Group (Justified) Belief

Belief and its Limits (BaiL); Seminar 5   ANU
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I. Opening Task on Preservation

In small groups:

1. Come up with 2-3 everyday examples in which it's common to ascribe a belief to a group of agents.

2. For each one, ask whether the group is justified in having that belief.

3. What do you think we are doing when we ascribe group beliefs, and describe them as justified/unjustified?

> For example, are we speaking literally, are we just summarizing, or are we doing something else?

II. Why Philosophize About Group Beliefs?

It's natural to be skeptical about group beliefs being "genuine". I thought is something like: only "agents"—things with mental states—have beliefs. And groups don't have mental states. So when we speak of them having mental states our talk is somehow metaphorical.

> Similar to me, for instance, saying "My computer thinks I'm a hacker" when I've entered too many incorrect passwords.

Here's a quick argument from Lackey (2020) that we need to take group beliefs seriously:

(1) Groups can lie.

(2) Only entities with genuine beliefs can lie.

(3) So, groups have genuine beliefs.

> Think of a government lying to its people (British Conservative government on COVID parties), of a company lying to its customers (Philip Morris on the dangers of smoking), or an employer lying about the perks of a job position.
>   The argument presumably doesn't depend on lying in particular. Take any action that can only be performed by things with beliefs.

Further, Lackey thinks it's important we understand not just what group belief is, but what *justified* group belief is. For example:

> If the Bush Administration justifiedly believed that Iraq did not have weapons of mass destruction, then not only did the administration lie to the public in saying that it did, but it is also fully culpable for the hundreds of thousands of lives needlessly lost in the Iraq war. [p. 342]

We'll be focusing on justified group belief today. Lackey splits them into broadly two categories:

> Two notes:
> 1. As Lackey defines these terms, they are not all encompassing—you could have a hybrid view (like Lackey's).
> 2. A similar distinction maps onto views on what it is for groups to have beliefs at all (let alone justified ones). Naturally, those sympathetic to a deflationary/inflationary account of group belief will be attracted to a deflationary/inflationary account of justified group belief, and vice versa. But I suppose it's not impossible to have a mixed view.

Inflationary Group justified belief is determined only by facts that obtain only at the "group level"—such as (as we'll see) the joint acceptance of reasons.

Deflationary Group justified belief is determined just by the aggregation of the justified beliefs of its members.

II. Joint Acceptance Accounts

Lackey first considers popular "Joint Acceptance Accounts"—which she takes to be the most popular inflationary accounts. They are motivated with cases like the following:

> **Jury.** Each member of a jury has access to evidence that the suspect was seen fleeing the scene of the crime. So, none of the members justifiedly believe the suspect is innocent. But this is "hearsay" evidence which is inadmissible in court. Given only the admissible evidence, the jury as a group justifiedly believe that suspect is innocent.

> **Hiring Committee.** A philosophy department has been given the rare opportunity to hire a new assistant professor. They are considering an application from Fred Jones. Each member personally have high standards for when an applicant counts as "qualified"; accordingly, none of the members believe Jones is qualified. But as a group, they recognize they should take this opportunity and hire someone, and so collectively have lower standards. By these standards, the group believe Jones is qualified and put him forward as a candidate.

These cases are used to motivate "Joint Acceptance Accounts" like the following.

(JAA) A group G justifiedly believes that p if and only if G has a good reason to believe p and believes p for that reason, where:

> – G **has a reason r to believe** p if and only if enough of G's "operative members" would properly express openly a willingness to accept r jointly as the group's reason to believe p.

Applying this to the above two cases:

- In **Jury**, the group is justifiedly believes the defendant is guilty as they jointly accept the admissible evidence, and only the admissible evidence, as their reason for believing this.

- In **Hiring Committee**, the group justifiedly believes Joens is qualified as they jointly accept the provided evidence (e.g. job materials) as their reason for believing this.

Lackey's main criticism of Joint-Acceptance centres around cases like:

> **Philip Morris.** The operative members of Philip Morris—a tobacoo company—are individually aware of the overwhelming evidence linking smoking to lung cancer. However, because of what is at stake financially and legally, none of these operative members would properly express a willingness to accept that the dangers of smoking give Philip Morris a reason to believe there's a link.

JAA seems to predict Philip Morris have no reason to believe there's a link between smoking and cancer. Lackey thinks this is clearly wrong.

But note that her criticsms are very focused-in on Joint Acceptance theories. So you could have a inflationary view that avoids her central criticisms.

What's doing the work in this case is that the group and the members are privy to different evidence.

What's doing the work in this case is that the members have different epistemic standards to the group.

This one is based on Lackey's suggested amendments to Frederick Schmidt's account his 1994 "The justification of group beliefs". It is certainly not the only "Joint Acceptance account".

These are the members in the group involved in making the relevant decisions.

