

THE EPISTEMIC FEATURES OF GROUP BELIEF¹

ABSTRACT

Recently, there has been a debate focusing on the question of whether groups can literally have beliefs. For the purposes of epistemology, however, the key question is whether groups can have *knowledge*. More specifically, the question is whether “group views” can have the key epistemic features of belief, viz., aiming at truth and being epistemically rational. I argue that, while groups may not have beliefs in the full sense of the word, group views can have these key epistemic features of belief. However, I argue that on Margaret Gilbert’s influential “plural subject” account of group belief, group views are unlikely to be epistemically rational.

There has been a lively debate in the literature on group beliefs concerning whether groups can believe.² The “believers” argue that groups can literally have beliefs.³ The “rejectionists” argue that groups cannot genuinely believe anything, but can only accept propositions.⁴ The arguments of the rejectionists include pointing out that group beliefs, like acceptances and unlike the beliefs of individuals, are voluntary, pragmatic, qualitative, context bound, and non-integrative. Believers respond by arguing that either (1) group beliefs do not (always) have these features, (2) individual beliefs sometimes have these features, or (3) these features are contingent features which distinguish *individual* belief from acceptance and do not define belief proper.

This debate is largely within philosophy of mind, focusing on the question of whether groups can have a particular sort of mental attribute, a belief. In this paper, I want to shift the discussion and place epistemological concerns at the center. This shift to the epistemological perspective provides us with a new lens through which to analyze and evaluate various accounts of group belief. For the purposes of epistemology the key question is whether groups can be knowers. More specifically, the question is whether group beliefs can have the key epistemic features of belief, viz., aiming at truth and being epistemically rational.⁵ I argue in this paper that, while groups may not be able to have full-fledged beliefs in every sense, group views can have these epistemically

relevant features of belief. Thus, groups can be knowers.

I start the paper by distinguishing between “summative” and “non-summative” accounts of group beliefs. On the non-summative account group properties are not identical to or derived from the properties of all or most of the members. Such properties are genuinely those of *the group*. In the second section of the paper, I argue that non-summative group views in this sense can amount to knowledge, because these views can have the key epistemic features of aiming at truth and epistemic rationality. I then respond to the objection that group views that aim at truth and are epistemically rational are always merely “summative” group views. In the final section of the paper I evaluate a particular account of group belief, Margaret Gilbert’s influential plural subject theory, from the perspective of epistemology. I argue that this account of group beliefs is epistemically unacceptable; group beliefs as described by Gilbert will fail to be epistemically rational and, thus, will be unlikely to amount to knowledge.

1. Non-summative Groups

There are clearly cases where when we say that some group believes something all we mean is that all or most members of that group believe it. The view that this is all it ever means to say that a group believes something has been called the

“summative” view.⁶ As a number of authors have pointed out, however, it is neither necessary nor sufficient for the members to believe *p* in order for the group to believe that *p*. In other words, group attitudes can differ in content from the individual beliefs of the members. All members may believe something that the group does not and the group may believe something that no member does.

To illustrate this, imagine a group (G) composed of four members: Susan, Fred, John, and Beth. If each of them grades an essay by Kate and each believes that Kate deserves a C, then we might say, “G believes that Kate deserves a C.” This would be to apply the concept of group belief in a purely summative way. Suppose, however, that Susan et al. are the members of the evaluation committee for student essays. In that case, whether the group even has a view on what Kate deserves will depend on what the group procedures are for adopting beliefs. It may be that only once they have met to discuss the grade do they then form a group belief on the matter. That procedure determines the view of the committee, not what the individuals happen to believe.

Given the independence of the group belief from the beliefs of the individuals, it may also happen that the group has a view that no member has. For example, suppose G’s view is that Joe deserves a B. The members may have agreed to combine their individual grades in such a way that their group view is some sort of combination or average of the individual views. The individual beliefs of the members may be as follows: Susan thinks that Joe deserves an A, Fred thinks Joe deserves a C, John thinks Joe deserves a C+, and Beth thinks he deserves a B+. And, it may be that the group process does not change any individual member’s mind about the appropriate grade for Joe. Thus, the group view is “Joe deserves a B,” while no member believes this. In the non-summative case the group view is more than simply the views of the individual members; it is the view of the group. It is group belief in this non-summative sense that I will be concerned with in this paper.⁷ The question for the epistemologist is whether such views can amount to knowledge. Before I tackle this question, however, I need to lay down some terminological and methodological ground rules.

First, for the sake of simplicity, I will be

treating group views as categorical rather than as coming in degrees.⁸ It is worth noting that some have claimed that group views cannot come in degrees.⁹ But this is false. Groups can have degrees of confidence in propositions. The standard way to determine degrees of belief is the willingness of an epistemic agent to bet on various lotteries. Groups can select such bets as well as individuals. Thus, group views can come in degrees. Nevertheless, this is not an essential issue for our purposes, because it is not clear why the capacity for having degrees of confidence in a proposition is an epistemically essential feature of belief. While it might be a good thing if one can proportion one’s degree of belief to the evidence, one could still be a knower without having degrees of confidence.

