The Epistemology of Groups.

By Jennifer Lackey.

(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021). x-200. ISBN: 9780199656608. Hbk €66,99.

Simon Graf (*University of Leeds, UK*)

On 22 April 2010, two days after an explosion occurred at the British Petroleum-owned *Deepwater Horizon drilling rig* in the Gulf of Mexico, a massive oil leak was discovered. Lasting for more than five months, and expelling almost five million barrels of oil into the sea, it turned into the largest oil spill in history to the present day. Fuelled by anger about the devastating effects this spill had on the marine environment throughout the entire Gulf of Mexico, and the following disastrous crisis management of BP, a fundamental question emerged: who (if anybody) is responsible for the harms caused?

When thinking about collective responsibility, we face a dilemma: on the one hand, we want to hold individuals, such as the responsible—or representative members accountable; on the other hand, we want to blame the entire corporation, as an independent entity over and above its composite parts. Such questions are taken up by Jennifer Lackey in her short but rich monograph. She points out that the two described ways of approaching collective responsibility are linked to the central divide between *deflationist* and *inflationist* approaches to social philosophy. While deflationists understand collective attitudes as being entirely grasped by analysing "individual members and their states", inflationists hold that "group phenomena are importantly over and above, or otherwise distinct from, individual members and their states" (3). Amidst several thought-provoking and insightful philosophical ideas introduced and discussed by Lackey, there is one that stretches throughout the entire book: the will to overcome this traditional division between inflationism and deflationism.

As such, the book can be understood as having two interrelated projects, one being negative and the second being positive. The

critical project is an extensive critical analysis of both inflationary/non-summativist, as well as deflationary/summativist approaches to socio-epistemological phenomena. In five chapters, each devoted to one phenomenon, Lackey discusses group belief (chapter 1), group justified belief (chapter 2), group knowledge (chapter 3), group assertions (chapter 4), and group lies (chapter 5). In each chapter, Lackey gives intuitive, case-driven insights into the flaws and shortcomings of well-known accounts of the respective phenomena. These critiques are usually the strongest parts of the book leaving the reader convinced that the discussed approaches are defective or at least incomplete. The reconstructive project, on the other hand, is the attempt to employ new understandings able to accommodate for the identified flaws, usually residing in between the traditional dichotomy of inflationism/deflationism. In particular, Lackey introduces such hybrid accounts of group belief, group justified belief, and group lies. In what follows, I will focus on her positive project as it emerges from the discussion of the literature, and end with some critical remarks about the generality and novelty of Lackey's approach.

Her endeavour begins by acknowledging that groups are not only capable of believing and asserting things, but can also intentionally deceive or misguide us. She gives several examples, such as Phillip Morris lying to us about the addictive and exceedingly unhealthy nature of smoking or BP's executive committee jointly spreading misinformation about dispersants being used in the clean-up process of the Deep-Water Horizon drill. While she understands the first case as a bald-faced *group lie*, the second example is introduced to demonstrate that groups can also *bullshit* just as much as individuals can.1 As a result, Lackey identifies being able to distinguish group lies and group bullshit from genuine group belief, as the two central desiderata of an adequate account of group belief. Since group lies and group bullshit "undeniably involve the absence of belief", she thinks that the fulfilment of both desiderata is "non-negotiable for a tenable account of group belief" (34).

Unfortunately, the inflationary (non-summative) accounts of group

1 Here, *bullshit* is used in the technical sense of Harry Frankfurt, who describes the bullshitter as being "neither on the side of the true nor on the side of the false", but instead makes things up to suit his purpose without caring "whether the things he says describe reality correctly" (Frankfurt 2005, 56).

belief, which in recent years became orthodoxy, are ill-equipped to satisfy either of the desiderata. For example, joint acceptance accounts, which interpret groups as believing in p when their members jointly accept p, allow groups to intentionally choose to believe things for pragmatic or principled reasons. This outcome is not only diametrically opposed to our non-voluntaristic understanding of individual belief but furthermore makes group beliefs and group lies functionally indistinguishable. Similar problems are faced by premise-based judgment aggregation accounts, which break down a complex proposition (conclusion) into subparts (premises) and ask whether the majority of the (operative) members believe them. In these views, groups can believe that p, while no individual member of the group believes that p (if the majority believes the respective subparts). This allowance of a divergence between the group-level and member-level beliefs would provide companies, such as Phillip Morris with an instrument to endorse desired beliefs: each member can believe that smoking is dangerous for one or another reason while the group happily proclaims otherwise.

