

Access to Collective Epistemic Reasons: Reply to Mitova

Abstract: In this short paper, I critically examine Veli Mitova’s proposal that social-identity groups can have collective epistemic reasons. My primary focus is the role of privileged access in her account of how collective reasons become *epistemic* reasons for social-identity groups. I argue that there is a potentially worrying structural asymmetry in her account of two different types of cases. More specifically, the mechanisms at play in cases of “doxastic reasons” seem fundamentally different from those at play in cases of “epistemic-conduct reasons”. The upshot is a need for further explanation of what unifies these dimensions of the account.

1) Introduction

Veli Mitova argues that social-identity groups can have collective epistemic reasons. Related discussions of the normativity of groups have tended to focus on either collective *practical* reasons or the *justified beliefs* of groups—and in neither case on *social-identity* groups. So, Mitova’s thesis is novel in at least three respects: it concerns *epistemic* as opposed to practical reasons; it concerns epistemic *reasons* as opposed to justified belief (her notion of “epistemic reasons” is more expansive than reasons for belief); and it concerns a far less structured or organized sort of group than, say, a company or a university. Her focus is on social-identity groups, membership in which does not hinge on one’s intentions or desires to be in that group. A striking and important upshot of Mitova’s thesis is that one can find oneself with reasons to engage in significant forms of intellectual conduct, simply in virtue of one’s membership in a group—a kind of membership that lies outside of one’s voluntary control.

Mitova’s main strategy is to independently motivate necessary and sufficient conditions on collective epistemic reasons, and then show that social-identity groups can, at least sometimes, meet those conditions. I am sympathetic with a lot of her argument, and I agree that it has important upshots for debates about collective responsibility, group justified belief, and epistemic injustice. I find especially interesting the claim that individuals can be blameworthy

for implicit biases when those biases manifest epistemic conduct that goes against the collective epistemic reasons of their social-identity group. In this short reply, I will restrict my attention to a couple of places where I think more detail is needed. In my view, Mitova has further theoretical work to do in clarifying the role of “privileged access” in collective epistemic reasons. I will argue that the mechanism by which collective reasons become *epistemic* in the case of collective “epistemic-conduct reasons” needs further unpacking. I consider some ways of doing so, and close with two observations about the connection between the account’s approach to collective doxastic reasons and collective epistemic-conduct reasons.

2) The View

Mitova’s focus is a species of *normative* reasons: “A (pro tanto) normative reason for ϕ -ing is a consideration that favours ϕ -ing” (Mitova 2022, 8). She further distinguishes two kinds of epistemic normative reasons, “doxastic” and “epistemic-conduct reasons”:

Doxastic reasons: reasons to believe, disbelieve, or suspend judgement about a proposition.

Epistemic-conduct reasons: reasons for epistemic conduct, such as to adhere to epistemic norms, gather more evidence, investigate further into a topic, or cultivate epistemic virtues and quash one’s vices (9).

Mitova is well aware that “epistemic-conduct reasons” presuppose a broader conception of the epistemic domain than a more traditional view, according to which the epistemic domain encompasses only doxastic reasons. On the traditional view, so-called “epistemic reasons to inquire” or “epistemic reasons to cultivate epistemic virtues” are really just practical or moral reasons in disguise (Feldman and Connee 1985; Feldman 2004; Kelly 2003; Thorstad 2022). Other recent work identifies “epistemic-conduct reasons” as a unique kind of “zetetic” reason (cf. Friedman 2020). According to Mitova, if you prefer either of these alternative approaches to epistemic-conduct reasons, the thrust of her argument still has important implications. I will return to this in Section 3.

Here are Mitova’s necessary and sufficient conditions for collective epistemic normative reasons:

CERG: R is a *pro tanto* collective epistemic normative reason for group G to ϕ iff:

- (1) R is a consideration that epistemically counts in favour of G's ϕ -ing;
- (2) ϕ -ing is either believing a proposition or undertaking epistemic actions such as inquiring, etc; and
- (3) the favouring relation obtains partly in virtue of a group G's being a group of the kind it is.

(Mitova 2022, 10)

With these conditions, Mitova aims to capture what it is for a reason to be a genuinely *epistemic* and *collective* reason for a group. I want to focus on condition 3), which is needed because 1) and 2) alone might well classify as “collective epistemic reasons” reasons that some very loosely or temporarily clumped-together group of people simply *happen* to have—one that does not seem in any important sense collective. A group of people watching a hockey game might have a reason to believe they are watching a hockey game. Even if we can make sense of the idea that this *group* has a reason, surely the group does not have that reason in virtue of being a *group*, let alone some distinctive kind of group. Mitova is interested in epistemic reasons that a group G can have in virtue of being that group. As Mitova puts it, 3) is what gives R its “groupiness” (10).^{1 2}

The “in virtue of” relation in 3) requires careful handling. What does it mean to say that a group G has collective normative reason R in virtue of being that group? One thing that should be true

¹ The term is attributed to Grace Patterson.

