessness certainly may, over time, begin to have similarly 'internal' effects on habits, attitudes, and so on, but not to the extent that socialisation into a gender has. Moreover, the group 'women' – like groups of race, class, caste, ethno-religion, etc. – is extremely historically durable and socially fundamental. As this suggests, our definition also needs to retain a sense of social structure rather than only denoting the individuals in a series. Sociologically speaking, the 'social group' is an entity based in the interplay between, on the one hand, agency and practices, and, on the other, structure and history. A vast web of surrounding structural and historical factors – outside of any individual – contributes to defining the meaning, relations, and status of a group at a given time: written-down laws, cultural products that diffuse norms and expectations, resource distributions with path-dependent effects, and so on. Overall, I am unconvinced that 'series' captures all that is significant about social groups like 'women', 'the working class', 'untouchable castes', 'black Americans', and so on.

But is this difference between ‘serial collectivities’ and social groups one of substance or merely degree? I think the latter: social groups like ‘women’ or ‘low caste’ are *more* historically rooted, *more* pervasively significant for members, *more* constitutive of identity, *more* ‘internally’ consequential for members’ personal characteristics. They are not categorically different to series; the worry just arises because the degree of difference seems so wide. This points to a potential solution; we can think of collective subjects of social injustice as *based* in series, but also located on a continuum from comparatively transient groupings arising from particular social positions, through to very established social groups or categories in the traditional sense; class, gender, race, sexuality, disability, and so on. There seems little need to throw out the established terminology of ‘social group’ used for the collectivities most frequently at issue in social justice theory and practice.

The continuum is further illustrated by cases where a social position-based serial collectivity arises but over time begins to take on the nature of a more established social group. For example, people living in the United Kingdom while seeking asylum is arguably such a case. The people signified in common UK parlance by the descriptor ‘asylum seeker’ arrive in this social position as a highly disparate population. But owing to factors in various areas – law, media discourse, politics, culture, informal economy – ‘asylum seekers’ is en route to becoming a more defined social group in UK society. Some people now say in a socio-political sense ‘I am an asylum seeker’ (as distinct from, in a merely administrative sense, ‘I happen to have submitted an application seeking asylum’). It is possible to speak of solidarity with asylum seekers; there are activist groups, campaigns, community events where the relevant community is people sharing the common experience of being a person seeking asylum. The surrounding structure involves immigration and asylum law, labour institutions, inclusion/exclusion rules in social policy and education, economic pressures, and strongly durable cultural and ideational factors, and gives rise to a distinct social position. Occupying this position is different to being a coincidental member of the set of people who currently own a red car, or whose surname begins A-to-M. It brings with it certain parameters and channels of likely experience, playing a major causal role in how people’s lives will go – and this holds, for the foreseeable future, for people who *will* occupy this position. Moreover, as time passes, this ‘serial collectivity’ solidifies into something closer to a social group in the more traditional sense.



There is much more that could be discussed here. For now, I understand 'social groups' as a collective entity arising out of the phenomenon of 'series'; people sharing a common position in relation to external social reality that significantly shapes their experience. These reside on a continuum from latent or transient serial collectivities implied by particular social positions, through to fundamental and familiar social groups which for many people are lifelong and partially constitutive of individual identity.

This still leaves us with the problem of intersection. Everybody has so many overlapping group identities – the worry goes – how do we know which groups to be concerned with, and which levels of intersection? Don't we ultimately arrive at a situation where everybody is more or less unique, and so, ironically, back at individualism?

Firstly, as a critique this would somewhat misunderstand intersectionality, which is better construed as a 'critical corrective'. For feminist or social justice politics, it urges awareness that inequalities and different needs can exist within movements ostensibly united by common cause against shared injustice. For public policy, it highlights that forms of group-based injustice can overlap and compound, as in Crenshaw's (1989) original example of black female employees unable to access anti-discrimination legal mechanisms because provisions on race were satisfied by catering for black men, and provisions on gender by catering for white women.

At any rate, for theoretical or macro-policy purposes I believe the answer to the quandary is that given throughout this article: the crux of the issue is causality. Groups are relevant as a matter of social-scientific explanation: does group status – including particular intersections thereof – play an important causal role in injustice for a large number of people who share that status in common? And, at the same time, is this causal factor feasibly alterable through human agency? (Most likely large-scale collective agency.)