I really do not know what Schmidt has in mind when he says "*properly*"; here's Lackey's explanation:

"the reference to what members would properly do is needed because the reasons possessed by the group include those that are available within and to the group, not merely those the members actually jointly accept as reasons." For instance, suppose that the members of the Humane Society of the United States do not explicitly jointly accept that the moral wrongness of animal cruelty gives them a reason to believe that dog fighting should be opposed; nevertheless, this reason might be available to the group via all of their other commitments...

..."proper joint acceptance" will often be determined by the structure or procedural requirements of the group in question openly express a willingness to accept r jointly as the group's reason to believe p. [p.347]

And it might be even worse for JAA. What if Philip Morris decide only to jointly accept evidence that casts doubt on a link between smoking and cancer, and refuse to jointly accept the overwhelming evidence for the opposite conclusion? Does JAA therefore predict Philip Morris are justified in believing there is no link?

The upshot for Lackey is that *group justification cannot be wholly determined by factors over which the members of the group have direct voluntary control.* This is the "Illegitimate Manipulation of Evidence Problem".

Lackey is also skeptical of the cases motivating JAA.

- For **Jury**, Lackey thinks perhaps the jury is *practically* or *legally* justified in bleieving the defendant is guilty. But they are not *epistemically* justified—inadmissible evidence can be good evidence!

- For **Hiring Committee**, Lackey is skeptical that, when the members are more cautious than the group, both the members and the group can be epistemically justified in their beliefs. On this view, wouldn't Philip Moriss's financial interests justify them in being extremely skeptical as to whether there's a link between smoking and cancer?

IV. Deflationist/Summative Accounts

To avoid this Illegitimate Manipulation of Evidence Problem, we might look at deflationary views, on which group justified belief is understood purely in terms of the justified beliefs of its members.

Lackey takes the view in Goldman (2014) to be the most developed. To get his view on the table, consider:

> **Stolen Cookies 1.** Multiple chocolate-chip cookies have been stolen from the kitchen. The grad students—Tom, Jennifer, and Jeremy—all believe at least one faculty member—Al, Bronwyn, or Colin—stole at least one cookie.
>
> Tom does so because he saw crumbs on Al's shirt. Though neither Jennifer nor Jeremy know about this.
>
> Jennifer does so because a reliable informant told her Bronwyn stole a cookie. But neither Tom nor Jeremy know about this.
>
> Jeremy does so because he knows Colin has a deep fondness for chocolate-chip cookies. But neither Tom nor Jennifer know about this.

Goldman thinks the graduate students justifiedly believe a faculty member stole a cookie. If so, this supports a "vertical" over a "horizontal" theory of group justification:

Horizontal: Whether G's belief that p is justified depends on whether the other beliefs possessed by G support p.

Vertical: Whether G's belief is justified depends on whether enough of the members of G have a justified belief that p.

Note that it is quite diaectically important for Lackey that she undermines the motivation for JAAs , and not just the JAAs themselves—for her own view cannot capture the suggested judgements about justified group belief in both **Jury** and **Hiring Committee**.

Does this mean the Lackey is committed to the "uniqueness thesis"—that there is only one rational set of epistemic standards to have? (We briefly looked at this idea previously in the context of credences.) For if two agents could rationally have different epistemic standards, why couldn't an agent and a group it's a member of have different epistemic standards?

Note. I've tried to greatly simplify these cases. If I've made the numbers too small, we can always imagine structurally analogous cases with a bigger group.

Suppose these are the only graduate students, and the only faculty members.

Do we share this judgment?

Goldman's judgement supports Vertical as there's no single group-level belief supporting the claim a faculty member stole a cookie; each member believes so due to a different justified belief of theirs.

Here's a simplified account of the view Goldman therefore defends the captures the Vertical judgement:

(**Simple Goldman**) A group *G*'s belief in *p* is justified iff a sufficient proportion of it's members have a justified belief in *p*.

For simplicity, I'm ignoring the complications Lackey raises concerning degrees of justification.

I'll focus on two problems Lackey outlines for this kind of view. For the first—**the Group Justification Paradox**—consider a slight variant:

> **Stolen Cookies 2.** Exactly the same as **Stolen Cookies 1**, except there was only one, very special cookie that was stolen. So Tom believes Al *and nobody else* stole a cookie; as does Jennifer for Bronwyn, and Jeremy for Colin.

To be honest, I found the discussion of the Group Justification Paradox and the Defeater problem both fairly confusing; I'll skip the latter as it isn't essential for motivating Lackey's view.

Note that, as everyone knows at most one cookie was stolen:

- Both Jennifer and Jeremy justifiedly believe that Al did not steal the cookie. Call this proposition $\neg A$.

- Both Tom and Jeremy justifiedly believe that Bronwyn did not steal the cookie. $\neg B$.

- Both Tom and Jennifer justifiedly believe that Colin did not steal the cookie. Call this proposition $\neg C$.

Finally, suppose that $\frac{2}{3}$rds counts as a "significant proportion". It follows by Simple Goldman that all of the following the grad students justifiedly believe:

If you don't like this assumption, just add more grad students & faculty members with the relevant justified beliefs so that we do get a significant proportion in each case.