Based on these observations, Lackey proposes her own account of group belief, called the *Group Agent Account* (GAA), which understands groups as being agents in their own rights in a robust and substantive way. Since this account is also the centrepiece for Lackey's understanding of group justification and group lies it is worth stating it in full:

> **Group Agent Account:** A group, G, believes that p if and only if: (1) there is a significant percentage of G's operative members 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 (48-49).

This account, designed to avoid all the problems afflicting rival views, is neither entirely inflationary since it concerns the number of operative members believing that p (1), nor entirely deflationary in also considering the bases of the member-beliefs (2).

Moving the focus from the beliefs themselves to the bases of the beliefs in GAA is the first step towards the *Group Epistemic Agent*

Account (GEAA) of justified group belief (introduced in chapter 2).[2] In addition to the conditions of GAA, GEAA demands that the beliefs that p held by the operative members are themselves justified. Furthermore, "full disclosure of the evidence", and "rational deliberation" in "accordance with [...] group epistemic normative requirements" *would* not lead to "a total belief set that fails to make sufficiently probable that p" (97). This emphasis on counterfactual disclosure and deliberation of evidence among operative members allows Lackey to deal with cases of defeated or distributed evidence. Moreover, the normative requirements enable Lackey to govern the amount of deliberation that would be necessary for the group to be justified. Therefore, GEAA accommodates cases in which a group *should* have possessed some evidence but failed to do so. These cases, as Lackey emphasises, have turned out to be troublesome for both inflationary, as well as deflationary accounts in the literature. As was the case with group belief, joint acceptance accounts of group justification are vulnerable to willful manipulation of the evidence possessed by the group. Equally, summative accounts, as proposed by Goldman (2014) are insensible to the evidential base of the group. They allow for defeated evidence to support beliefs or beliefs being formed among members for different reasons.

GEAA's focus on justified member beliefs and counterfactual disclosure of the respective evidence leads her to reject the possibility of groups knowing something by functionally integrating evidence into its structure in a compartmentalized way (chapter 3). Such processes are often referred to as distributed cognition or social knowing, "where no single individual knows a given proposition, but the information plays a particular functional role in the community" (111). While most famously defended by Edwin Hutchins and Alexander Bird, similar notions also occupy an important place in US law. Lackey not only raises various objections to these conceptions of socially extended knowledge, she even goes a step further by dismissing the whole endeavour as leading "to unacceptable epistemological consequences" (115). Given that GEAA is unable to explain this kind of social knowledge, it is not surprising that Lackey confronts them with such a harsh critique. Any piece of evidence that would be embedded directly into the

2 This chapter is a reprint (including minor modifications) of Lackey (2016).

structure of the group, without the awareness of any (operative) member, could not be revealed by any amount of deliberation. Furthermore, both GAA and GEAA deny that there are (justified) group-level beliefs that are not (justifiably) held by a significant amount of the operative members—something that is common in cases of distributed cognition.

While much of the critique concerning prevalent accounts of social knowledge is warranted, it appears overzealous to conclude that there are no instances of groups justifiably believing things in these distributed ways. This conclusion is especially surprising in light of Lackey's inflationary understanding of group assertions. Instead of surpassing the dichotomy of inflationism and deflationism again, Lackey straightforwardly understands group assertions in inflationary terms. In her view, group assertions are either a result of coordinated group activity, or authority based acts, such as an announcement being made by a spokesperson on behalf of a group (the latter is built on a critical discussion of Kirk Ludwig's theory of proxy agency). While she discusses authorized group assertions in great detail, she does not spend much time on coordinated group activity. Her omission is probably no coincidence, since group assertions of the latter kind, such as the collective drafting of a research paper, are structurally very similar to cases of distributed cognition. For example, we could think of instances in which a group is asserting that p, as the result of coordinated processing of evidence among the members. We can even assume that all members (and therefore the group) believe p, and some members justifiably believe that p; still according to GEAA we need to regard the group as not being justified in believing that p, since the group belief is not a result of a significant percentage of the operative members justifiably believing that p.3

The last chapter circles back to group lies, under consideration of the insights gathered on group belief and group justification. Lackey starts with revitalizing the traditional understanding of lying which recently came under repeated attack. This traditional understanding does not only involve (a) stating that p, and (b) believing that p is false, but furthermore (c) an intention to deceive. Recent works have, however, referred to cases that show that the

3 See Bird (2010) for a similar case.

will to deceive is not a necessary condition of lying, as is the case in instances of bold-faced, or coercion-lies. These recent arguments have led to a rejection of (c). Lackey, nonetheless, thinks that the "tides have turned too quickly" and that these cases do not "warrant severing the connection between lying and deception altogether" (167). While she modifies the traditional account to be able to handle various counterexamples, she simultaneously shows that non-deception accounts wrongfully regard cases of selfless assertion to be lies. As a result, Lackey proposes a refined deception view of group lies, that again understands the group as "the agent at the center of the view" (186).

