

## Would We Lie To You?

Jennifer Lackey, *The Epistemology of Groups*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2021. 224 pp,  
\$70 Hardcover.

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While the quintessential epistemological subject has traditionally been the *individual* agent, some of those working in social epistemology have made the case that the domain of epistemology should include *groups*, as well. While the topic that has received the most attention is group belief (see e.g., Gilbert (1987; 1989), Tuomela (1992), List and Pettit (2011)), there has also been a good amount of work done on group knowledge (e.g., Goldman (2004), Hakli (2007), Bird (2010; 2014)), and group justification (e.g., Schmitt (1994), Silva (2019), Dunn (2019)), along with some less-commonly addressed questions, including group inquiry (Habgood-Coote (2020)) and group understanding (Boyd (2019)). One of the most prolific and original contributors to these discussions is Jennifer Lackey, whose book *The Epistemology of Groups* collects and builds upon her previously published work in group epistemology to provide a host of new and compelling views that will doubtless be a catalyst for many fruitful discussions in social epistemology.

While theories in group epistemology vary significantly, many can be categorized as either *deflationary* views (also sometimes referred to as *summativist* views, in which the state of

a group is determined entirely by the states of its members), or *inflationary* views (sometimes referred to as *non-summativist* views, in which the state of a group may be distinct from that of its members). There is debate about whether this is the best way to carve up the logical space, as well as the best way to define each part of that space; regardless, one can generally approach a group as either something that really is nothing more than the members that comprise it, or else as something that needs to be conceived of as a distinct epistemic agent. Lackey's approach to the epistemology of groups is unique in at least two ways. First, her theories of group states – belief, justified belief, and knowledge, each receiving its own dedicated chapter – incorporate aspects of both deflationary and inflationary views. Second, Lackey dedicates a good amount of space to the phenomenon of group *lies*. Lying serves both as a motivation for pursuing a theory of group belief (e.g., it seems that groups are able to lie, and in order to lie one needs to be able to believe) as well as a constraint on theories of group doxastic and epistemic states (e.g., it is a detriment if a theory of group states cannot account for how a group lies).

Chapter 1 addresses group belief, and takes aim at popular versions of both deflationary and inflationary views: specifically, Lackey argues that neither type of view has sufficiently considered the phenomena of group lying or group bullshitting. Lackey's own theory draws from both camps:

*Group Agent Account:* A group, G, believes that p if and only if: (1) there is a significant percentage of G's operative members [i.e., those members who have decision-making authority, relative to a certain domain] who believe that p, and (2) are such that adding together the bases of their beliefs that p yields a belief set that is not substantively incoherent. (49-50)

While Lackey considers and responds to numerous potential objections, this is not to say that her view is without its potentially counterintuitive consequences. Lackey relies on numerous carefully constructed cases throughout the book to motivate her positions, and while I often shared the intuition that I was meant to, I didn't always. For example, one counterintuitive consequence of the *group agent account* is that groups will end up believing things that are completely irrelevant to the aims of the group, e.g., if it just so happens that a significant percentage of the operative members of a group believe that, say, the Maple Leafs will win the Stanley Cup this year, then the group believes it, even if there is nothing about the group that has anything to do with hockey. Lackey does indeed consider this objection, but accepts that sometimes groups do, in fact, possess such irrelevant or unimportant beliefs.

Others might be a bit more wary. Consider a different case: all of the members of the Maple Leafs believe that a certain political candidate is the best choice for office, although they've never discussed it internally, and the organization conceives of itself as apolitical. Nevertheless, according to the *group agent account*, the Maple Leafs will have a belief about who is best suited for office. Consider now a case in which the president of the organization is asked which political party the Maple Leafs support. In response, he confidently asserts that, "We are not in the business of politics, and have no stance on the issue." It would be odd, I think, to say that the president is saying something false, or perhaps even lying in this case, although this seems to be a potential consequence of accepting the *group agent account*. While no view will satisfy the intuitions of every reader, in this case, though, inflationary views in which groups have "minds of their own" pull my intuitions in a different direction.

Chapter 2 builds on the theory of group belief to develop a theory of *group justification*. Lackey is again meticulous in dismantling existing deflationary and inflationary views of group

justification, and again her own view draws from elements of each. The result is her *group epistemic agent account* of group justification, which requires that a significant percentage of a group's operative members are justified in a way that is coherent, but also that relevant evidence for a proposition would survive rational deliberation among all of the group's members.

Chapter 3 is concerned with *group knowledge*, although instead of developing a positive theory, Lackey instead focuses on rejecting existing views of group knowledge in order to deflect potential objections to her theories of group belief and justification. Here Lackey takes specific aim at inflationary proposals that state that there can be social or collective knowledge that can be possessed at the societal level despite not being possessed by any of its members (especially those developed in Bird (2010, 2014)). One of Lackey's main objections is that such views run afoul of the *knowledge-action principle*, i.e., if an agent knows that  $p$ , then said agent is rational in treating  $p$  as a reason for action. A purely inflationary view of group knowledge thus has the counterintuitive consequence that a community would be rational to act on the basis of a view that no individual even believes, let alone knows.

Again, one may be more or less sympathetic towards these conclusions depending on where one's intuitions lie. I think there are two points where one's intuitions might diverge: one might disagree that a group is, in fact, irrational to act on the basis of knowledge that none of its members possesses individually (although Lackey also considers other moral and legal ramifications of taking this approach); or, one might disagree that the principles that govern the relationship between knowledge and action at the individual level holds, or holds in the same way, at the group level. The latter possibility is, I think, fertile ground for potential future discussions. While there has been some work done already on the theoretical underpinnings of the relationship between individual-level states and group-level states (e.g., Gibert and Pilchman,

2014), there has not, to my knowledge, been a dedicated discussion of how principles like the knowledge-action principle should be conceived of at the group level.

While the first three chapters are concerned with group states, the last two chapters concern group actions: *group assertion* in chapter 4, and *group lies* in chapter 5. While Lackey's theories of group states shared features of both deflationary and inflationary views, she is much more sympathetic towards inflationary views when it comes to group actions. One of her primary reasons is that groups can appoint *spokespersons* who can assert, lie, and bullshit on behalf of the group. We thus get cases in which it seems a group asserts something because its appointed spokesperson asserts it on the group's behalf, despite none of the members of the group asserting it, or even believing what is asserted.

The final chapter fulfils a promise set out in chapter 1 by providing a full account of group lies. The first half of the chapter is dedicated to developing a conception of individual lies, which Lackey then applies to groups to develop the following view:

G-LIE: A group, G, lies to B if and only if (1) G states that *p* to B, (2) G believes that *p* is false, and (3) G intends to be deceptive to B with respect to whether *p* in stating that *p*.

(186)

This view is again inflationary in the sense that it considers the *group* as the entity that is lying, and not merely the individuals that comprise it. While G-LIE does indeed seem to nicely capture the phenomenon of group lies, one area of potential worry is how to reconcile the deflationary and inflationary aspects of each of the components of the view. For instance, Lackey will likely understand (1) in an inflationary sense, while (2) will incorporate both inflationary and deflationary components. Lackey does not provide a theory of group intention, and thus such a view could fall into potentially any category. We are then left with a view in which various

combinations of spokespersons, operative members, and members of the group in general are potentially responsible for different aspects of what the group believes, does, and intends, which may prove difficult to untangle when determining when, exactly, a group is lying.

Here I have barely scratched the surface of the arguments that Lackey develops throughout, all of which are original, thought-provoking, and multifaceted. For those interested in social or group epistemology, the book is essential reading, and will likely be a touchstone for many discussions from this point forward.

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