² What's the point of condition 1) over and above condition 2)? 1) is important to spell out explicitly, because starting with condition 2) alone would end up misclassifying some practical reasons as epistemic reasons. Some practical reasons count in favour of being in an *epistemic state*, such as believing p, or undertaking inquiry. Perhaps the fact I am your good friend is practical reason to believe that I am telling the truth. 1) specifies that the favouring relation at issue must itself be epistemic. That is to say, if R is a collective epistemic reason, it must *epistemically* count in favour of G's ϕ -ing. According to Mitova, a reason R epistemically counts in favour of ϕ -ing just in case “doing the favoured thing (believing or undertaking epistemic actions) promotes epistemic goals such as truth, knowledge, etc.” (Mitova 2022, 10).

is that the group has the reason because of certain *distinctive features* of the group, or in other words, because it is a group of *that kind*. Mitova focuses on the social or political role that the group plays in relation to other groups. We might think that a government has a collective reason to keep its citizens safe because it is a *government*, i.e. because of the role it plays in relation to its citizens. How do we transpose this idea into the epistemic domain? According to Mitova:

One natural way of transposing this idea to the epistemic realm is to think that the relevant group, as a group, has special epistemic reasons in virtue of the kind of role it plays because this role gives it privileged access to some evidence to which other groups don't have access (Mitova 2022, 11).

The idea is that a group can have privileged access to epistemic reasons because of the role it plays in relation to other groups. Perhaps the group *Volkswagen* has collective epistemic reasons favouring beliefs about the eco-friendliness of its vehicles, at least partly because:

the role that this group plays in relation to other groups (e.g. consumers) gives them privileged access to these reasons.

According to Mitova, this is what it means to say that Volkswagen has these *epistemic* reasons, in part, in virtue of being the group Volkswagen. It might seem unclear what Mitova means by “privileged access”. For example, a canonical way of cashing out the idea of privileged access is in terms of notions like transparency and infallibility—say, as properties of beliefs about our own phenomenally conscious mental states. It is implausible to attribute something like transparency or infallibility to Volkswagen's collective beliefs about the eco-friendliness of its vehicles. However, it seems to me that, at least in the context of her discussion of collective *doxastic* reasons, Mitova uses this term in a related but somewhat looser way. I take Mitova's “privileged access” to denote something like a *uniquely strong* epistemic position, as opposed to the more stringent properties of transparency or infallibility. Even if not identical with more canonical uses, this usage of “privileged access” bears a recognizable connection to them. I will return to some further issues around privileged access, even understood in this broader way, shortly.

There is a second dimension to the groupiness of collective epistemic normative reasons, one that Mitova identifies as the most important of all: R obtains for G because G is a *group*. To put the point succinctly, it must be the case that no individual member of G is capable of promoting the end that R favours, *on their own*. Mitova summarizes these dimensions of CERG(3) as follows:

CERG(3) the favouring relation obtains partly in virtue of G's being a group of the kind it is, i.e., it obtains because:

CERG(3)^{ROLE} the group plays a particular role in relation to other groups, giving it privileged access to reasons for ϕ -ing, and

CERG(3)^{TEAM} the aim of ϕ -ing can be attained by G but cannot be attained by individuals alone (in their capacity as individuals)

(Mitova 2022, 11)

These should not be taken as necessary or sufficient conditions on the groupiness of a reason (even though CERG(3) is). Rather, they are intended as plausible indicators that a reason is collective (11). This will be important in Section 3.

3) Access and Epistemic Positions

Can *social-identity groups* meet the conditions of CERG? Mitova approaches this part of the project, first, by showing how social-identity groups can meet the conditions of CERG for doxastic reasons, and then, second, how they can do so for epistemic-conduct reasons. One of my main questions arises at this latter point, and in particular when it comes to the idea that social-identity groups instantiate the privileged access dimension of CERG(3)^{ROLE} for epistemic-conduct reasons.

Before explaining what I have in mind, I want to emphasize that, as just noted, Mitova does not intend CERG(3)^{ROLE} as a necessary condition on the groupiness of a reason. So even if I can successfully show that no social-identity group meets it (which I do not intend to show), this would not amount to an objection to Mitova's account. Rather, it would amount to a request for further information. If this "plausible indicator" of the groupiness of a reason is not applicable in

the case of social-identity group G, then what *is* it in virtue of which G has a collective epistemic reason to ϕ ? This latter sort of question is what I aim to make pressing in what follows.