This, incidentally, points to spin-off implications that I am happy to embrace. Firstly, social justice theory is pushed towards engagement with empirical social science and theory to a degree unusual in philosophy. Secondly, it is likely that many sceptics of social justice arguments evince disbelief with the empirical premises involved, before even reaching the normative discussion. As such, especially in an increasingly 'post-truth' moment, and in light of doubt being cast on the commitment of social justice research to rigorous truth-telling (see footnote 2), the on-going project of establishing the 'factual

picture' component of social justice theory (Mills 2000) is vital. Ideas such as the causal influence of structural groups and relations upon individual agency are non-quotidian, not necessarily easy to understand, and require quality empirical evidencing and theory if they are to convince anyone beyond the already-convinced. (This is not to suggest, of course, that such research does not already exist.)

## 5. Objections: social ontology, social causation, counterfactuals, the non-identity problem

The position outlined so far involves several assumptions that are not philosophically innocent. While, naturally, I can't conclusively 'prove' these here, this section makes explicit the relevant conceptual commitments, thereby opening them to challenge, while offering initial replies to likely objections.

### 5.1 *Why can't we just give a reductionist account of groups in terms of individuals?*

A likely complaint is that the seemingly group-based normative statements I am interested in all have a plausible individualist reading, i.e. "each black person in the USA suffers injustice that political action should address", "each Jewish person experiences a pervasive risk of anti-Semitic discrimination", etc. Isn't talking of 'the group' just a shorthand for the actual complex individual-level situation – but a fictitious shorthand that it would be dangerous to take as real?

This reply raises a question of social ontology, motivated, I think, by an assumption that a reductionist-individualist account is preferable, presumably because of a desire to apply Occam's Razor both to explanatory and normative commitments. However, the razor should only be wielded if we can retain accuracy and insight. In my view, often in political or social normativity the group is both explanatorily and normatively irreducible,<sup>14</sup> and the normatively important thing is the *relations* between non-reduced social groups. Consider the following example.

At time  $t^1$  we are government labour regulators engaged in a normative evaluation. We conclude: "in this economy, workers are unjustly disempowered regarding important things that affect their lives, such as working conditions and the distribution of the

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<sup>14</sup> For these purposes, i.e. this is not an all-purposes argument about the nature of social reality.

proceeds of their labour, and are excessively dominated by the economic power of owners”. A clear example is seen in our field visit to Megacorp at  $t^1$ , where Xavier, Yan, and Zoe are joint owners, and Ahmad and Belinda are workers (alongside many co-workers). We table legislation mandating workplace democracy reforms, which will make it into law by time  $t^3$ .

However, some time after our visit, Xavier and Yan lose their partner positions and fall on hard times. At  $t^2$ , six months before  $t^3$ , they become factory floor workers in a nearby city for Massiveinc, subject to the undemocratic control of bosses there. At time  $t^3$ , the new legislation comes into effect.

I described us as arriving at an evaluative conclusion relating to ‘workers’ – but perhaps this is the kind of misleading shorthand at issue. On an individualist reinterpretation, then, at  $t^1$  we evince normative concern for Ahmad and Belinda (and their co-workers Christine, Denzel, etc., and workers in similar companies) and the injustice they each individually face.

However, although we don’t (on this specific issue) have normative concern for Xavier and Yan, the workplace democracy legislation proposed at  $t^1$  following our visit to Megacorp will positively affect Xavier and Yan when it becomes law at  $t^3$ , six months after they join the factory floor at Massiveinc. Moreover, let’s say, as an epilogue, that Zoe (the remaining Megacorp boss) becomes pregnant shortly after  $t^3$ . Megacorp goes bust some time during her daughter Mel’s childhood. At 18, Mel also begins entry-level work at Massiveinc, where her older peers regale her with tales of how much worse things were 19 years prior.

On the individualist understanding, there seems to be an error, since Xavier and Yan (and Mel) were not the subjects of normative concern in our evaluative exercise. Conversely, on a group understanding – that the value-bearing subject of normative concern was the group ‘workers’ – we can make sense of why this isn’t a regrettable policy error (assuming we wouldn’t wish retribution against former bosses or their offspring).