Second, I will not defend the claim that groups can “believe” in the full sense of the word. The focus of this paper is epistemological; thus, those features of belief that are not epistemically important will not concern us. It may be that in order for something to count as “full blown” belief it must have features beyond those purely epistemically relevant ones. For the purposes of this paper I will remain agnostic about whether groups can “believe” in the full blown sense. In order to make clear my agnosticism on this issue, in the following I will use the term “group view” rather than group belief.¹⁰

Third, a number of theorists have suggested particular accounts of collective belief (or, more broadly, collective intentionality), but in this paper I want to avoid selecting one of these as *the notion* of collective belief or *the procedure* for forming group beliefs. For purposes of exploring the epistemology of group views, we will want to consider a wide range of possible ways in which groups can adopt group views.¹¹ So, here I will not propose a particular account of group views beyond the minimal characterization of non-summative group views that I have offered above. I will, however, argue in the final section of the paper that one particular account of collective belief, Margaret Gilbert’s well-known “plural subject” theory, is objectionable from an epistemological point of view.

Finally, there is an important methodological point that should be kept in mind. I am starting from the presumption that some sort of ontological

individualism is true; groups are composed of individual human beings and the properties of groups supervene on those of the members and the rules that govern their interaction. However, when asking what features groups have, we need to look first at the level of the group. We should avoid arguments, for example, that conclude that group views have or fail to have a particular epistemic feature simply because the beliefs of the individual members have or fail to have that feature. Such an inference would be like concluding that a brick is not rectangular because the molecules that compose it are not rectangular. This methodological proviso does not imply that we should ignore the fact that collective epistemic agents are composed of individual epistemic agents. After determining what features the group has, we can then ask what features individual members must have in order for the group to have that feature. In so doing, however, we must avoid assuming that if a group has some epistemic feature, then the members do, or *vice versa*.

II. Groups that Aim at Truth

Our question is whether group views are something that could amount to knowledge. In particular, do group views have those features that make belief a component of knowledge? Admittedly, in many cases group views are not the sort of thing that could be the basis of knowledge or that it would be appropriate to evaluate from an epistemic point of view. Some group views are performatives, which are not the sorts of things that can be evaluated as true or false. Tuomela (2000, 2004), for example, notes that some group views are like the view that "squirrel pelts are money," where the acceptance of this by a group of persons is what *makes* squirrel pelts money.¹² These group views have a "world-to-mind" direction of fit, rather than a "mind-to-world" direction of fit. They are therefore similar to "I christen this ship *The Lusitania*," which also has a "world-to-mind" direction of fit.¹³

Furthermore, groups often adopt positions for purely pragmatic reasons. Of course, as Frederick Schmitt (1994, 275-76) points out, "if group beliefs are assumed as premises for group action, then a group is generally better off having true beliefs than having false beliefs." Nevertheless, in such cases the truth is merely a

means to a pragmatic goal and if the goal is better reached by the group adopting a view that is false, then the group may very well rationally prefer the false view.¹⁴ Outsiders may evaluate such group positions for accuracy, support, and consistency, but the group may reasonably find such evaluations to be largely irrelevant. In these sorts of cases the rejectionists seem correct that the group view is some sort of acceptance other than a belief.¹⁵

Nevertheless, groups do sometimes take positions and defend them as true. Our question, then is whether these group views can ever amount to knowledge. It has been argued that the key epistemic feature of belief (or acceptance) is that it aims at truth.¹⁶ Keith Lehrer (1990), for example, argues that, "There is a special kind of acceptance requisite to knowledge. It is accepting something for the purpose of attaining truth and avoiding error with respect to the very thing one accepts. More precisely, the purpose is to accept that *p* if and only if *p*" (11). In a similar vein David Velleman (2000) in his discussion of the epistemic feature of belief claims that "to believe a proposition is to accept it with the aim of thereby accepting a truth" (251). If I merely imagine or fantasize that *p*, for example, that attitude cannot be the basis for knowledge. On this view a propositional attitude such as belief or acceptance can only be a candidate for knowledge if it aims at truth. Thus, if we want to know whether groups can have knowledge, we need to know whether their views can aim at truth.¹⁷

What does it mean for a view to "aim at truth"? Following Bernard Williams (1973, 136-137) we can say that, if a view "aims at truth," then it will have three features. First, "truth and falsehood are dimensions of assessment" of that view. Note that this does not just mean that others may so assess the view on this dimension, but that this assessment is one that is relevant to whether I maintain that view. "If a man recognizes that what he has been believing is false, he thereby abandons the belief he had" (137). Second, to have the view that *p* is to have the view that *p* is true. And, third, to say "My view is that *p*' "carries, in general, a claim that *p* is true" (137). However, while these are important features of views that "aim at truth," they do not help us very much in understanding the idea of how a view may *aim at truth*.

To capture what it means to say that a view “aims at truth,” I will follow Velleman (2000). According to Velleman, a view “has the aim of being the acceptance of a truth when it is regulated, either by the subject’s intentions or by some other mechanism in ways designed to ensure that it is the truth” (254). This does not mean that the practices that the agent employs must actually be reliable or “ensure” that what is accepted is true. Rather, they must be such that they are used by the agent, *because* the agent has the goal of accepting the truth and only the truth. This may be a result of the agent intentionally selecting or retaining these practices because the agent believes they are effective at getting the truth and nothing but the truth. Or this may be the result of some mechanism of natural selection that has led to the use of these practices where survival of the organism depended on the organism getting the truth and nothing but the truth.