Again, regarding CERG(3)^{ROLE}, the claim is that one collective dimension of the “in virtue of” relation specified by CERG (3) is that the social-identity group in question has R because of the role that this group plays in relation to other groups. To transpose this to the epistemic domain, Mitova’s claim is that the social-identity group has privileged access to R because of the role it plays in relation to other groups. To make the case here for social-identity groups, Mitova focuses on the group *Black people*. According to Mitova, this group has collective epistemic reasons favouring beliefs about the invisibility of white privilege because:

the role that this group plays in relation to other groups (e.g. white people) gives them privileged access to these reasons.

Drawing on the work of Kristie Dotson (2011), W.E.B. du Bois (1903), Miranda Fricker (2007), Gaile Pohlhaus (2012) and many others, Mitova observes that the role of Black people in relation to white people—a relation characterized by oppression, vulnerability, and a corresponding need to “attend to what the powerful are likely to notice and expect” (Polhaus 2012, 717, 721)—has given rise to *double consciousness* (du Bois 1903). Double consciousness, roughly put, is a kind of survival strategy of the oppressed, essentially incorporating two sets of epistemic resources: those of one’s own group, and those of the powerful. Contrast this with the epistemic position of the powerful, who typically only need their own epistemic resources to get around in the world, ignoring those of the oppressed, and indeed thereby enforcing dominance by excluding the epistemic resources of the oppressed from mainstream epistemic practices. This is a stark illustration of how a group’s role in relation to other groups can put them in a special *epistemic* position. As Mitova puts it:

The fact of double consciousness and the unique access that black people have to it is privileged evidence of white normativity, of the invisibility of white privilege, and of the ways in which ignoring race is likely to reinforce such normativity (Mitova 2022, 13).

The group *Black people* have a corresponding set of epistemic reasons *in virtue of* being this particular group, in the sense that the role they play in relation to white people gives them privileged access to those reasons.

Privileged access is helpful in explaining how a social-identity group can have collective *doxastic* reasons, in virtue of being that group. The example of double consciousness as a source of privileged access to evidence of the invisibility of white privilege is an effective one. But I am less clear about the role that privileged access is meant to play in collective epistemic-conduct reasons. Mitova's leading example of a group that has collective epistemic-conduct reasons is *white people*. According to Mitova, the group *white people* has an epistemic reason to shed its willful hermeneutical ignorance (among other things), in virtue of being the particular group that it is.

Notice that, if this is true, it is *not* because:

the role that white people play in relation to other groups (such as Black people) gives the group *privileged access* to the fact of its willful hermeneutical ignorance.

Indeed, something close to the opposite would seem to be the case. White people would seem to be especially prone to ignorance about their own willful hermeneutical ignorance. Presumably that is why, if anything, the group has an epistemic-*conduct* reason as opposed to a doxastic one. But so far, the only story we have been given about how to transpose, into the epistemic domain, the claim that we can understand the groupiness of a collective reason in terms of its obtaining because of the role group G plays in relation to other groups, is the idea that this role gives G privileged access to the relevant reason. That story seems unavailable in this case.

It seems, then, that Mitova has a couple of options. First, she might argue that I am mistaken in my claim that the role(s) the group *white people* plays in relation to other groups does not give it privileged access to its own white ignorance. Or, she might argue that privileged access—even in

the broader sense we've been working with—is not essential for transposing things into the epistemic domain. I suspect that Mitova would go the latter route.³

Perhaps CERG(3)^{ROLE} does not require privileged access, but rather can be satisfied by a group's having something we might call an “exclusive epistemic position”, one that obtains in virtue of the group's social role. The key difference between privileged access and an exclusive epistemic position, as I understand these terms, can be framed in terms of the type—or quality—of epistemic position these things entail. Privileged access entails some kind of especially strong or good epistemic position. Exclusive epistemic positions simply entail that there is something unique about the group's epistemic position, regardless of whether it is good or bad. Returning to the example of white people, the idea would be, then, the role that this group plays in relation to other groups puts them in an exclusive epistemic position which itself generates (or is partly constituted by) epistemic reasons for the group. So, as a group that is willfully hermeneutically ignorant about the invisibility of white privilege, white people are in an exclusive epistemic position: one characterized by a *lack* of certain epistemic goods, such as knowledge of their hermeneutical ignorance about the invisibility of white privilege. This is a distinctive source of epistemic reasons for white people, namely to conduct inquiry and cultivate virtues that will irradicate white people's willful hermeneutical ignorance about the invisibility of white privilege.

