In a couple of recent papers Deborah Tollefsen has argued that groups should be viewed as having some of the intentional and epistemic properties as do individuals. In “Organizations as True Believers” she argues that corporations really do have intentional states. In “Collective Epistemic Agency” she continues her development of group agency and she now argues that collectives can be genuine knowers. The target of her arguments is, naturally, the wide spread view that “knowers are individuals, and knowledge is generated by mental processes and lodged in the mind-brain.” According to Tollefsen, “An epistemic agent is a deliberator that is subject to epistemic assessment; she can be charged with incoherency, inconsistency, ambiguity, and so on.” Further, “To be a deliberator in the rich sense in which you or I deliberate is to be subject to the immediacy that is characteristic of reason. When we engage in reasoning (and assuming we have the appropriate desires) we are moved to act immediately or think in accordance with the reasons that we arrive at through deliberation.” When we identify which attitudes and acts should be shaped or informed, then such identification takes place from a point of view. Typically, the point of view is the first person singular I, but Tollefsen argues that reflections on group deliberation show that the we-concept often marks the point of view in question. So, Tollefsen argues in effect that

1. A group can be a deliberator
2. A deliberator, in the sense being discussed, is an epistemic agent
3. An epistemic agent can have knowledge
4. So a group can have knowledge.
The bulk of Tollefsen’s paper, “Collective Epistemic Agency,” is focused on arguing that (1) is true, i.e., that a group can be a deliberator. One of the examples she uses to make her case involves the decision made by a college admissions committee. The three committee members consider each candidate and vote ‘yes’ or ‘no’ depending on whether or not the candidate should be accepted into the program. If a candidate votes ‘no’ on one of four criteria of acceptance, then she votes ‘no’ on the candidate. The results for the three individual committee members are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Good GREs?</th>
<th>Good grades?</th>
<th>Good letters?</th>
<th>Good writing sample?</th>
<th>Accept?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If we look at the results of the individual votes on whether to accept the candidate, thus taking a conclusion driven approach, then since each member cast a ‘no’ vote, the candidate is not admitted. But if we sum up each column, thus accepting a premise driven approach, then we see that the candidate has a majority support in each category and so the result should be that she is accepted. Tollefsen points out that if we accept the premise driven approach then the result for the committee cannot be reduced to that on any of its member, and the committee has reasons for accepting the candidate that do not have immediacy for any particular individual in the committee. Thus, it appears that the committee has reasons that none of its members has. And thus we can view the committee as an epistemic agent when accepting the premise driven approach.

Tollefsen argues that provided that the group accepts the premise driven approach, and thus a view that entails that the group decision cannot be reduced to that of its individual members, then we can view the group as a decision maker. The reasons for accepting the
candidate are reasons for the group, and not reasons for any individual member of the group. But if we go along with her and assume that groups can make decisions at all, then it appears to me that it is plausible to argue that the group can have reasons to accept the candidate on the basis of a conclusion driven approach as well as on the premise driven approach. That is, perhaps we should not limit group reasons to the premise driven approach, as Tollefsen seems to do. If groups deliberate and decide, then it seems like the following case can be made for the group making a decision given the conclusion driven approach. It is the group that would then decide to adopt that approach rather than the premise driven approach and so the group would be responsible for the outcome in either case. It is true that if the conclusion driven approach is taken, then individual committee members agree with the group’s decision. Still, no individual committee member could make the decision to reject or accept the candidate. Only the group could make that decision and so there is a sense in which the group decision can not be reduced to individual decisions, and there is a sense in which the group has a responsibility because of its power that cannot be reduced to individual responsibilities.

That aside, Tollefsen’s argument is interesting, but ultimately not convincing. There are several reasons for not accepting the argument.