In what follows I say of practices, groups, and views that they may or may not “aim at truth.” Some clarification is in order here. Practices aim at truth when they are designed to get at the truth (in the sense described above). A group aims at truth when it adopts views by means of such practices, which the group employs because the group has the goal of having true and only true views. A view aims at truth when it is the result of the group using such practices in pursuit of the truth. Of course, this definition allows that a group may aim at truth where its practices are not effective. But, we must still be able to interpret the group as using those practices, because the group aims at truth.

Before grappling with the question of whether groups can aim at truth, however, it will help to address the distinct but related issue of voluntarism. A number of rejectionists have claimed that group views are voluntarily adopted and in this way they differ from beliefs proper, which are involuntary.¹⁸ Indeed, they seem to be right that in many cases a group view is something that the members decide on by choosing to endorse it as the view of the group.¹⁹ Of course, this is of interest to the epistemologist only to the extent that doxastic involuntarism is an epistemically crucial feature of belief.²⁰ If it is merely a contingent psychological fact about human beings, rather than a necessary feature of knowledge, then this

difference between individual beliefs and group views need not concern us.²¹

Williams (1973) argues that the involuntariness of belief is necessary in order for belief to play its distinctive epistemic role. According to Williams,

If I could acquire a belief at will, I could acquire it whether it was true or not... If in full consciousness I could will to acquire a ‘belief’ irrespective of its truth, it is unclear that before the event I could seriously think of it as a belief, i.e. as something purporting to represent reality. At the very least there must be a restriction on what is the case after the event since I could not then, in full consciousness, regard this as a belief of mine, i.e. as something I take to be true, and also know that I acquired it at will... (148).

An implication of Williams’ position is that, if group views are voluntary, then a group could not adopt views with the intention that they represent reality, nor could the group or its members think that a view so adopted is true. If this is correct and if all group views are voluntarily adopted, then group views will always be purely pragmatic and cannot amount to knowledge. Groups would not be able to adopt views “with the aim of thereby accepting a truth.” I argue below, however, that neither is involuntarism epistemically essential, nor are all group views voluntary.

Williams is surely correct that that if we knowingly chose to accept some proposition on the basis of something other than good epistemic reasons, it would make no sense to put our faith in the truth of that “belief.” However, there is no requirement that the voluntary choice of what to believe be based on non-epistemic reasons. Imagine an individual who has the odd ability to choose what to believe. If she chooses to accept only those propositions that she believes are true on the basis of reasons, then she could both reasonably expect that her beliefs would represent reality and she could sensibly trust that her chosen beliefs are true. Thus, as long as groups can adopt views for good epistemic reasons, they too can be in a position to expect that their views are true.

Suppose, however, that contrary to the argument above, Williams is correct and involuntarism is

an epistemically essential feature of belief. This does not rule out of the epistemic realm all group views; some groups could have a similar degree of doxastic involuntarism as do individuals. Of course, we cannot simply add involuntarism to group belief and produce the desired epistemic feature. It is not enough to show that group views can be formed involuntarily; it must be shown that they can be formed involuntarily in the right way. And, indeed, a group may have views that it has not voluntarily adopted and which are adopted via practices that are designed to ensure that the view is true. For instance, suppose a group *G* has in the past adopted a certain procedure for forming its views and that this procedure does not require that the members directly accept or endorse the view in question. The procedure might, for example, require that a secretary records and combines the views of the members into a resulting "group view" of which the secretary then informs the members. Suppose, also that this procedure is one that the group adopted because it is reliable at getting to the truth.²² It is true that there is some choice involved here. The group can voluntarily change its procedures, but this does not seem so different from an individual who may change his doxastic processes by, for example, taking a critical thinking class.

As we have seen, the epistemic worries about voluntarism really concern the possibility that groups may adopt views for non-epistemic reasons. In other words, the concern is that group views may aim at pragmatic success rather than truth. And, it is true that given the greater degree of voluntarism of group belief, groups may choose to adopt views for any reason they choose. Indeed, according to K. Brad Wray, "The important difference between acceptance and belief is that agents accept views in light of their goals, whereas beliefs are not acquired in light of goals" (2003, 369). Wray argues that groups are defined by their goals, and, thus, unlike individual epistemic agents groups will always choose to believe based on their goals. And, it is often the case, as Christopher McMahon (2003, 351) points out, that groups undertake to defend as true positions that they adopt for purely instrumental reasons. For example, notoriously the tobacco companies took the position that smoking does not cause cancer. However, this is more a difference of degree than

of kind between individuals and groups. W. K. Clifford's (1879/2001) negligent ship owner, for example, does not seem so different from the cigarette companies when he "acquired his belief not by honestly earning it in patient investigation, but by stifling his doubts."²³

But even if individuals' beliefs always aimed at truth, it would not follow that group views never do. An aim is something that depends on the goal of the system. If the group has epistemic goals, then when that group adopts views they may aim at truth.²⁴ Furthermore, while many groups want their beliefs on particular topics be true, there are groups whose sole goal is to get at the truth: groups of scientists, for example. Clearly such groups will want their views to be true. But, just having the goal of getting the truth may not be enough; groups must actually do things that "aim" at the truth. And, according to Wedgwood (2002), "the only way in which it makes sense to aim at having a correct belief is by means of having a rational belief" (276). Can groups be epistemically rational in this way?