We might worry about whether this is a trivial account of the collective epistemic reasons of white people. Elsewhere in her paper, Mitova points out that we cannot rest content with spelling out the “groupiness” of an epistemic reason in terms of the idea that the reason would not exist without that group. This seems exactly right. Pointing this out amounts to the truism that a normative reason is always a reason *for* someone. The trouble is, one might argue that this new way of transposing factors surrounding white people's social role into the epistemic domain amounts to something worryingly similar.

³ Indeed, Mitova said as much in personal communication. The following is an invitation for her to say more about a brief sketch of some ideas she offered in personal communication.

Fortunately, there is more we can do. For example, Mitova helpfully highlights a number of specifically *epistemic* details about the social and political role of white people. She argues that this social role is constitutively connected with a great deal of damage to the epistemic environment. The argument is dense, and in places points to work Mitova has done elsewhere, but I am prepared to grant what she says for present purposes. The main focus is how white ignorance

creates and widens what Miranda Fricker (2007) calls ‘hermeneutical lacunas’—gaps in our collective resources for understanding our experiences and the world. I have argued elsewhere (Mitova MS) that such gaps create *epistemically* risky environments, environments which deprive agents of *epistemic* reasons and hence knowledge, and lead to the proliferation of *epistemic* vice, such as the vices of the privileged (Medina 2013) (Mitova 2022, 14).

According to Mitova, it is in virtue of having done this sort of damage to the epistemic environment that the role of white people, in relation to other groups, gives white people a reason to inquire and cultivate virtues that will reduce and ideally irradicate that damage. Perhaps there are non-trivial materials for an account of the collective epistemic reasons of white people here, an account that trades on substantive claims about the social role of white people causing damage to the epistemic environment. The idea is that white people obtain an epistemic reason, not *simply* in virtue of occupying the epistemic position they do, but rather because their social role is constitutively connected to a kind of damage being done to the epistemic environment.

As far as I can tell, this is Mitova’s considered position on collective epistemic-conduct reasons. One thing to note, then, regardless of whether it is plausible, is that we seem to have arrived at a deeply bifurcated view about the collective epistemic reasons of social identity groups. Of course, in a sense this is unsurprising. After all, Mitova is working with a bifurcated picture of epistemic reasons. But that bifurcation snowballs. The two stories about how CERG(3)^{ROLE} can be met by doxastic and epistemic-conduct reasons, respectively, are themselves fundamentally different stories about how facts about a group’s social role *translate to the epistemic domain*, thus generating epistemic reasons. This is a kind of bifurcation that occurs at a deeply

explanatory level of the account. I will close with a couple of observations about this feature of the account.

First, defenders of the traditional view of epistemic reasons, or defenders of the zetetic view, may want to step in and argue that Mitova's account—at least this part of it—is not really about collective *epistemic* reasons, but rather practical or zetetic reasons in disguise. Since Mitova has already granted this possibility and maintains that her argument contains important insights regardless, this likely isn't a very promising dialectical route. To my mind, a more substantive feature of the account, meriting further attention, is the following. Notice that the collective epistemic-conduct reasons of white people seem to be reasons white people are *blameworthy* for not appreciating, other things being equal. They correspond to certain *obligations* that white people have, and which, barring an excuse or some other exculpatory factor, white people are blameworthy or criticizable for not appreciating. The same does not seem to apply for Mitova's central example of collective doxastic reasons. It does not seem plausible to suggest that the group *Black people* would be blameworthy for failing to appreciate the collective doxastic reasons the group has to believe that white privilege is invisible. Of course, it seems like a desirable state of affairs that the group appreciates these reasons. But the group hardly seems blameworthy to whatever extent it does not. Perhaps this is because these reasons correspond to certain (epistemic) *permissions* as opposed to obligations.

One immediate upshot of this observation is that a core theoretical advantage Mitova advertises of her account—namely, its ability to illuminate blameworthiness for implicit biases—is only a theoretical advantage of half the account. It's an advantage of the part about epistemic-conduct reasons. Indeed, until we have an example of a group being blameworthy for failing to appreciate its collective doxastic reasons, it's perhaps unclear how collective doxastic reasons can help illuminate blameworthy cognitive conduct of any kind (since the story involves explaining how blameworthiness at the group level transfers to the individual). To be sure, we need not think of this as a limitation or defect of the account, per se. But we might wonder whether it generates some pressure to further motivate the account as a whole.

In my view, we need an explanation of why the collective epistemic reasons Mitova endorses have such a fundamentally different structure. Without it, we are left to wonder whether the two parts of the account are really about fundamentally different things (and not necessarily in the sense of “epistemic vs. practical”). Put differently: we need some independent motivation for the idea that both privileged access *and* exclusivity of epistemic position can function as ways of generating collective epistemic reasons—motivation beyond the fact that saying so allows us to capture quite different-seeming sorts of cases. An explanation of what unifies the framework at this level may provide such independent motivation.

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