The redescription objection:

There is a sense in which we say that the committee decides to do X, or that an organization has certain goals, or that a company has certain beliefs. The admissions committee decided to accept the candidate, the goal of the United Way is to help the less fortunate, and Microsoft believes that they are not responsible for viruses directed against their software. But the fact that we appear to attribute various mental properties to groups and organizations is not a good reason for saying that they do have such mental properties. For example, we also say that even though each
member of the admissions committee voted against admission, *they* deliberated (not the committee) and decided that the strengths of the candidate warranted that she be admitted. But often times, instead of us saying that the members of the committee deliberated and concluded that the candidate should or should not be accepted, we conveniently redescribe what goes on by claiming that the *committee* so decided. There are good practical reasons for us redescribing what went on. For example, we can get a point across more quickly and with fewer words. But our laziness does not have ontological commitments. Us redescribing what went on does not bring minds into existence.

*The belief voluntarism objection:*

Suppose we can view organizations and groups as having beliefs, as the ability to deliberate requires. When we deal with individuals, then either an individual has a belief that P or not, and it is typically not up to the individual whether or not to hold the belief. For example, either I believe that Elvis lived in Graceland or I don’t believe so, and it does not seem to be subject to my decision which I believe. Although some versions of weak belief voluntarism might be reasonable when applied to some beliefs, strong belief voluntarism seems wrong. But if we attribute a belief to a group, such as the admissions committee, then it appears that we are committed to strong belief voluntarism.

Suppose that when the committee members enter the room for final deliberation, each member has filled in his/her part of the grid. Suppose also that at that point no member knows how the other members cast their vote on each premise. At this point, does the committee, or doesn’t it believe that the candidate should be accepted? Assuming that groups can have beliefs, there seems to be no nonarbitrary answer to the question. With all the information and data in place, the committee still needs to look at the data. But even that does not settle the issue of what
the committee believes, for the committee still hasn’t decided whether to use a premise driven approach or a conclusion driven approach. Even if we assume that each member of the committee knows how all the members cast their vote, we still don’t know what the committee believes. In effect, with all the data in place the committee has to decide whether to use the conclusion driven approach or the premise driven approach knowing what the resulting belief will be and that it will depend on the approach taken. This seems to commit us to a very strong view of belief voluntarism, where the committee can choose and decide what to belief, or even whether to have a belief in case the view is that only the premise driven approach saddles the committee with a belief. Any view that commits one to strong belief voluntarism is prima facie suspect.

*The “no mind” objection:*

Deliberation requires a mind, and on the face of it, it doesn’t seem that a committee or an organization has a mind; rather, its members have minds. Further, if a committee or an organization doesn’t have a mind, then it seems like it can not have beliefs and intentions, that it can not deliberate, decide, etc. Tollefsen has a simple reply. She points out that “whether something has a mind depends on whether it has intentional states and not the other way around.”

While Tollefsen claims that computers are not deliberators in the sense that she is concerned with, it seems that we might have machines that are deliberators. We might, for example, have a machine that not only processes information but also acts on them. It might, for example, based on its information, conclude that it needs to return to its power source and refuel, and then follow through with the appropriate action. In spite of this I would be hesitant to attribute a mind to the machine, because at this time I have no reason to believe that the machine
is conscious of its own states. That is, the machine lacks consciousness, and having consciousness is a fundamental mark of the mental.

Suppose that we are generous and attribute intentional states to the admissions committee, saying that the committee intends to accept the student. Even so, I believe that we would not, and should not, attribute consciousness to the committee. There is nothing that it is like to be the committee, even though there is something that it is like to be a member of the committee. The members of the committee have minds, the committee doesn’t. And if the committee doesn’t have a mind, it doesn’t have mental properties, including intentional states. Instead, the mental properties we lazily ascribe to the committee are derivative from the mental properties of the individuals who make up the committee and who deliberate amongst themselves.  

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5 “Collective Epistemic Agency,” p. 56.  
7 “Organizations as True Believers,” p. 397.  
8 I thank the Center for Excellence in the Arts and Humanities at ISU for their support while working on this paper.