Following Foley (1993) we can define a group as epistemically rational if and only if it takes the steps that can reasonably be expected to help it achieve its epistemic goals. In this paper I am assuming that our epistemic goal is having true views (and not having false views). A virtue of this account of rationality is that, if we accept the idea that groups as well as individuals can have goals, we can apply it to both individuals and to groups. Of course, whether some course of action could reasonably be expected to bring us closer to our goals will depend on our situation and what the most effective means are. I may be acting rationally from my subjective point of view if I take what I believe to be the most effective steps to my goals. From someone else's point of view it may be clear that these steps are unlikely to work and, thus, that I am not proceeding in a rational way. Thus, as Foley notes, whether or not we are being rational can be evaluated from a number of perspectives. In particular, we can treat group rationality as allowing for both a "subjective" and an "objective" perspective.

A group *G* is **subjectively** epistemically rational iff *G* has the goal of believing* truths and avoiding falsehoods and abides by epistemic practices

that G believes* are effective in achieving that goal.²⁵

A group G is **objectively** epistemically rational iff G has the goal of believing* truths and avoiding falsehoods and abides by epistemic practices that are effective in achieving that goal.

Obviously groups can be subjectively epistemically rational. They can choose to adopt practices that they think are effective in getting at the truth or they may find that some of their practices are so effective. And, groups may engage in practices that actually are effective.

While we are considering whether groups can be epistemically rational it is worth responding to an objection according to which groups fail to have an important feature of rationality, i.e., consistency. Striving for consistency amongst ones' beliefs has often been cited as an epistemic practice that is effective in achieving our goal of believing truths and avoiding falsehoods.²⁶ Given that groups can have more than one view, the question arises whether groups can be rational in this sense. Some have argued that group views may *happen* to be coherent, but that there will not be the pressure to integrate beliefs that is characteristic of individual epistemic agents.²⁷ It is true that group views may more easily lack integration insofar as such integration may require a decision and commitment on the part of the group. In other words, to insure consistency groups will need to use practices that lead to a consistent set of views. But, clearly, groups can adopt such policies and practices. Philip Pettit (2003), for example, describes how different approaches to combining individual judgments to produce a group judgment will result in different degrees of integration and coherence among the judgments of the group.²⁸ Interestingly, Pettit (2003) claims that rational unity among the beliefs of the collective means that the group views will differ from those of the individual members. "Rational unity is a constraint that binds the attitudes of the collectivity at any time and across different times and the satisfaction of that constraint means that these attitudes cannot be smoothly continuous with the corresponding attitudes of members" (184). Thus, those groups with coherent views may be less likely to have a merely summative structure.

III. The Return of the Summative

It may be argued that I have saved the epistemic feature of group views only at the cost of the non-summative feature. McMahon (2003) and Meijers (2002, 2003) for example, argue that when groups aim at truth, the group views will be best understood as merely summative.²⁹ Meijers, for example, says: "if only epistemic reasons for believing are taken into account, it is impossible that there is a difference in content between what I as an individual believe and what I believe as a member of the group, for epistemic access is not role bound" (2003, 379). In short, a group cannot adopt the view that p with the goal that their view be true unless each member first comes to be convinced that p is true, and thus comes to believe that p .

On this view there is only one practice that would be appropriate for a group that aims at truth. According to McMahon (2003), for example, "a collective belief of this sort [i.e., one that aims at truth] is formed when all the members agree that the relevant evidence supports a particular conclusion" (353). In other words, any group practice that aims at the truth will be one that derives the group view from the individual beliefs of the members. The reasoning here seems to be as follows. If your aim is to believe the truth and avoid falsehood, then you will want to consider all relevant evidence. If the members take into account the same set of evidence in relation to p , then as long as they are all rational, they will agree on which proposition is best supported by the evidence. As a result, the group view will simply be the consensus of the group members. Thus, every group that aims at truth will "believe" whatever the members believe. Therefore, the summative account will be correct for any epistemically respectable group view. I argue below that McMahon and Meijers are incorrect; groups may aim at truth, even when the group's view is not simply the sum of the views of the individuals.

First, the member beliefs and the group view may diverge because the members and the group do not have the same set of evidence before them. An individual member could, for example, hold back some information.³⁰ One might respond that in that case the group is

failing to aim at truth, because its practices of information sharing (or not sharing, as the case may be) are excluding evidence. However, this is to assume that epistemic agents always make better decisions with more evidence and this is not necessarily true. Courts, for example, do not allow juries to see “prejudicial” evidence. Some evidence is not “probative” and may lead the jury away from rather than toward the truth of whether the defendant is “guilty beyond a reasonable doubt.” Thus, the group could rationally base their views on a set of evidence that excludes evidence of this sort. If a member of the jury knows such information, then it would be appropriate for him or her not to share this information. It may be that, given doxastic involuntarism, the individual cannot simply forget the information and bring her beliefs in line with that of the group. We can imagine a group in which every member has such information but fails to make it available for group deliberation. The jury then comes to a consensus on what verdict is supported by the evidence before them. Given that the members have different evidence from the group, it may be that none of the members personally believes the group view. Nevertheless, the group view may still be epistemically rational.

Second, the member beliefs and the group view may diverge, because the members may individually put more or less weight on the evidence than does the group. In this case it may be that both the group and the members base their views on exactly the same evidence, but they end up with different conclusions because they weigh the evidence differently.

