

Socially Extended Knowledge

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Consensus as an epistemic norm for group
acceptance

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Assuming that groups are “plural agents” (irreducible to individual participants), (Gilbert, 1989)

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)

Outline

1. Four premises for discussing epistemic group attitudes.
2. Are group belief and group acceptance respectively compatible with our premises?
3. An alternative type of group acceptance: consensual acceptance
4. Epistemological implications

1. Four premises for discussing epistemic group attitudes

Group intentionality (GI): definition

GI consists in the ability to

- form common 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 .

Defining group epistemic intentionality (GEI)

- GEI consists in the ability to form common truth-responsive and consistent attitudes based on distributed information about target epistemic issues, and to plan future actions on their basis.
- A common commitment to abide by specific epistemic standards is part of conducting collective epistemic actions.

Test case: the W.H.O. expert

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.

Test case: the W.H.O. expert

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.

Test case: the W.H.O. expert

- Suppose that the group concludes that the Ebola virus will be under control in 90% of the target area within a year.
- is the group of experts "committed to Φ that P ", where Φ refers to the collective propositional attitude entertained?

Joint commitment

- Usually taken to be highly characteristic of joint actions.
- In collective epistemic action, it is crucial that participants are committed to playing their own part as best as they can: collect evidence, screen the evidence for its accuracy and exhaustiveness, pursue the epistemic goals they are responsible for, and plan actions on the basis of common attitudes.
- Hence commitment is **constitutive** of collective epistemic actions

Joint commitment

Epistemic collective actions require commitment in at least the following dimensions:

- Monitoring the compatibility of subplans (consistency)
- Offering mutual support when contextually needed
- Monitoring means-end coherence

What about: « Endorsing the collective epistemic decisions»? (More on this later)

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

1. "Entailment thesis"

2. The "compositional thesis"

+ "Hidden" premises?

3. The autonomy of epistemic agency relative to instrumental agency

4. The unity of epistemic rationality

1 - Entailment thesis

Accepting that p is true entails that one believes that p .

Clarke (1994)

2 - Compositional thesis

Group attitudes are/are not reducible to the participants' attitudes. (Denial of this thesis is at the core of the notion of socially extended knowledge).

3 - Autonomy of epistemic/ instrumental agency

- Does epistemic rationality depend or not on the goals of action, in particular, on its stakes?

Yes: Cohen (1992), Stalnaker (1984)

No: Jeffrey (1956), Koriath & Goldsmith (1996), Proust (2013).

3 - Autonomy of epistemic/ instrumental agency

Philosophical and empirical considerations suggest that **confidence level** in one's epistemic states is independent from the decision that is strategically made to maximise the benefits of the corresponding action.

- Because strategic acceptance responds to contextual prudential considerations, it will vary from one context to the next. What fluctuates is the agents' willingness to act, not their epistemic states.
- Acting or not on one's own reliable beliefs will depend on the benefits and costs incurred in particular contexts. Confidence in one's own beliefs, however, remains constant across contexts.

4 - Unity of epistemic rationality

- Should individual participants' epistemic states and decisions be or not be, in principle, consistent with the epistemic states and decisions of the group to which they actively belong?
- It is arguable that individual participants need to have a way of **integrating** their own attitudes and those of the epistemic groups to which they belong.

What is, then, the selection of premises that makes sense for collective **epistemic** agency?

Our identificaton of the target collective attitude(s) should

1. Preserve the "Entailment thesis"
2. Deny the "compositional thesis"
3. Defend the autonomy of epistemic agency relative to instrumental agency.
4. Defend the unity of epistemic rationality across levels

Collective beliefs and acceptances
do not satisfy our four premises.

Belief as a collective attitude

[Intentionality depends on beliefs, because only beliefs are holistic. (Tollefsen, 2002)]

- Entailment thesis and autonomy thesis are preserved.
- Unity of rationality across levels is not preserved
- Example from our W.H.O. test case

Belief as a collective attitude

Once the group has deliberated about its conclusions, part of the W.H.O. experts might still believe (and not help believing) that key indicators are missing from the study, which, from their viewpoint, should affect the reliability of the common decision.

