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Consensus as an epistemic norm for group acceptance

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Our problem

What is the propositional attitude formed by the collective epistemic agents as commissions of inquiry or research teams?

Assuming that groups are “plural agents” (irreducible to individual participants), what are the propositional attitudes involved in epistemic collective agency?

Two positions

- The “ascribers” have defended that groups form **beliefs** (Gilbert, 1989, Tollefsen, 2002)
- The “rejectionists” have claimed that groups form goal-sensitive **acceptances** (Meijers, 1999, Wray, 2002)

Why join the debate?

- Because the crucial arguments in this controversy have not been exhaustively and systematically dealt with.

And

- Because the conditions of collective **epistemic** agency have been up to now only rarely discussed.

Outline

1. Group intentionality: background definitions
2. Four preliminary questions about collective attitudes
3. Group belief and group acceptance are unable to address these questions
4. Consensual acceptance offers an alternative, coherent way of addressing them.
5. Conclusion: when are two heads better than one?



1. Group intentionality: preliminary definitions

Not every **individual** system has intentionality: bacteria, for example, fail to use stable representations of the world to guide their behavior.

Similarly, **groups** may fail to be intentional if they are structurally unable, as groups, to form stable and coherent attitudes across time, or if they do not need collective forms of representation to act jointly.

Example

- Tango dancing, for example, does not require a unique, agent-level epistemic or conative decision center.
- Each dancer relies on **individually computed "coordination smoothers"** to compensate for prediction errors between expected and observed joint behavior. (Vesper et al., 2010).

Group intentionality (GI): definition

GI consists in the ability to

- represent common* collective goals and attitudes,
- preserve, integrate or revise them over time in the light of new attitude contents,
- use them to guide action.

Pettit (2003), pp. 181-2

Gilbert (1997), Pacherie (2011), Tuomela (2007) .

Defining group intentionality (GI)

* “**Common attitudes**”:

Attitudes that are not merely shared, but also known to be shared by the other group members .

This excludes the case of observer-relative, **non-agentive** epistemic groups such as polling data sets.

Defining Group Epistemic Intentionality (GEI)

GEI consists in the ability to

- Form **common epistemic goals**
- Deliberate jointly about goal-conducive **common propositional attitudes**
- **Preserve, integrate or revise** over time these attitudes as a function of the information distributed in the group
- **Plan** future collective actions on their basis.

Example: the W.H.O. committee

Suppose that the World Health Organization (W.H.O.) aims to predict within one month the chances to see the Ebola Virus under control in Guinea within a year.

In order to perform such a complex, interdisciplinary type of epistemic action, a committee will be assembled with the required joint competences.

Example: the W.H.O. committee

This committee will identify and plan various epistemic steps, such as:

- collecting evidence from the local administration, from health professionals and from anthropologists,
- devising predictive mathematical models,
- considering various scenarios,
- discussing the reliability of the outcome in each of them, and so on.

Epistemic difference in group/individual cognition

- Individuals can feel that their perception is blurred; they can feel that they know, do not know, or vaguely remember something, or that they can solve a problem.
 - They can rely on their epistemic feelings to track the reliability of the outcomes of epistemic actions.
- Groups do not perceive, remember or reason in a first-person way.
 - They cannot entertain non-conceptual evaluative attitudes about their current cognitive processes.

2. Four preliminary questions about epistemic group attitudes

The selection of the collective attitude of interest depends on 4 central theses being accepted or denied

1. Are group attitudes reducible/irreducible to individual members' attitudes?
2. Is group e-agency dependent of/independent from instrumental agency?
3. Is Clarke's entailment thesis true/false?
4. Should there be a unity of epistemic rationality between individual and collective levels?

Q1 - Are group attitudes reducible/irreducible to individual attitudes?

- The "*Compositional*" or "*Summative thesis*" takes it that group attitudes are reducible to the attitudes of the participants.
- The "*Irreducibility thesis*" claims that collective attitudes cannot be reduced to those of the participants.
 - Either they are claimed to differ in type
 - Or they are claimed to differ in content

Q2 - Is group epistemic agency autonomous with respect to group instrumental agency?

- Some philosophers have claimed that accepting a proposition p as true may in some contexts depend on the role that p has in practical reasoning, thus denying the autonomy of epistemic norms with respect to instrumental norms
(Cohen, 1992, Stalnaker, 1984).
- There are good reasons, however, to resist taking utility as a dimension of epistemic evaluation (Goldman, 2010, Proust, 2013).

Q3. Is Clarke's Entailment thesis true?

Accepting that p entails that one believes that p . (D.S. Clarke, 1994)

Q3 crucially relates to Q2: if accepting as true is allowed **not to** influence global belief, it is because the autonomy thesis is rejected.