Third, the member beliefs and the group view may diverge because the group and the members have different thresholds for acceptance. The McMahon and Meijers argument assumes that if two epistemic agents have the same set of evidence relevant to *p*, they weight the evidence the same, and both are epistemically rational, then they will both either accept, suspend judgment on, or reject *p*. But, whether one accepts or rejects a proposition may depend not only on the evidence and the weight that one puts on that evidence, but also on one’s “threshold” for acceptance. To return to the jury example, juries in criminal trials are instructed to apply a particular threshold—beyond a reasonable doubt—which will govern

whether they accept or reject the proposition that the defendant is guilty. This may or may not match the threshold that the individual jurors require for personally accepting or rejecting this proposition. Thus, the jury may find the defendant “not guilty,” while all the members believe that the defendant is guilty. Such differences in the threshold for acceptance may be perfectly reasonable, given the fact that the group and the members may have very different contexts for their views.

It might be objected that if an agent takes into account irrelevant evidence or excludes relevant evidence or assigns that evidence too much or too little weight, then that agent is failing to be epistemically rational.³¹ Thus, on this view if the members use the consensus approach to the formation of group beliefs, the group and the individual beliefs will only diverge to the extent that either the group or the individuals fail in epistemic rationality. It is true that if both the members and the group are *optimally* epistemically rational, and if they have the same evidence before them, assign the same weight to the evidence, and have the same threshold for acceptance, then they must come to the same conclusion. But, if they do not reach the same conclusion it does not follow that either one or the other must fail to be aiming at truth. We do not require that in order for agents to aim at truth that they be optimally epistemically rational. Thus, groups may aim at truth even when their beliefs diverge from those of one or more of the members.

One might argue, however, that in order for the group genuinely to aim at truth it is not sufficient that the group holds that its views are true; the members should also hold that the group’s views are true. And if the members believe that the group view is true, then they must believe it. I do not want to debate this claim here; I just want to note that even if this were correct, the summative view would still not always capture the nature of epistemically respectable group views. A group may form a view via some process such as the one I described in Section II, where the group view is a function of the individual views. Such a process may be designed to lead to the truth. Recall that in my example the group view was derived by a secretary, who then informs the members of the view. Thus, the group may form a view which none of the members believes. However, one

could argue that, if the members are subjectively epistemically rational and they each believe that the group's views are true, perhaps because they believe the group procedures to be very reliable—more reliable than any procedure they can perform as individuals—then each member will update his or her belief to match the group view. Thus, the individual beliefs will be the same as the group view.

However, although in such a case the individual beliefs match the group belief, it would be incorrect to say that the group belief is simply a function of the individual beliefs, as implied by the summative view. It is not the case that the group just believes what the individuals do. In fact, it is precisely the other way around; the individuals believe what the group does, because they think that the group view is true. This is highlighted by the fact that there will be some period of time where the group belief is distinct from the beliefs of the individual members, that is, the time that elapses between the group view being formed and the members updating their individual beliefs. Thus, while the group and the individuals believe the same thing, the group view is still non-summative.

IV. Joint Commitments and Epistemic Rationality

So far I have avoided discussing the merits of any particular account of non-summative group belief. In this section, I want to consider one very influential account of group belief, Margaret Gilbert's plural subject account, from the perspective of the epistemic issues I have been discussing. I will argue that Gilbert-style group beliefs are seriously problematic from an epistemic point of view. In particular, on Gilbert's account of group beliefs, it is unlikely that the group beliefs will be held in an epistemically rational way. I argue that this gives us reason to look for an alternative account of group views.

In her numerous writings on group belief Gilbert has defended the following definition of group belief:

(i) A group G believes that p if and only if the members of G jointly accept that p. (ii) A group jointly accepts that p if and only if it is common knowledge in G that the individual

members of G have openly expressed a conditional commitment jointly to accept that p together with other members of G. (1996, 204-05)

According to Gilbert, a group belief is formed when the members jointly accept a view. This joint acceptance binds each of the members to the group belief. When we conditionally commit to accept that p, we are each committed to accepting that p on the condition that the others are. Since each member has committed herself to the collective belief, she is obligated to "believe" the proposition as a group member, although not necessarily as an individual. And no member can rescind the commitment on her own. This means that in contexts where her group membership is salient she is committed to act, speak, and reason consistently with the group view.³² If she fails to do so, then she has violated an obligation she has to her fellow group members.³³

Gilbert describes how these commitments function in group contexts, in the following example:

[T]he members of a seminar on human rights may in the course of a meeting form a joint commitment to believe as a body that the notion of a group right is a viable one. This would involve a requirement to express that belief at least within the confines of the seminar when it is in session. More broadly, it would require that each party express that belief when acting as a member of the seminar. (2004, 104)

According to Gilbert, even in the case of groups of scientific researchers, such obligations will be in place. Gilbert (1994) describes a hypothetical case where a member of a group of string theorists says, "String theory isn't going anywhere." According to Gilbert, the scientist would be open to rebuke for failing to keep her commitment to the group belief. Indeed, Gilbert (2000) claims that such joint commitments to express the group view when acting as a member helps to explain the conformity within groups. All members take themselves and others as obligated not to question the group view.

