

1 Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

8 *The Epistemic Life of Groups: Essays in the Epistemology of Collectives*

9 MICHAEL S. BRADY AND MIRANDA FRICKER, EDS.

10 Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016; 255 pp.; \$74.00 (hardback)

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13 This book features 11 original essays on collective epistemology, which the editors
14 frame as the synthesis of work from social epistemology with certain positions in the
15 philosophy of mind. Specifically, many of the essays draw from aspects of Margaret
16 Gilbert's plural subject theory, such as her collective account of group belief. An approach
17 which recurs throughout the essays is the identification of an 'individual x' and the expla-
18 nation of a less obvious corresponding 'group x.' Discussed in this way are groundless
19 group self-knowledge (Hans Bernhard Schmid), group emotion (Michael Brady), and
20 group belief revision (Glen Pettigrove).

21 The essays are ordered under the headings 'Epistemology,' 'Ethics,' 'Political Philos-
22 ophy,' and 'Philosophy of Science.' Less obvious thematic orderings might have made
23 sense. For instance, three of the essays deal closely with implicit prejudice—the psy-
24 chological errors (Kai Spiekermann) and historiographical errors (Elizabeth Anderson)
25 that help to maintain it, and assignment of culpability for it (Miranda Fricker)—and are
26 profitably read together. If readers are less familiar with Gilbert's views, it may be
27 helpful to refer directly to the essay that she co-authors with James Weatherall or the
28 essay by Pettigrove, since these essays explain at some length the account of group
29 belief sometimes assumed to be familiar by the other authors. That said, the essays
30 do complement each other as they are arranged.

31 Many of the essays make reasonably self-contained arguments that will appeal even
32 to those with a tangential interest in collective epistemology. The stand-out essays in
33 this regard are those of Fabienne Peter and Torsten Wilholt. Peter's essay works out
34 some of the important upshots of collective epistemology for our understanding of the
35 functioning and justification of democracy, and Wilholt's does the same for scientific
36 research communities.

37 I turn to comment on two of the essays. In her essay "The Social Epistemology of
38 Morality," Anderson discusses ways in which a group can fail to learn moral lessons
39 from its experiences, using slavery as an example. Anderson formulates the concept
40 of "authoritarian moral inquiry" (79); moral inquiry in which some social inferiors

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1 are excluded from partaking and in which their moral claims are ill attended to by those
2 above them in a social hierarchy. The result of authoritarian moral inquiry is self-
3 contradictory apologetics, as Anderson illustrates by explaining Nicolas de Condorcet's
4 confused proposal for an "... extraordinarily protracted abolition process" (81). Anderson
5 notes that authoritarian moral inquiry was not undermined in the case of slavery by
6 theoretical discussion but by practical activity. Through "... self-emancipation, and
7 serving their country in war" (86) the enslaved challenged the moral imaginations of
8 their masters, causing their moral claims to be somewhat better attended to. Anderson
9 concludes that our understanding of moral contention and learning in the real world
10 ought to be less intellectualist. That is, we must acknowledge the importance of moral
11 contestation and challenge conducted with living and breathing others rather than relying
12 on the "... thought experiments that can be carried out by an isolated individual" (92).
13 Anderson formulates her discussion in terms of group moral principles, which are those
14 "... taken for granted within the group as a premise for further argument, not needing
15 independent justification" (76). It is unclear that the entities she has in mind—the
16 United States and Europe—were sufficiently ideologically homogeneous that they had
17 group moral principles regarding slavery. Moreover, recent empirically focused work
18 by Cristina Bicchieri suggests that adherence to moral norms and the process of their
19 alteration are best understood in terms of the decentralized and overlapping groups
20 which any given individual inhabits; their "reference network."¹ From this perspective,
21 authoritarian moral inquiry is not structurally dissimilar from any other type of moral
22 inquiry; we attend primarily to the moral claims and perspectives of those in our refer-
23 ence network, e.g., family members and co-religionists. Whilst Anderson is right to
24 stress the importance of being challenged to moral learning, it is difficult to see that any
25 degree of this could leave us with a reference network that included everyone. Thought
26 experiments (like Adam Smith's impartial spectator or John Rawls' veil of ignorance)
27 are what allow us to simulate for a time such an unrealizable condition and make moral
28 conclusions.

29 Stephanie Collins and Holly Lawford-Smith's essay "The Transfer of Duties" concerns
30 the moral nexus between individuals and the state. On their account, the state can serve
31 as the collective agent to which individuals transfer their moral duties and the state in
32 turn devolves duties to various role-performers. The authors draw a novel view of state
33 membership that diverges from legal citizenship or national identity. Membership
34 is created "... where the individual's moral agency is bound up with the moral agency
35 of the state" (167)—when individuals have delegated a sufficient portion of their moral
36 duties to the state and have, or stand to have, roles assigned to them. Many liberals will
37 have reservations about the ease with which it is supposed that moral duties can be
38 transmogrified into states' duties, and the authors' account of membership exacerbates
39 existing questions about the nature of individuals' responsibility for their states'
40 wrongdoing. Although the authors acknowledge that a state's moral failure can have
41 an "epistemic dimension" (165), it might be suggested that they underplay the epistemic
42 difficulties of accurately conveying individuals' moral wills to the state, summing these
43 into a coherent plan, and efficiently executing the plan.

44 This is a worthy addition to the study of collective epistemology. Less technical and
45 heavy hitting than some recent collections, this book contains essays that will appeal to

46 ¹ Bicchieri (2017).

1 those whose central interests lie elsewhere. In this way, the authors demonstrate that
2 collective epistemology is a field of inquiry that is maturing sufficiently to add to
3 discussions in other areas of philosophy.

4 **Reference**

5 Bicchieri, Christina

6 2017 *Norms in the Wild: How to Diagnose, Measure, and Change Social*
7 *Norms*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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10 MARCUS HUNT *Tulane University*

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AUTHOR QUERIES

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