- $\neg A$

- $\neg B$

- $\neg C$

- *A* or *B* or *C*.

Lackey thinks this can't be right. Nobody can be justified in having a set of beliefs like this.

Initial thoughts?

Potential Reply. Why not think this is just an instance of:

> **The Preface Paradox.** A non-fiction author justifiedly believes every sentence she has written in her book. Still, in the preface, she write "I have surely made some mistakes in here."

Many think the author beliefs are perfectly coherent. And this is because, it is thought, justification *isn't* closed under conjunction: the author justifiedly believes each sentence, but not their conjunction. Indeed, the author justifiedly thinks the conjunction is false.

Conjunction Closure Is *S* justifiedly believes *p*, and *S* justifiedly believes *q*, then *S* has justification to believe *p&q*.

Lackey gives three reasons for thinking the Group Justification Paradox is different.

This is central part where I couldn't quite follow it. p. 365

(i) The author would not revise her beliefs on reviewing the evidence. For each sentence, the evidence in favour of it outweighs the evidence from her general fallibility.

In contrast, for each of $\neg A$, $\neg B$ and $\neg C$, the group does have significant evidence they would, on review, present.

What I find confusing about this is, if the group did share it's evidence, though none of A, B nor C would be justified, F would still be *highly* justified!

(ii) We can imagine the sentences in the authors books are largely independent: one can be accepted or rejected without this impacting the others. But in the Group Justification Paradox, "accepting one subgroup's claims necessarily means rejecting the claims of the other subgroups".

I just fail to see the relevance of this— but do let me know if you think I'm missing something obvious here!

(iii) The author of can "act consistently" by "accepting each claim individually while also not, for instance, betting on all of the claims being true". Whereas the grad students cannot act consistently. "In discussion with the [cookie] police...the group will be advising that [a faculty member stole the cookie] and then ruling out [each faculty member] as the suspect."

This point I especially don't get: in a conversation with the Editor, won't the author both assert that some sentence is false, and then assert, of each sentence, that it's true? — Likewise, why couldn't the group accept each of $\neg A$, $\neg B$ and $\neg C$ individually while not betting that all of them are true?

For Lackey's second complaint—**the "Collective Evidence Problem"**—consider:

> **Stolen Cookies 3.** Like **Stolen Cookies 1**, except that Tom also has independent, excellent evidence that Bronwyn didn't steal a cookie; Jennifer has excellent evidence Colin didn't steal a cookie, and Jeremy has excellent evidence Al didn't steal a cookie.

Contra Goldman's theory, Lackey thinks in this case the grad students do not justifiably believe a faculty member stole the cookie:

> This is because there is not a single basis of the members' beliefs that is free of direct and compelling counter-evidence. Otherwise put, there is no basis that would survive full disclosure... [p. 370]

To use Lackey's phrasing, were all the graduate students to "fully disclose all of their evidence and counter-evidence", there "would be no remaining reason to believe" a faculty member stole the cookie.

Lackey takes there to be two central upshots of these problems:

1. Contra Simple Goldman, to determine whether a group justifiably believes p, we must ensure not just that each member justifiably believes it, but that there bases for their believes form a coherent package.

This is the upshot from **Stolen Cookies 2** and the Group Justification Paradox.

2. Contra Simple Goldman, we must also ensure that, were the group's individual evidence somehow to be pooled, there would still be enough individual members that justifiably believe p.

This is the upshot from **Stolen Cookies 3** and the Collective Evidence Problem.

V. Lackey's Theory

(**Group Epistemic Agent Account**) A group *G* justifiedly believes that *p* if and only if

(1) A significant percentage of the operative members of *G* (a) justifiedly believe that *p*, and (b) are such that adding together the bases of their justified beliefs that *p* yields a belief set that is coherent.

(2) Full disclosure of the evidence relevant to the proposition that *p*, accompanied by rational deliberation about that evidence among the members of *G* in accordance with their individual and group epistemic normative requirements, would not result in further evidence that when added to the bases of *G*'s members' beliefs that *p*, yields a total belief set that fails to make sufficiently probable that *p*.

- **This avoids the Illegitimate Manipulation of Evidence problem:** all the operative members of Philip Morris have good reason to believe there's a link between smoking and cancer, and their bases for doing so is presumably coherent, and pooling the evidence would keep it quite likely that there's a link.

  (1)(a) is doing the work here.

- **This avoids the Group Justification Paradox:** in **Stolen Cookies 2**, "adding together the bases for their justified beliefs" presumably does not "yield a belief set that is coherent".

  (1)(b) is doing the work here.

- **And it avoids the Collective Evidence Problem:** full disclosure of the graduate students evidence would make it significantly unlikely that a faculty members stole a cookie.

  (2) is doing the work here.

...Are we convinced?

References

Goldman, A. I. (2014). Social process reliabilism: Solving justification problems in collective epistemology.

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Lackey, J. (2020). *The Epistemology of Groups*. Oxford University Press, New York, NY.