Belief as a collective attitude

- This is consistent with the objection against the ascribers:

Endorsement of epistemic group outcomes is not applicable to beliefs.

- As emphasized by Bernard Williams (1973), beliefs cannot be controlled. One cannot wish to acquire a given belief: beliefs are non-agentive attitudes, whether at the individual or at the collective level.

Acceptance as a collective attitude

- 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.
- 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

- Pros: emphasis on epistemic agency
- a non-reductionist theory, which clearly contrasts collective and individual epistemic agency, a plausible claim with respect to premise 2.
- The principle of rational unity may seem to be safeguarded; believing that P and accepting that not P are consistent, but at the cost of denying the entailment thesis.

Acceptance as a collective attitude

- Cons: denying the entailment thesis is a very high price to pay
- a conflation of epistemic and instrumental norms must be made in order to deactivate the entailment thesis
- As a consequence, the thesis of the autonomy of epistemic agency from instrumental agency is rejected.

**OUR PROPOSAL: ACCEPTING P AS
CONSENSUAL**

Extending the range of acceptance

- Entailment thesis: accepting P as true entails believing P.
- Accepting P as consensual does not entail *believing* that P.
- What it entails, rather, is:
 - Believing that P is consensually accepted by the group.
 - This metarepresentation captures what individual participants reactively think when taking part in collective epistemic actions.

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.

- **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.).

Accepting under
consensus in five steps

Functional analysis of AUC

1. Consensually accepting is a collective epistemic action, and hence it is not derivative from individual attitudes (in agreement with premise 2)
2. Its goal is to make a joint epistemically rational decision concerning propositions that are not yet evidentially or demonstratively settled (in agreement with premise 3).

Reliability < informational integration

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

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.

- See Bahrami et al. (2010, 2012) and Lehrer & Wagner (1981).
- Decision performance does not increase linearly with group size, probably through a decrease of members' efforts ("social loafing") and a higher homogeneity in their cognitive characteristics. See Sorkin et al. (2001) pp. 201.

Past AUCs are part of common ground

4. Once an AUC/ 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 $B(\text{AUC}/P)$ will also ipso facto become common knowledge. Yet, individual participants do not need to revise their own initial belief about P (in agreement with premises 1 and 4).

Efficiency

5. Once becoming common ground, AUC 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 AUC:

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

Back to W.H.O.

- Once the W.H.O. group has consensually determined the current relevant facts about Ebola virus in a given area of Guinea, and adopted a policy for future intervention, both the group and its participants are committed to taking the steps that were collectively decided and performing the tasks as distributed.

Back to W.H.O.

- Commitment is about acting or planning to act (including forming strategic acceptances), not about forming any belief whatsoever.
- Metarepresenting AUCs is automatic, and belief-based, not something members are committed doing.

How then, is rational unity secured?

- The normative difference between collective consensus 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 AUCs to guide further collective actions.

Epistemological implications

Cognitive integration: extended?

- Individuals may have perceptions, memories, emotions, beliefs and dispositions to act that are interconnected in all sorts of ways.
- Groups only deliberate about the questions that are brought to them for adjudication.
- They cannot form consensual acceptances about all the propositions that might be relevant to their main epistemic target.

- The participants' beliefs form the background of current decision-making
- but individual beliefs are not part of the group's own character.

Cognitive character at the group level?

Cognitive character might be identified with a group's integrated dispositions for acquiring, combining and evaluating information, and guiding

Cognitive character at the group level?

Cognitive character might be identified with a group's integrated dispositions for acquiring, combining information, deliberating, extracting consensus, and relying on its own former AUCs to promote new actions

Cognitive character at the group level?

The relevant “integrated dispositions” consist exclusively in analytic rules and protocols for (e.g.):

- recruiting “genuine” experts,
- using predictive models
- selecting proper arbitration processes
- detecting decision biases and spurious forms of consensual decision-making.

AUCs as metarepresented

- The meta-beliefs of AUCs that participants are forming constitute incentives for them to reconsider (revise, maintain or suspend) their own individual convictions in the light of group decisions. (Lehrer, 1985)
- Meta-beliefs are a way of integrating individual and collective forms of epistemic agency.