Q4: Should there be a *unity of epistemic rationality* between levels?

= Should the epistemic states of each individual participant be consistent with the epistemic states of the group to which they actively belong?

Is there a rational way of resolving the likely conflicts in terms of the attitudes respectively involved at each level?

3. How do existing proposals address these questions?

A - Belief as a collective attitude



Q1: Irreducibility

According to Margaret Gilbert (2013), groups and members *have the same attitude type* available to them: they can form beliefs.

Collective belief *contents, however, are not reducible to members' belief contents*

Collective beliefs do not need to satisfy a distribution condition: A group may have a belief that no individual participant has.

Tollefsen, 2015



Belief as a collective attitude

Arguments:

1. Metaphysical: The condition for a group belief to be present is that the group members "are jointly committed to believe that p as a body".
2. Common parlance: the concept of belief is standardly extended to collectives.
3. Individual and collective beliefs are sufficiently analogous to recognize them as belonging to the same type of attitude in spite of having their own specific features.

This response to Q1 entails disunity of rationality (Q4)

- Gilbert insists that individuals are **not** invited to try to believe what the group believes. What they should rather try to do is collectively *emulate a single body that believes that p*.
- But how should this emulation proceed?
 - A self-intimation such as "be committed to believe!", Gilbert recognizes, is inconsistent.
 - Believing as a group seems incompatible with the absence of noetic feelings of graded certainty at the group level.

Q3: denial of autonomy

- The normative difference between the collective and the individual case boils down to a **social coercive rule** concerning the **expression** of collective belief:
- "Present group intentions, preferences, decisions and beliefs *as if* they were those of an individual agent!" (Gilbert, 2009, p. 160)

→ Epistemic autonomy is denied to groups

- Individual belief is aiming to the truth unconstrained by any other norm, social or practical.
- Collective beliefs, however, do not enjoy the epistemic autonomy that individual beliefs have, because practical reasons may influence the collective epistemic decision to emulate belief-as-a-body

B - Acceptance as a collective attitude (Meijers, 2002, Wray, 2001)



- Alternative view: a group needs to have a consistent set of premises available to make plans.
- It should, then, have a policy whose function is to maintain consistency in its premises and goals and stability over time.
- Collective acceptance has this function



Acceptance as a collective attitude

- The policy would stipulate that:
 - once P is found true by the group's own accepted set of methods of epistemic evaluation
 - the group (and its participants) should take P as a premise in further collective reasoning about how to act.
- But the participants are individually able to believe what seems right to them.

Acceptance as a collective attitude

Q1: Irreducibility in type and content.

1. Metaphysical argument: "Plural subjects are constituted by their [collective] goals".

- Pursuing goals determines whether a plural agent comes into existence or disappears.
- Temporary absence of goals does not threaten survival of individual agents.

2. Argument from commitment: Collective goals constitutively create common commitments for defending what the group accepts "as a whole" and for acting on it. Meijers (2003), p. 369.

Epistemic Autonomy rejected (Q2)

- Only individual thinking can be epistemically autonomous
- Collective acceptances compromise between epistemic and instrumental rationality: G accepts p if G decides, *for pragmatic reasons*, to treat p as if it were true, or close to true.

Rejecting Clarke's entailment thesis (Q3)

- Collective acceptance may vary across contexts without influencing individual belief, because
 - Acceptance aims at truth-cum-utility
 - Belief exclusively aims at truth.

Disunity of rationality (Q4)

- The ascribers take a cross-level disunity of rationality to be an inevitable consequence of the social coerciveness of group-thinking.
- The **rejectionists** take it to result from the duality of rational norms, that are exercised differently at the group level and at the individual level.

Disunity of rationality (Q4)

- No **epistemic** reasons are on offer to explain and justify why an individual participant should form *unrelated* epistemic attitudes when the group is meeting and when it is not.
- The rejection of the entailment thesis is an effort to restore coherence in the position, but it has **no independent** justification.

In summary

Extending beliefs to collectives or introducing a form of pragmatic group acceptance

- jeopardize the autonomy of epistemic group decision relative to instrumental reasons
- Makes the disunity of rationality across levels an architectural feature of GEI
- In addition "accepters" have to reject Clarke's entailment with no epistemic justification

4 - Our proposal: Consensual
acceptance as the only collective
attitude

Rationale

- A plural subject cannot automatically form beliefs, first-order desires, or similar passively acquired attitudes, for lack of a direct functional connection to the world (such as perceptual evidence).
- A plural subject has an **indirect connection** to the world: a disposition to extract shared information by collecting genuine consensus* about propositions worth deliberating about.

