Preface

“A pragmatic approach to agency in group activity” is my philosophical contribution to the research field of group action, group intentionality and action theory in general. The results presented are relevant for philosophers, sociologists, business ethicists and all people who create, organize or manage groups. Accordingly, I kept the text self-contained with all technical terminology highlighted and explained as well as properly referenced for background reading.

My approach builds towards a theory of agency which bridges individual agency and agency in groups, but it does so by starting from practical insights about group activity, rather than from our understanding of individual agency. Interactions and structures within group activity are often out in the open, ready to be observed and analyzed. Many philosophers have exploited this accessibility to provide deep insight about agency in group activity. To my knowledge, however, none have given these insights priority over how we think individual agency works. In this sense, I turn the direction of building action theory around, and the result is a practical view of agency that respects the large variety of expressions of agency, combined with a clean approach to relevant terminology and concepts.

My personal motivation for the research presented here is both practical and theoretical. The practical motivation comes from my time at a management consulting firm where I served various companies over several years. As a consultant, I found myself in a strange position: we had enormous influence on the decisions made, yet we rarely ever actually made the decisions—our clients did. We also rarely took responsibility for these decisions and we rarely ever carried out the decisions and lived through the consequences. What exactly was our role in these situations? How did our actions and decisions relate to what happened in these companies? What was our “share” of responsibility? I am certain many people in all kinds of businesses—from employees to managers—ask these questions themselves at least occasionally. As for myself, I found the answers presented in this thesis to be helpful and actionable.

My theoretical motivation comes from a completely different direction: my first academic contact with philosophy during my studies of physics took me into discussions about free will and ethics. For both topics, an understanding of action and agency is crucial; free will is ultimately expressed in free agency, and ethics must relate our actions to the things we are responsible for. The main positions of action theory, in turn, have a strong focus on individual human agents and, more particularly, on what is happening in the minds of these agents. This focus is as understandable as it is elusive; we know very little about how our minds work, while the things we do know scientifically often leave us puzzled. To me, this

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was never a good theoretical foundation. Accordingly, I developed an approach to action theory that leaves me much more confident to take its lessons to other areas of philosophical discussion.

With these ideas and motivations, I was determined to start my work on “A pragmatic approach to agency in group activity,” but more was required. I was fortunate to find an extremely helpful and good-willed environment both professionally and personally. Special thanks go to Ralf Stoecker. He supported my transition from being a physicist and consultant to being a philosopher. His engagement, inspiration, advice, philosophical intelligence and insight were invaluable to me personally and to the quality of my work. I could not have wished for a better supervisor, and I am deeply thankful for this. I also want to thank Johanna Wagner for sharing an office with me, enabling countless philosophical discussions, and for just being the kind, open-minded person she is. This creative environment was complemented by inspiring colleagues like Christian Neuhäuser, Christian Nimtz, Almut von Wedelstaedt, Peter Schulte, Pia Becker and many more. I am also very grateful to Bielefeld University. The dissertation, published here as an improved version, was successfully completed and defended at its Departement of Philosophy.

Outside of my home university, I also found a thriving and inspiring scientific community. I am grateful for the exchanges with countless truly committed philosophers. Special moments of insight and clarity of approach were inspired by conversations with Michael Bratman, Stephen Butterfil and Bence Nanay, even though they might not be aware of it. Ultimately, I hope that in publishing this work, I give back a little of what I received from this community.

Finally, none of this would have been possible without the unwavering support of my family and friends. My wife enabled me to pursue philosophy when we adapted to our new life as a family. I am deeply thankful for her gifts of love, happiness and both a daughter and son, who have inspired me in their own right. My friends helped me to keep things in perspective, brainstorm, think outside myself and bounce around ideas. I look forward to continuing life’s adventures with them by my side.