Now, the individualist could still say: “OK, but why can’t we re-describe our attitude at  $t^1$  as simply ‘normative concern for whichever individuals happen to be a worker at a given future time’?” Well, we could, perhaps, but here we reach a more superficial linguistic or terminological choice. If what you have normative concern for is “whichever individuals

turn out to occupy the social position of ‘worker’ from now and in the foreseeable future” then what you have concern for *is* the social group ‘workers’ – that is the effect of the ‘whichever’, which de-particularises the individuals and even makes their quantity uncertain.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, again, the normatively important thing concerns this group’s relation *qua* workers to the owners *qua* owners. In my view, this is a more accurate rendering of what is going on when we attempt to advance social justice and are thinking at socially macro or meso levels, where we have a concern with the justice (or fairness, goodness, etc.) of the social relations people find themselves within *qua* social categories they belong to. And, as I hope is clear, this doesn’t conflict with the principle of normative individualism at the level of metaethical rumination.

The thought experiment given above could be adapted for cases such as sexual orientation, regional inequality, disability, religious groups, refugees, etc. It may seem not to work as well for matters such as race or sex/gender, where category membership is typically less fluid (although of course not entirely fixed). But if we are interested normatively in the future-relevance of such groups’ durable relations, the same ‘de-particularisation’ just mentioned comes in: we don’t have precise knowledge of the particular individuals who will be women or people of minority ethnicities in the medium-term future of people not yet born. They will, in social life, fall under fuzzy-edged groups of people more or less sharing a particular identity or social position. When<sup>16</sup> the normatively important thing is the nature of this indeterminate and unquantified group of individuals’ relations to other groups, we can, I believe, make prescriptions or evaluations about social change that take such groups as the units of normative concern.

An alternative individualist suggestion might be that instead of theorising the causal and normative importance of groups, we can do all we need at the individual level by accounting for the *shared characteristics* of group members, and then giving the causal

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<sup>15</sup> Consider also that developments such as aggressive mergers and acquisitions that restructure company hierarchies may leave significant numbers of people in hybrid positions that, over time, shift the intersubjectively-understood meaning of ‘workers’ and ‘owners’. Alternatively, such a shift may happen in a ‘bottom-up’ way through the growth of employee investment accounts or worker stock ownership schemes. (Of course, if worker ownership of the means of production was taken far enough then it would dissolve the social groups of ‘workers’ and ‘owners’ as they exist in capitalist societies.) In this example, for heuristic purposes I refer simply to ‘workers’; but the possibility of indeterminacy over not just group membership, but *criteria* for group membership, makes an individualist reduction even more difficult.

<sup>16</sup> That is, social group-relevant issues are, of course, not the *only* type of normatively important thing relevant to these individuals’ complex lives.

story of how these characteristics put each relevant individual at increased risk of future harm – while retaining an ontologically deflationary position on groups. For instance, what causes greater danger of harm is not *being a member of the group* ‘Black Americans’, or ‘women’, but simply being-black or being-a-woman.

However, this ‘characteristics’ approach is clearly unable to insightfully conceptualise things like racism, gender inequality, caste oppression, anti-Semitism or Islamophobia, economically exploited groups, etc. In these cases, the individuals who experience instances of harm or unfairness do not arrive in that situation because of something inherently stemming from having a certain skin colour, following a certain religion, etc., but rather because of the very fact of an identifiable group existing, which has become subject to discriminatory and/or oppressive norms and practices on the part of other groups or perhaps the state. The only relevance of ‘characteristics’ is that this is what defines, in public life, individuals as members of those groups: as far as social injustice goes, the group is logically prior. If there didn’t exist a group to be the subject of discriminatory norms, or party to a social conflict, then a given individual would not suffer the social injustice in question (they might suffer other, interpersonal, wrongs). In the Black Lives Matter case, somebody suffering (say) economic deprivation and police violence is, strictly speaking, not the victim of injustice simply because of “being-black”, but rather because the group in which her being-black happens to place her was historically designated inferior status by prevailing norms and institutions, many of which linger on or have significant causal legacies. The injustice is not explained by something about the characteristic of being-black, but rather by the social structure of a (recently de jure) racist society, and someone’s being a member of a particular group living within that structure. Cases like caste are perhaps even more clear-cut: not a matter of having a ‘characteristic’, but simply of being designated a member of a group. Without the existence of the group there would be no individual-level characteristics of pertinence. Similarly, regarding anti-Semitism or Islamophobia, there is nothing inherently about “being-Jewish” or “being-Muslim” that puts one at risk of abuse. It is only because of the prevalence of anti-Semitic or Islamophobic beliefs and practices, referential to the group, that any individual suffers injustice *qua* religious-cultural affiliation.