If Gilbert is correct that when we form group beliefs we will be involved in such commitments,

then it seems that group views will likely not be held in an epistemically rational way. Recall that in order for a group to be subjectively epistemically rational it must be regulated by practices that the group believes are effective at getting at the truth. In order for a group view to be objectively epistemically rational it must be regulated by practices that are effective in getting at the truth. It seems that Gilbert-style group beliefs are unlikely to be either objectively or subjectively rational. On the face of it, it seems that groups that have Gilbert-style group beliefs will have to adopt practices that will not be effective in getting at the truth. Some of the key practices by which group views will be formed and revised will involve members voicing their views, presenting evidence, etc. On Gilbert's view, the commitments required for the formation of group beliefs provide the members with binding non-epistemic reasons for asserting and supporting a proposition. Each member is obliged to act and speak as if she believes the group view. Within the group one is obligated not to question the group view, even if one believes it is false. But such non-truth sensitive reasons for upholding a belief may very well be contrary to the epistemic goals of any group, which wants its views to be true.³⁴ Indeed, Gilbert is quite aware of this consequence of her account of group beliefs. She notes that group beliefs "justify the infliction of pressure by one person on another in the service of beliefs which may be false" (1994, 253). She concludes that, "It will be hard to avoid the repressiveness of collective beliefs. Perhaps the best we can do is attempt to assure that the beliefs that become collective among us are beliefs we can live with. For, once they are set, they are powerful forces" (253).

It seems that, from the epistemic point of view, not only should group members be *permitted* to question the group belief, they are *obligated* to do so if they think it is false or poorly supported by the evidence. If an individual member has gained new evidence relevant to whether some proposition ought to be collectively accepted, then she is obliged to share this with her fellow group members. To simply change her mind and not share the new information with her compatriots is to fail in an epistemic duty to other members of the group.³⁵ But, according to Gilbert, group beliefs will exert strong pressure on individuals

precisely not to fulfill this epistemic duty, because we are obligated never, in an unqualified way, to contradict the group belief.

Gilbert (2004, 104) does say that members would not be violating any commitment if they voiced disagreements *in propria persona*, making clear that it is a personal view. Whether this will do much epistemological good, however, depends on what is meant here by "in propria persona." Does it mean that the member must make clear that she recognizes that what she is about to say is not the official group view, but nevertheless she intends to question that view and intends that the others engage with her on this topic as group members? Or does it mean that the member must make clear that she is merely expressing a "personal belief," which neither she nor the other members of the group should see as part of the group belief forming and revising process? This second understanding of the obligations created by Gilbert's group commitment seems to be at work in what she says about the seminar group quoted above. Gilbert says that the members are obligated not to contradict the group view *when acting as members of the seminar*. Thus, it is only when not acting as a member of the seminar that a member may personally express a different view. In which case, she would be speaking and the others would be hearing her speak in their roles as individuals, not as members of the group. But then the group will not be able to benefit from any insights the dissenter may offer. Furthermore, even this qualified questioning will tend to be suppressed by the joint commitment. Gilbert (2000) claims that even qualifying one's views as a personal opinion will lead others to "have some reason to fear that next time she will forget the qualification and come out with this heterodox opinion as if the community was not committed to anything contrary to it" (44). According to Gilbert this will lead the individual not just to suppress her dissenting views, but to fail to form them in the first place. According to Gilbert (2000), "participation in a group belief can have consequences even for one's private thoughts, inhibiting one from pursuing spontaneous doubts about the group view, inclining one to ignore evidence that suggests the falsity of that view, and so on" (44-45).

This is not to say that the practices that such

Gilbert-style group views lead us to engage in could *never be* epistemically rational. There may be cases where the group belief forming practices are much more reliable than any practice an individual could use. In such a situation the group will do better if the members do not try to change the group view to be in line with their own views. And the individual members will do better if they suppress their doubts, since they are more likely to go wrong than the group. But surely it may be possible that in some circumstances free and open inquiry where individuals freely pursue their doubts and express their individual beliefs is a good way of trying to get to the truth. And groups may reasonably want to engage in such practices. But these practices are ruled out when we jointly commit to a group view. In such cases jointly committing to accept a group view would be epistemically irrational.

A defender of the plural subject theory may claim that I may have shown that plural subject beliefs are epistemically non-optimal, but that doesn't mean that Gilbert has not offered the correct view of group beliefs. Gilbert herself recognizes these problematic consequences of group beliefs and that has not led her to reject or revise her view. Indeed, she argues (2000) that it is a virtue of her account that it can explain why groups often fail in epistemic rationality. It does show, however, that we would be in a much happier epistemic situation with regard to group beliefs if forming joint commitments were not the only way to have group beliefs. The first thing I need to do to show that we are in the happy situation is to provide an alternative explanation of the obligations that Gilbert says are connected to group belief. The fact that her account can explain these obligations is one of the primary virtues of plural subject theory. I offer such alternative explanations below.

Gilbert is correct that other participants in a group view will often reasonably expect us to speak and act consistently with the group view in those contexts where our group membership is salient. Indeed, these expectations do sometimes follow from actual obligations. She is incorrect, however, that the only way to explain these obligations is by positing joint commitments to accept the view in question. Consider the expectation that we will speak and act consistently with the group view

when speaking to those outside the group. When I am speaking to outsiders as a group member, it will typically be expected that what I say is an expression of the group view, not my own personal view. It would be misleading if I were to state my individual views under the guise of speaking for the group. In such cases, Gilbert is correct that members ought to "act as would any one of several *mouthpieces* of the body in question, thus uttering *its* beliefs, as opposed to the beliefs of any of its members, including the utterer" (45). This obligation arises from the obligation not to mislead others; I am being asked what the group's view is, not what my individual beliefs are. There is no need to posit joint commitments to explain this obligation. Furthermore, if it is particularly important that the audience be given all relevant information, it might be appropriate for me to say where I disagree with the group view and in so doing I would not necessarily be failing to fulfill any obligation.