In general, I have two major misgivings with Lackey's understanding of the epistemology of groups.4 First, throughout the book, Lackey understands groups as epistemic entities in their own rights, having (justified) beliefs, lying, asserting via acting as independent agents. Simultaneously, she emphasises that groups are, nonetheless, directly constrained by member-level properties, such as the belief states and the evidence possessed by the operative members. This analysis is comparable to Condorcet-inspired premise aggregation accounts, which while being inflationist regard attitudes and properties of the members directly restricting the group level attitudes. Especially, List and Pettit's (2011) understanding of group agency is strikingly similar in this regard. They understand groups as irreducible agents while maintaining methodological individualism, the doctrine that the social world is essentially explained in terms of individuals and their properties. Whilst being independent agents, List and Pettit insist that "the attitudes and actions of a group agent supervene on the contributions of its member" (2011, 66). While Lackey herself talks about this notion of supervenience (115-116), she refers to List and Pettit's account throughout the book as being inflationary. Given that, it is unclear how novel Lackey's approach truly is regarding the underlying social ontology. That is, Lackey's book does not present the reader a clear understanding of either emergence, supervenience, or how we should think about the relation between members and the group on ontologically firm grounds. Depending on the underlying understanding of emergence, much of the analysis given about

4 I want to thank Haixin Dang, J. Robert Williams, and Andrew Peet for discussions on these issues.

group belief, group justified belief, and group lies might be framed as being straightforward inflationist (in a similar manner to the proposed understanding of group assertions). On the other hand, if the supervenience relation, as described by List and Pettit, would be sufficient to denote an account as being not entirely inflationary, their account would equally reside in the middle ground between inflationism/deflationism.

Second, Lackey allows for a certain amount of discontinuity in our epistemic theorizing regarding our theories of belief, assertion, and justification. For example, GEAA presupposes a certain structure of the group, by speaking of operative members, their justified beliefs, and the way the evidence is distributed among the members. This presupposition commits the account to distinguish between non-operative and operative members "who are responsible for the group belief having the content that it does" (27). This distinction not only completely divorces our understanding of individual justification and collective justification (individuals simply cannot have operative members), but also restricts the analysis to a particular understanding of (group) belief. While other accounts of group justification found in the literature are more flexible on the nature of group belief, GEAA is directly built on GAA, and, therefore, leaves little space for groups holding beliefs in distinct ways. This discontinuity is also manifested in GEAA's restriction to small-scale, committee-like structured groups which could—in principle—deliberate their evidence, leading to a rejection of distributed cognition and social knowledge (as discussed in chapter 3).

As my outline indicates, Lackey's monograph is not only a rich and sophisticated work, but also provides an extensive overview of the contemporary field. While being primarily concerned with epistemology, Lackey also touches on metaphysical and ethical questions urgent in the social philosophy of groups. Her proposed hybrid understanding of different collective phenomena significantly contributes to the existing literature by incorporating various ideas from seemingly opposing accounts. Especially GAA and GEAA combine virtues from accounts as different as Schmitt's joint acceptance account, or Goldman's justification aggregation model. Her focus on smaller-scale highly deliberative groups,

as well as the lack of a detailed ontological analysis, however, assumes an understanding of socio-epistemic entities that can neither be extrapolated to larger groups nor individual epistemic agents. The latter is especially problematic since it disconnects social epistemology from individual epistemic theorizing. Whether you agree with her positive proposal or not, Lackey's ambitions actualize the possibility of defending a socio-epistemological understanding of groups that resides in between the dichotomy of inflationism and deflationism.

References

Bird, Alexander. (2010). "Social knowing: The social sense of 'scientific knowledge'". *Philosophical Perspectives* 24 (1): 23-56.

Frankfurt, Harry G. (2005). *On Bullshit*. Princeton University Press.

Lackey, Jennifer. (2007). "Norms of Assertion." *Noûs* 41: 594-626.

Lackey, Jennifer. (2016). "What is justified group belief?" *Philosophical Review* 125 (3): 341-396.

Lackey, Jennifer. (2021). *The Epistemology of Groups*. Oxford University Press.

List, Christian and Pettit, Philip. (2011). *Group Agency: The Possibility, Design, and Status of Corporate Agents*. Oxford University Press.