## 5.2 Social causation

A second salient assumption is that I rely on a notion of social causation. Within fields habitually conversant in social ontology this would be relatively unremarkable (e.g. Sawyer 2003; Little 2011; Porpora 2018), but elsewhere is less familiar and potentially more contentious. At stake is the attribution of causal powers to higher-level social entities (social relations, structures, groups, institutions, etc.), rather than only to individuals. In much scholarly thought – and, I suspect, most everyday ‘common sense’ – individuals are assumed to be the ‘building blocks’ of higher-level entities, whose features ultimately reduce to individual micro-foundations. The ‘supervenience’ relation, influentially applied by Kim (2005) to characterise the relationship between mental events and the physical properties of the brain, underlies many such claims; social entities are exhaustively supervenient on individuals and their thoughts and deeds. As such this is, again, a question of reductionism: should we always decompose the higher-level notion of groups and their causal relations into an account at the (lower) level of individuals, their characteristics, and their interactions with specific contextual factors? In the case of groups and social justice, I don’t believe that this should *always* be done.

Therefore, a reply to the individualist-reductionist claim is needed. Several promising possible responses are offered by Kincaid (2009). For one, we might grant supervenience à la Kim, but simply doubt its importance. If a baseball breaks a window, we can demand explanation in terms of the baseball’s micro-particles, but that seems of limited insightfulness. There is nothing wacky about attributing causality to the nature of the atoms’ arrangement and collective behaviour as a moving baseball. Moreover, the causal individualist can’t necessarily feel safe that they have chosen the most basic level: maybe causal relations between human individuals don’t really exist either – why stop there and not instead look at micro-physical causes, neurons, brain chemistry, atoms?

This strategy of reply is concessive, insofar as it doesn’t dispute supervenience as an ontological theory. Instead it couches the question as one of epistemic value: what level of analysis is it useful to see things at? It claims that it is sensible sometimes, rather than always demanding infinite granularity, to conceive of higher-level entities as causing. This should not strike us as metaphysically suspect. It is comparable to attributing causality to the Gulf Stream, or road traffic, or the mind: higher-order emergent entities that contain smaller parts but whose salient feature (for the analysis at hand) is, rather,

their systemic and relational properties. We might, in principle, fully recount the behaviour of every water molecule, automobile, and neuron, but normally this would be epistemically worthless.

This 'epistemic value' strategy of reply to the reductionist charge works when we want to say that a higher-level entity causes something *external* to itself: the traffic reduced the audience numbers; the Gulf Stream warms west Europe. As such, it helps with one part of the puzzle of the causality of social groups, namely clarifying the acceptability of talking of groups as standing in causal relations to other groups.

However, my arguments appear to commit me to a more trenchant stance, namely that supra-individual social entities can cause things in ways that *don't* exhaustively reduce to whatever their micro-parts do. This necessitates a non-concessive reply to the supervenience-touting reductionist, and one that directly engages the ontological debate (rather than just appealing to epistemic usefulness). It would involve claiming that the lower-level components are not always causally prior to the higher-level entity, therefore committing us to 'downward causation' – again, far from uncontroversial (Kim 1993, 349-56; Hulswit 2005). Nevertheless, I believe that for social groups it is a coherent idea. I have defended here a conception of social groups as not merely collections of individuals at a given time who fit a particular descriptor. Rather, they are social entities partly based in historically-given structure: laws, institutions, slow-changing resource distributions, influential cultural texts, handed-down norms and traditions, and so on. These things influence at least some of: childhood socialization; habits, proclivities, and behavioural norms; expectations of others' actions; others' expectations of you; which opportunities are, or appear, readily available and which are distant or unimagined. In turn, the thus-patterned behaviour and psychological states of individuals, both within and outside of the group, reproduces the group across time. The continued existence of the group – with its specific relations to other groups and its intersubjective self-understanding – has causal influence over individual group-members in the future (existing members 'from now', and not-yet-born members). Thus, it is not just that social groups emerge as 'spontaneous order' from the actions of many individuals at a given present moment. By contrast, I am seeking a major role for history – and futurity. Ypi (2017) illuminates the role of history and path-dependence in structural injustice (a concept clearly highly relevant to the topic here, although not simply interchangeable with it). The further point, for me, is that, while this might imply that structural injustice is

past-looking, it is also by the same token future-looking. Currently-not-yet-existing individuals who will occupy particular social positions will (absent certain changes now) suffer structural injustices in the same historically-derived, path-dependent way that *currently-existing* members of disadvantaged groups do vis-à-vis our past.