In its normative dimension, Consensus is factive

- **Genuine consensus:** consensus based on distributed information.
- The process used to let consensus emerge may vary as a function of group size and composition (weighted majority, unanimous decision, etc.).
- Any form of decision failing to extract distributed information is not genuinely consensual.

Consensual acceptance (CA) in five clauses

Functional analysis of CA

1. Consensually accepting is a collective epistemic action, and hence it is not derivative from individual attitudes **(Q1)**
2. Its goal is to make a joint epistemically rational decision concerning propositions that are not yet evidentially or demonstratively settled **(Q2)**.

Reliability < informational integration

3. Accepting a proposition under consensus presupposes the integration of multiple informational sources and an explicit arbitration between conflicting epistemic decisions. **(Q2)**

Past CAs are part of common ground

4. Once a CA/P is made mutually manifest, it is ipso facto part of the group's common ground for taking further collective actions, such as producing reports and preparing intervention plans.

Individuals' **metabeliefs** $B(CA/P)$ will also ipso facto become common knowledge.

Yet, individual participants do not need to revise their own initial belief about P (**Q4**).

Efficiency

5. Once becoming common ground, CA that P entails a collective commitment to **rely on P in relevant further actions.**

→ No commitment to individually believe that P

→ Group-level **commitment to *act*** in a way that is congruent with CA:

- See the case of conversation: take CA as common ground (automatic) and further converse in a way coherent with it (controlled).

How does CA respond to our four questions?

Q1: irreducibility

Irreducibility results from the fact that, in virtue of their functional structure,

i) **only** groups can form consensual acceptances and

ii) consensual acceptances are **the only genuinely epistemic attitudes** that they can form (although they can form also **seemingly** epistemic attitudes).

Q2: Epistemic Autonomy: similar to the case of individual agents

- It is true that the selection of a given epistemic action is driven by desires and by needs.

However,

- The judgment concerning the correctness of a particular epistemic decision is **not** influenced by the reasons that motivated one to act in this or that epistemic way.
- Morton (2006), Proust (2013).

Q2: Epistemic Autonomy

Similarly collective agents

Form epistemic acceptances based on consensus, which, being factive, is what it is.

To distinguish from what they strategically decide to disclose – an instrumental decision.

Q3 - Clarke's entailment thesis

- Why are individual and collective epistemic agents not always able to form beliefs on the basis of their acceptances?
- Our proposal offers a principled answer.
 - Accepting p under a norm of truth entails believing that p is true.
 - When accepting p as true, a reflective acceptor should also believe that [s/he accepts p as true]

Q3 - Clarke's entailment thesis

- Clarke's entailment, however, fails to extend to other types of acceptance, including Consensual Acceptance.
- When accepting p under a norm N where N is *not* truth, a reflective acceptor should not believe that p
- S/he should only believe that [s/he accepts that p under N], or that [it is true that p conforms to N].

Accepting P as consensual does not entail

- *believing* that P.

But rather:

- **Believing that P is consensually accepted by the group.**

This metarepresentation captures what individual participants reactively think when taking part in collective epistemic actions.

Q3 - Clarke's entailment thesis

→ A semantic ascent bridges the gap between collective consensual acceptances and individual belief systems

- each individual participant will automatically form a metarepresentation – [this proposition has been consensually accepted]
- this metarepresentation offers a defeasible cue about the embedded proposition being probably true.

Q4 - Cross-level unity of rationality

- The normative difference between Consensual Acceptance and individual judgment allows individual agents to rationally allocate their commitment to act.
- For example, participants are justified to exercise their power to exit if it turns out that it is incoherent with their own acceptances to rely on given collective CAs to guide further collective actions.

Consensus tracks truth if

- i) it allows *more extensive and reliable evidence* to be collected, integrated and discussed by different participants than the best informed participant can do (thus increasing knowledge and reducing error)
- ii) it is able to use participants' *own confidence* in their individual opinion in order to proportionate their impact on collective decision (Bahrami et al. 2012).
- iii) Group size and composition are epistemically adequate to the task.



**CONCLUSION: when are two heads
better than one?**

From information factivity to attitude

We have defended a conceptual contrast between

- Consensual acceptance
- Collective acceptance

similar to the contrast between

- Perceiving
- Seeming to perceive

- Consensual acceptance is factive
- Collective acceptance is not
- By virtue of its propositional format, Collective Acceptance does not automatically integrate nonpropositional, experience-based assessments of uncertainty.
→ nor does it need to follow truth-preserving sequencing of epistemic decision-making

A critical meta-attitude needed

- The **good news** is that the structure of CA is such that collective deliberation can be designed to satisfy conditions of satisfaction for CA.
- As experimentally shown, a number of social biases, such as the equality bias or the conformity bias may jeopardize the very possibility of performing CA.



Thanks for your attention!

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