

Jennifer Lackey (ed.) - Essays in Collective Epistemology (Oxford University Press, 2014)

Han van Wietmarschen
University College London

We routinely ascribe both belief and knowledge to collective entities. We say that the Bush administration knew that no weapons of mass destruction were found in Iraq, that the philosophy department believes its hiring decision complies with employment law, or that we know that greenhouse gas emissions cause climate change. Collective epistemology studies the nature of collective belief, justification, and knowledge. This volume contains ten original articles, five of which are centrally concerned with collective epistemology so understood. The other five take up a number of issues that fall into the wider area of social epistemology.

Two of the contributions are primarily concerned with the metaphysics of group belief and knowledge. Gilbert and Pilchman propose a joint commitment account of the nature of group belief: a group believes that *p* if and only if the members of the group are jointly committed to believe that *p* as a body. Bird is primarily interested in the ascription of knowledge to large, diffuse groups, such as the scientific community as a whole. On Bird's view, the scientific community can know, say, how stem cell differentiation works, but not because the members of this group are jointly committed to a theory of stem cell differentiation. Instead, group knowledge of this kind is based on the distribution of information and abilities across the group members. Together, these two articles give a good sense of the wide range of phenomena under investigation in this volume, and they provide an appropriate warning against the assumption that that all of our everyday collective knowledge and belief ascriptions refer to the same underlying structure.

A further three articles focus primarily on normative questions in collective epistemology. Goldman shows how a reliabilist conception of the justification of individual belief can be extended to the beliefs of groups. On this view, a group's belief that *p* is justified, roughly, to the extent that it is formed through a reliable belief aggregation process. Briggs, Cariani, Easwaran, and Fitelson, in one of the most illuminating contributions to the volume, do not offer a full theory of the justification of group belief, but instead focus on norms of coherence and consistency, which act as constraints on justified belief. Arguing that the doctrinal paradox undermines deductive consistency as a norm of rational group belief, Briggs et al. develop and defend a strictly weaker norm of coherence. Wright's article extends a stoic theory of epistemic virtue from individual believers to group believers. On the stoic view, individual epistemic virtue can be understood in terms of the individual's overall epistemic goal (*telos*) of believing well, and her particular goal (*skopos*), associated with each of her beliefs, of believing truly. Since groups are capable of having both of these epistemic goals, we can account for group epistemic virtue in terms of these goals as well.

Looking at these five core articles, a few things stand out. First, two of the articles dealing with the justification of group belief presuppose a picture of the metaphysics of group belief which is in direct conflict with the two accounts developed in the volume. Goldman and Briggs et al. provide accounts of the justification of group belief presupposing, but not arguing, that whether a group believes that *p* is determined by an aggregation function that takes the *p*-related beliefs of the members as input. On both Bird's and Gilbert and Pilchman's accounts, however, a group's belief that *p* does not supervene on the members' individual beliefs with regard to *p*. In fact, on both views, a group could believe that *p* even if none of the members individually

believe that p. In the introduction, Lackey proposes to look at these articles as taking up different sides in a debate between summative and non-summative accounts of collective knowledge. The problem is that these articles do not genuinely engage with one another because they are concerned with a different subject matter. Bird, Gilbert and Pilchman take up questions about the metaphysical structure of group belief and knowledge, paying little attention to the consequences of their views for questions of justification. Goldman and Briggs et al. offer views about the justification of group belief presupposing a controversial picture of what group beliefs are. The sharp division of metaphysical and normative questions is remarkable, and points to a need for further work that considers them in tandem.

Second, it is surprising that the articles don't make greater use of the existing literature on collective intention and action. Lackey's collection is an important and timely contribution to epistemology precisely because the literature on collective belief and knowledge is in an early stage of development. The question of how a group of individuals can intend and act together, on the other hand, has been the focus of systematic debate for several decades, which has resulted in a range of well developed theories. Although Gilbert and Pilchman's arguments are closely related to Gilbert's work on shared intention, there is overall little sustained attempt to draw on insights from the broader collective action literature to inform our account of collective belief and knowledge. This is all the more surprising because the view that intentions are a special kind of belief has some popularity at the moment, and on that view, existing theories of collective intention would *count* as theories of collective belief. Pettit's contribution does provide a general conception of group agency, and an account of the kind of evidence that warrants ascription of agency to groups, but his article does not employ these resources to directly address questions about the nature and justification of group belief.

Of the remaining articles, three take up questions about how the beliefs of groups affect the justification of individual belief. Christensen extends his conciliatory approach to the epistemology of disagreement to the kind of large scale disagreements we find in pluralistic societies. List, in work related to the article by Briggs et al., develops a standard of coherent group belief to determine when we should or shouldn't defer to the majority view of a group. Lackey argues for a reductionist view about group testimony, according to which the testimony provided by a group is reducible to the testimony provided by one or more individuals. These three contributions are especially interesting because they build a bridge between epistemology and political philosophy, an area in which the question of how individuals should respond to the judgments of their fellow citizens looms large. Finally, Sosa offers an account of how the pragmatic can properly encroach on the epistemic by showing how the social role of belief and knowledge co-determines the degree of reliability required for knowledge.

Many of the articles in this volume read as early explorations into largely uncharted territory. The individual contributions take up a wide range of different questions, and show considerable variance in methodology and the use of terminology. As a result, the value of the collection does not lie in presenting the reader with a unified debate about a single well-defined question. Instead, the reader is offered an impressively varied and inspiring set of invitations to further research and reflection. Given the importance of collective epistemic phenomena, one would hope that the philosophical community accepts these invitations.