Further refinement is available: Emmeche et al (2000) distinguish between ‘strong’, ‘medium’, and ‘weak’ downward causation. The strong thesis would be that higher-level entities can completely overturn the laws or normal behaviour of lower-level entities as if by fiat. Almost nobody supports this view. However, I am happy – at least regarding social groups – to espouse medium (and weaker) versions. In medium downward causation, “higher level entities are constraining conditions for the emergent activity of lower levels” (ibid., 25). This further helps clarify the idea of social groups having causal properties vis-à-vis individuals. A common *prima facie* objection balks at the thought that social groups might be wielding causal power in the manner of an Aristotelian ‘efficient cause’; some agential force external to an object and effectuating change upon it, like the billiards player striking the ball. This would indeed be unusual. But thinking of social groups as causal in the sense of enabling and constraining conditions is more palatable, avoiding positing groups as large, shadowy agent-like actors themselves. The view is consistent with a ‘microfoundational approach to social causation’; “the causal properties of social entities derive from the structured circumstances of agency of the individuals who make up social entities” (Little 1993, 191). Social groups, then, are enabling and constraining conditions that contribute non-deterministic causal pressures or tendencies into the environment surrounding the exercise of individual agency. If the meaning or relations of a group were different, then the substance of these conditions impinging on individuals would be different. Thus, the effects of social groups, while both real and durable, are not immutably inalterable through agency. (If that were so then normative interest in them would be otiose.)

### 5.3 *Counterfactuals*

A third assumption underlying my position is that we can attribute normatively interesting causal power to social groups because of the existence of counterfactuals. For instance, above I mentioned ‘conditions of life’; ‘particular sets of likely possibilities and constraints conditioning agency’; ‘background conditions and likely experiences’. I suggested that, with social group positions, come such conditions, as in the examples of



being working class in the United Kingdom; an LGBT person in Saudi Arabia; a young, poor black man in a Brazilian city; a member of the Jewish diaspora. It is tempting to explicate a counterfactual reading of these as saying that if the individuals in question came under different social groups – if they were, say, members of the British upper class, heterosexual Saudi Arabians – then the relevant surrounding conditions to their agency would probably be significantly different. However, it is questionable, at best, whether it is coherent to separate out putatively ‘individual’ vs. social properties in this way; if the individual in question had developed in radically different social circumstances then probably they would be quite different individuals.

Perhaps, then, we can say that a different kind of counterfactual applies to (actual or potential) changes in conditions attending a group over time. Compared to a century prior, being working class in the United Kingdom today means something different to what it would have done without the development of the welfare state and an increase (however partial) in socio-economic mobility. However, this seems vulnerable to the non-identity problem (see following section): the *particular* people supposedly ‘affected’ by these changes would not have existed in the possible world providing the comparison point against which these ‘effects’ come into view.

More generally, the counterfactual conception of causation developed by Lewis (1973) and later updated (2000) remains contested (see e.g. Halpern and Hitchcock 2015).

Thus, counterfactuals remain tricky. I am happy to accept that in the case at hand I am mainly referring to the causal relevance of background conditions rather than efficient causes, for reasons stated in the previous section. Beyond that, I believe we can legitimately remain free-floating of (much of) the broader debate over causation. If a subtly different ‘contrastive’ account (Schaffer 2005), or a more complex probabilistic model (Halpern and Hitchcock 2015) were preferred, the main argument here remains largely untouched. The chief desideratum for a conception of causation that would fit the bill is merely that it allows a sense that things ‘could be/could have been otherwise’. This seems a relatively low bar. The sorts of thing we need the ability to say are: “being of the Rohingya ethnicity entails significant constraints on people’s lives in contemporary Myanmar; if we do X, the lives of Rohingya children in 20 years will be different to how they otherwise would have been”.

#### 5.4 *The non-identity problem and other worries about futurity*

A fourth possible objection to the account given here is that its marriage of normativity and futurity is suspect.