However, as Gilbert points out, we also often expect members to speak and act consistently with the group view when *within* the group, interacting with fellow group members.³⁶ These obligations can also be explained without appealing to joint commitments to the group view, however. We may have an obligation to act consistently with the group view, because this is necessary for the success of our collective actions. Many groups adopt collective views in order to facilitate collective action. If my acting, reasoning, and speaking consistently with the group view in group contexts is necessary in order to carry out our collective action and others are relying on me to "do my part," then I am obligated to do so. It is not necessary for me to have jointly committed to the view; all that is necessary is that I have knowingly allowed others to rely on me.³⁷ In short, this obligation is based on the fact that collective views are frequently necessary for collective action. So, these obligations can be understood as arising, not from making a commitment to a particular view, but from the more general obligation to help fellow members achieve our group goal.

Within a group with epistemic goals, such as scientists, these obligations do not commit us to mouthing the group view when we think it is wrong. Within such groups, when I think that

the group view is wrong, I am arguably *fulfilling* these obligations by bringing my view to the attention of the group. If I have what I consider to be compelling reasons to reject the group view, then by voicing my rejection and presenting my reasons, I am helping us move *toward* the truth. By changing my views in line with the evidence and suggesting that the rest of the group members do as well, I am being epistemically rational and working to promote the epistemic rationality of the group.³⁸ Thus, membership obligations in groups with epistemic goals will not commit us to engage in epistemically inappropriate practices. However, these obligations are not what Gilbert says are required to form a group belief. Thus, either Gilbert is incorrect that there are joint commitments necessary for group beliefs, or those groups with epistemic goals should be very careful not to form group beliefs. However, they can still have non-summative group views, which may be just as good.

One might object that if members are not "jointly committed" to the view in question, then what makes them *a group* with a view? In fact, I agree that commitments are necessary in order for a number of persons to form a group. I just think that Gilbert is requiring the commitments in relation to the wrong thing. If one is a member of a group, then I agree that this will involve one in various commitments to views, practices, values, etc. However, in groups that aim at truth these commitments will not include a commitment to believing propositions. Rather, the commitments will be to the particular procedures that are to be used in determining what these views should be. Thus, it would not be inappropriate, for example, for the string theorist to say that string theory isn't

going anywhere on the basis her recent review of the literature on string theory. It would be inappropriate, however, for the string theorist to say that string theory isn't going anywhere on the basis of what her astrologer told her. On my view, then, what makes one a member of such groups is a commitment to following certain practices that are seen as appropriately regulating our epistemic endeavors. If we have good reasons to think that in our situation we will do the best if individual members suppress their views, then we should commit to that practice. If we have good reasons to think that in our situation we will do the best if individual members freely inquire and baldly without preamble speak their dissenting views, then we should commit to that practice.

Conclusion

My goal in this paper has been to shift the discussion of group belief away from a concern with whether groups can be said to have particular sorts of mental or cognitive properties characteristic of belief, to a focus on the epistemic features of group views. I have argued that while groups can choose to adopt views for pragmatic reasons, they may also adopt views for epistemic reasons. If this is right, there is no reason to exclude group views from the realm of possible bases for genuine group knowledge. This focus on the epistemic also provides us with a way to evaluate differing accounts of group belief. Some accounts of group beliefs, such as Gilbert's, that work quite well when focusing on groups as purely pragmatic agents, work less well when considering groups as epistemic agents.

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Notes

- ¹ Thanks are due to Don Fallis for many useful conversations on the issues discussed in this paper, and to Alvin Goldman and the anonymous referee for their comments and suggestions.
- ² See e.g., Heimat Geirsson (2004), Margaret Gilbert (1987/1996, 1989, 1994, 1996, 2000, 2002, 2004), Raul Hakli (2006), Christopher McMahon (2003), Anthonie Meijers (2002, 2003), Gerhard Preyer (2003), Frederick Schmitt (1994), Deborah Tollefsen (2002a, 2002b, 2003), Raimo Tuomela (1992, 1995, 2000, 2004), and K. Brad Wray (2001, 2003).
- ³ Believers include Gilbert (1987/1996, 1989, 1994, 1996, 2000, 2002, 2004), Preyer (2003), Schmitt (1994), Tollefsen (2002a, 2002b, 2003), and (possibly), Tuomela (1992, 1995, 2000, 2004). A number of authors have included Tuomela in the rejectionist camp. He does make a distinction between what he calls "acceptance" beliefs, which groups have, and "experiential" beliefs, which only individuals may have. However, other features of his view, such as his (2004) claim that non-summative groups can know, make him more at home in the believer camp.
- ⁴ Rejectionists include Geirsson (2004), Hakli (2006), McMahon (2003), Meijers (2002, 2003), and Wray (2001, 2003).
- ⁵ Some, such as Velleman (2000) define belief as an acceptance that aims at truth; "to believe a proposition is to accept it with the aim of thereby accepting a truth" (251). On this view if we can show that groups can accept a proposition "with the aim of thereby accepting a truth," then we will have shown that groups can have beliefs.
- ⁶ See Quinton (1975) for the *locus classicus* of the summative account and Gilbert (1987/1996) for the seminal critical discussion of it.
- ⁷ This is a minimal notion of social group, which will be sufficient for our purposes. In Mathiesen (2003, 2005) I defend a more full-blooded notion of "collectives," which I argue requires a shared sense of collective identity.
- ⁸ See e.g. Meijers (2002) and Philip Pettit (2003).
- ⁹ Fallis (2004) makes this point in response to Pettit's (2003) claim that group judgments do not allow for degrees of confidence.
- ¹⁰ Occasionally, I will need to use the term "group belief" in order to avoid awkwardness, but this should be understood to be a term of art and should not be taken to imply that I am arguing that

groups literally believe.