For instance, the well-known ‘non-identity problem’ (e.g. Kavka 1982; Parfit 1982) goes roughly thus:

Plausibly, normative responsibility can only apply to effects our actions have on actual people; a choice is only bad if makes an actual person’s life worse than it otherwise would have been. Now, that doesn’t necessarily exclude actual future people. However, because of dynamic causal interdependence (‘the butterfly effect’), almost any decision to do A-rather-than-B will mean that different individuals will exist in the future to those who otherwise would have. So, A might be an action that would have bad consequences for future generations, but if we did B instead, then the individuals who are the ‘moral value-bearers’ about whom we evince concern when considering the A-scenario, will actually never exist. Choosing A doesn’t mean actual people’s lives are worse than they would have been, because if we had chosen B instead then there is no ‘would have been’ – *those* people would not have existed at all.

My arguments in this paper implicitly countenance the idea of fairly transformative social change making life better (or worse) for people than it otherwise would have been. Therefore, the stance seems vulnerable to the non-identity problem.

In developing a response, I think that firstly the non-identity problem should alert us to the presence, in pre-philosophical normative thinking, of moral concern for *indeterminate* future humans. Consider Martin Luther King’s dream that one day his children will be judged not by the colour of their skin but the content of their character. We would be justifiably baffled were he to add “But as for my great-grandchildren, whose precise identities I can never know, I’m not bothered either way”. Consider the feeling of success that egalitarian movements enjoy on achieving some breakthrough in legislation or social norms: not all of the people who represent the ‘sources of normativity’ for the positive valuation of this breakthrough are known to the campaigners or currently exist. Consider the argument that what we are currently failing to do about climate crisis represents us failing coming generations in a morally reprehensible way.

In all these cases, the sense is that untold numbers of unknown people, many of them not yet born and thus currently indeterminate, will or might have lives that are in the relevant aspects better or worse than they otherwise would have been, or, better or worse than would have been the lives of the 'different' people born in counterfactual worlds. As far as I can see, then, thinking in the manner at hand would generally be considered perfectly sensible in ordinary normative discourse.

Now, of course, appealing to ordinary discourse doesn't solve philosophical problems. But I think it can generally be considered a virtue of a philosophical concept that it meshes well with everyday talk. If this virtue can be added to an adjoining persuasive philosophical unpacking then we have a promising concept. Hare (2007) offers an unpacking that is, in my view, persuasive: we can think about present choices' effects on future individuals as making things 'de dicto better' or 'de dicto worse' for a specific described population. (Here 'de dicto' means 'the thing that is said/described', as opposed to 'de re', 'the thing itself'.<sup>17</sup>) Given the non-identity problem, a breakthrough in cancer-battling drugs in 2019 does not make life better for 2039 cancer patients Smith, Jones, Black, etc. Quite feasibly, in the possible world without the breakthrough, and associated ripples of cause and effect, Smith, Jones, etc. would never have gotten cancer anyway. The breakthrough made things 'worse de re' for them. But if what we have moral concern for is 'cancer patients', then the drug has made things 'better de dicto'.

While Hare gives the example of cancer patients, this de dicto solution applies particularly well to the topic of group-based social injustice. For instance, a similar idea arguably underlies Rawls's veil of ignorance, which enforces a certain kind of 'de dicto' concern for indeterminate individuals: the parties must prize the interests of the worst off – whoever might turn out to occupy that position.<sup>18</sup> This implies an idea of 'fairness to future individuals' (Reiman 2007). Arguably the basic moral kernel captured in the original position thought experiment is that justice requires fairness to those who will occupy particular social positions (the least well-off), i.e. fairness to those individuals de dicto. Indeed, much social justice thinking has a natural affinity with 'de dicto benefitting',

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<sup>17</sup> This is slightly different usage to Michael Smith's popularisation of the distinction, but the Latin terms apply similarly.

<sup>18</sup> Indeed, Dworkin (1981, 339-41) criticises Rawls for seemingly group-focussed implications.

precisely because it relies on notions like ‘social positions’, ‘social structure’ or, indeed, ‘social groups’. The implicit idea is that such things have a sociological existence, and will come to be ‘occupied’ by particular (but presently indeterminate) individuals. I can see nothing strange about evincing ‘de dicto’-style normative concern for these individuals. For example, notwithstanding some presently unlikely-seeming changes, there will be LGBT people in Brazil in 100 years’ time. Although we cannot know them, we can hope that the social norms and political trends, particularly under the presidency of Bolsonaro, that unjustly impede the lives of LGBT people in present-day Brazil have altered, so that the occupants of this social position in 100 years’ time do not suffer similar wrongs.