- 11 Tuomela (1995, 2000) discusses a range of types of collective belief or acceptance.
- 12 Using John Searle's (1995) formulation we would say squirrel pelts *count as* money in our society ("x counts as y in context c").
- 13 Of course, once the Queen so christens the ship, she can then believe in the ordinary "mind-to-world" sense, and, thus know that the ship in front of her is called *The Lusitania*.
- 14 It may be that the group must care that some of its beliefs be true, for example, the belief that a particular false belief is pragmatically useful. However, all I need to show here is that groups may sometimes adopt views for non-epistemic reasons, not that they always do.
- 15 As Velleman (2000) notes, "False *beliefs* are faulty in themselves, antecedently to and independently of any untoward practical consequences" (278) [emphasis added].
- 16 See e.g., Keith Lehrer (1990), Bernard Williams (1971/1973) and Wedgwood (2002).
- 17 One might argue that if we want to show that groups can know, then we would need to show that a group may accept a proposition for the purpose of attaining knowledge. I assume, however, with Velleman (2000) that, "an acceptance that aims at being knowledge... aims at the truth and more—i.e., at truth plus proper justification" (277). Thus, by showing the groups may aim at truth, I will have gone partway toward showing that groups may know.
- 18 See e.g., Meijers (2002, 2003), Wray (2001) and Hakli (2006). For a discussion of doxastic involuntarism with a focus on the question of whether we can have duties in relation to belief, see e.g., the articles by Ginet, Feldman, and Audi in Steup (2001).
- 19 Gilbert (2002) argues that a group belief may be involuntary, while the member acceptances are voluntary. While in general we should not infer that a group has some property p simply because the members have p (or vice versa), I have a difficult time understanding how a group belief can be involuntary when each of the members voluntarily agrees to it. Luckily, we do not need to rely on this argument to respond to the rejectionist on this point.
- 20 Hakli (2006) argues that this is the key feature that distinguishes group views from genuine beliefs, but he does not argue that this is an important epistemic distinction, which is our concern here.
- 21 Tollefsen (2003), for example, claims that, "Involuntarism about belief is, at best, a contingent thesis about human abilities, not a necessary truth about belief" (398).
- 22 Their procedure might be something like the practice Goldman (1999, 81-82) describes for amalgamating experts' opinions.
- 23 A number of participants in this debate have noted the pragmatic influences on individual belief formation; see, e.g., Tollefsen (2003), Hakli (2006).
- 24 See also Hakli (2006) for an argument that groups can adopt group views with the goal of getting the truth.
- 25 By believe* I just mean "has the view that."
- 26 For a defense of the importance of coherence see, e.g., Bonjour (1985).
- 27 See, e.g., Meijers (2003).
- 28 Pettit's concern, however, is primarily how this will allow the group to act like and be perceived as a unitary agent over time, not with whether the group can be epistemically rational.
- 29 McMahan (2003) makes a distinction between "discretionary" acceptances that aim at pragmatic ends and "epistemic" acceptances that aim at truth. Meijers (2002, 2003) makes a similar distinction between views adopted for pragmatic as opposed to epistemic reasons.
- 30 Schmitt (1994) argues that "the group may be justified in believing p even though some members are not justified in believing p. For the group might lack reasons against p that are rendered unavailable or inadmissible, even though the members possess those reasons" (274-75).
- 31 In fact, the procedures used by the group may correct for the irrational tendencies of various members, thus leading to an epistemically rational group view, while the members fail at epistemic rationality.

- ³² It is important to note that on Gilbert's account this may be overridden by other considerations, but one is still prima facie obligated to act and speak consistently with the group belief.
- ³³ Tuomela (2000) agrees with Gilbert that such group beliefs are commitments and lead to particular sorts of obligations.
- ³⁴ Tuomela's (1995) account of collective belief seems to be open to the same objection. On his view, when there is a group belief that p, "Any member of a group has the prima facie obligation to accept that p qua member of the group" (331).
- ³⁵ For a further discussion of such "other regarding epistemic virtues" see Kawall (2000).
- ³⁶ Of course, there may be cases where people think I am obligated, where I am not. The tendency to rebuke others cannot be assumed to indicate failure to abide by an obligation.
- ³⁷ Michael Bratman (1999, 135-38) makes a similar argument with regard to shared intentions. Obligations arise because we have intentionally created expectations on the part of others.
- ³⁸ Gilbert (2000) has argued that the obligations engendered by collective beliefs may explain the resistance to change within science. Given that we can explain such resistance with other social factors (training, guiding metaphors, economic interests, social psychology, etc.), it would be best to avoid positing obligations on the parts of members to resist change.

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