Now, it could be objected that if what matters normatively is ‘each individual LGBT person, whoever they turn out to be’, then this undermines the claim of normative concern for a group, because it is simply concern for each individual LGBT person de dicto. However, the de dicto conceptualisation *relies* on describing a particular group within a larger population. There wouldn’t be any point in it if it didn’t refer to a group that could be picked out by a descriptor. If we were going to have normative concern for each individual de dicto, then there might be any number of ways that we could try to make life better for them. We are only making life better – or, more precisely, making society more *just* – for these indeterminate people *qua* LGBT people.

Indeed, this notion of ‘making life better for’ is potentially somewhat misleading, and so this last point also helps address another possible worry. If normative individualism can include individuals who don’t yet exist, but also holds that ‘every individual human being is of prima facie equal moral importance’, the two together might imply some kind of mind-boggling utilitarian calculus applied to the entire future of humanity – which is clearly too epistemically demanding. However, this objection tries to squeeze social justice into a utilitarian, outcome-measuring mould, when it is more naturally a deontic and institutional mode of normative thinking concerned with notions such as fairness, justifiability, rights, and legitimacy. Now, admittedly, I have talked about making life better for people in the future, and placed heavy importance on causality, and in this sense the meta-rationale for deontological social justice can perhaps be ‘consequentialized’. But, trivially, any normative thinking is concerned in some sense with ‘making things better’ and is grounded in caring about the actual lives that humans lead. This doesn’t commit us to calculating utility or welfare-maximising schemes. The idea that actions at time  $t$  might alter the status or relations of groups by time  $t+n$  in

social justice-enhancing ways is, in fact – as indicated by the idea of concern for indeterminate individuals *de dicto* – precisely based in the thought that while exact outcomes may be incalculable, institutional or structural features of societies can be made more just. Approaching that task doesn't require a calculation of welfare consequences until doomsday: it is only a specific, circumscribed political project, rather than a normative 'theory of everything' for all time.

## 6. Conclusion

To summarise: as per normative individualism, the lived experience of individual humans, including those who will exist in the future, is the ultimate source of normativity. However, this is properly thought of as a deep-level metaethical clarification. For theory and practice, sometimes it is acceptable to evaluate normatively what is the case for social groups, not only for individuals: social groups can be the unit of concern in valid normative prescriptions or evaluations. We can understand this type of normative concern as concern to make life 'better *de dicto*' (thereby avoiding the non-identity problem) for the 'serial collectivity' of individuals who will occupy particular social group positions in the future. Social groups – phenomena arising out of the interplay between historically-derived structure and individual agency – exert 'medium downward causation' on individual members in the form of conditions enabling and constraining individual agency. There are possible counterfactuals where the meaning, status, and relations of groups are altered, and thus individual agents are faced with different conditions, in normatively important ways. This makes it coherent to speak of making society fairer for group x or y, removing the injustice suffered by group x or y. We can identify the groups relevant to social justice evaluation in a given scenario through the fact that they feature in a cogent social-scientific causal explanation of the pertinent disadvantage, maltreatment, inequality, etc.

The account given here is not, of course, proposed as the outline of an entire theory of justice: my argument is not that political philosophy and public policy should not deal with individual rights, with distribution *simpliciter*, with deliberative democracy, and the like. I have not addressed the ethical and strategic question of when it is a *good idea* to take groups as units of normative concern. My view is certainly not that it always is, or that group-based mobilisation and policy should predominate. Far from it: sometimes broad alliances, inspirational universalist rallying cries, or appeals to individual freedom

are called for. That is often a question for activism in specific historical circumstances. Moreover, while there will always be social groups and identity categories, of evolving and variably durable types, one would hope that they might one day be less salient to social injustice. But that is not the world that the theorist currently faces. I hope, therefore, that the arguments given here are of interest to sceptics of group-focused social justice, offering clarifications and defences of that mode of thought and practice, while opening it to more precise critical scrutiny.

## 7. References

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