



# What are collective epistemic reasons and why do we need them?

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Groups are a fundamental element of the social world. Many philosophers agree that groups not only are *agentive*, that is, that they act in the world, but that they can have moral obligations to act and effect change in the world ([reference omitted], Collins, 2019; Isaacs, 2011; Wringe, 2010, 2016).<sup>1</sup> This position implies that groups can have *moral* reasons—considerations in favour of acting a particular way (e.g. Woodard, 2017).<sup>2</sup>

According to Veli Mitova (2022), groups can also have *epistemic* reasons:

- (i) collective doxastic reasons in favour of holding (or disbelieving) certain beliefs
- (ii) collective epistemic-conduct reasons regarding the adherence to epistemic norms, the collection of evidence, etc.

I argue that in order to make sense of collective doxastic reasons, we need an account of group belief.<sup>3</sup> I provide elements of such an account to complement Mitova's approach and to allow for a more nuanced understanding of collective doxastic reasons (1). For some types of group beliefs, we need not invoke collective epistemic reasons (2). There are cases, however, where we do. Explaining when and why we need a notion of collective doxastic reasons will bring Mitova's particular interest in social identity groups into sharp relief (3).

<sup>1</sup> There is disagreement on whether or not this applies to all kinds of groups: there is less controversy around the agency of corporate groups as opposed to unstructured groups. For more on this distinction, see [Reference omitted].

<sup>2</sup> This position does not yet commit one to any particular view of what group moral reasons are—whether they are group-based reasons of individual group members or reasons properly *of* the group (see Woodard (2017) and [reference redacted]).

<sup>3</sup> My commentary focuses on collective doxastic reasons only.

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## 1 Collective doxastic reasons as reasons for group belief

Mitova explains that “A reason is a three-place relation: it is a *reason* for *someone* to do *something*”. (2022: 8). A doxastic reason  $R$  for some  $x$  to hold a belief that  $p$ , then, is a consideration that counts in favour of  $x$ 's believing that  $p$ . What kind of considerations are those? According to Benjamin Kiesewetter, “[e]vidence provides reason for beliefs – that much is almost universally agreed upon among philosophers”. Further, if  $R$  is an epistemic reason to believe  $p$ , then  $R$  provides partial justification for  $x$ 's believing  $p$  (2022).<sup>4</sup>

When thinking about *collective* epistemic reasons, there are various things that need untangling. After all, there are several variables in the aforementioned claim and it is far from self-evident which of these refer to a set of entities, that is, which of these refers to a “collective”. In other words, we need to clarify what is “collective” about collective (epistemic or other) reasons?

The obvious interpretation is that  $x$  can stand for a group—and that is indeed what Mitova has in mind. An epistemic (doxastic) reason  $R$  is then a consideration (e.g. a particular fact, a piece of evidence) that counts in favour of a group's believing that  $p$ . Collective doxastic reasons—the ones I am concerned with here—are collective in the sense of being *reasons for group beliefs* on this interpretation (p.13).

Mitova argues that groups, including collectivities with as little structure as social identity groups, *can* hold beliefs. In doing so, she is able to build on the work of philosophers such as Jennifer Lackey (2020) who have been defending the notion of group beliefs in recent years.<sup>5</sup> Yet even if one agrees with Mitova that groups can hold beliefs (and I *do* agree with them), in order for her to convincingly make her case for collective epistemic reasons more detail is needed on how groups—in contrast to individuals—hold beliefs. In the following, I offer my own analysis of group knowledge and beliefs to supplement her position ([reference redacted])<sup>6</sup> and to allow for a better understanding of the potential *collective* nature of some epistemic reasons.

What exactly does it mean for a group to hold a belief?

1. *Shared belief*: The first sense in which a set of agents  $[x_1 \dots x_n]$  can hold a belief  $p$  is that all members of the set hold the same first order belief that  $p$ . In that case, the belief that  $p$  is fully shared—or, to the extent that we are talking about (justified) true beliefs, there is fully shared knowledge of  $p$ .<sup>7</sup> The first type of

<sup>4</sup> This particular view, “normativism about reasons”, is not universally shared, according to Kiesewetter (2022: 671). Clayton Littlejohn, e.g., has argued against normativism (2013). I take it, though, that Mitova shares the view – we adopt it here for the sake of argument.

<sup>5</sup> Other works defending group beliefs include Tuomela (1992), Mathiesen (2006), Lackey (2016) and Koscholke (2020).

<sup>6</sup> See also [reference redacted] for preliminary work on this issue.

<sup>7</sup> I operate with a working definition of knowledge being true belief here, leaving aside the debate on whether or not it should be “justified true belief”. The correct—if you will—definition of knowledge is not relevant to my argument here. The term “knowledge” is used in this commentary mainly because the referenced literature is coined in terms of knowledge and not belief. Really, what we are concerned with in this commentary is belief.

group belief, then, is first order aggregate belief (Roy & Schwenkenbecher, 2019; Schwenkenbecher, 2022). Naturally, beliefs can be shared to varying degrees by members of a group (or a set of agents):  $p$  can be a partially shared belief in the group.

2. *Genuinely distributed belief*: Furthermore, Olivier Roy and I argued in a joint paper that knowledge (and, therefore, belief) can be genuinely distributed in groups (Roy & Schwenkenbecher, 2019). This may be a scenario where a belief  $p$  is composed of (or entailed by) beliefs  $p_1$ ,  $p_2$  and  $p_3$  and these three beliefs are held by three different members of the group. Another possibility is that one agent holds the belief that *If  $q$   $p$*  and another holds the belief that  *$q$*  such that  $p$  is entailed by those two beliefs. Where the beliefs entailing  $p$  are distributed across members of the group but there is someone in the group who actually holds all those beliefs, including  $p$ , we call that group member the “witness of pooled knowledge” (ibid.).
3. *Common belief*: More complex still are group-based beliefs where in addition to first order beliefs that  $p$  agents in our set (group members) hold higher order beliefs about those first order beliefs (that is, beliefs about whether or not their fellow group members hold the belief that  $p$ ). Where all agents in the set (a) share the first order belief that  $p$  and (b) all agents in the set share the belief that (a) obtains and (c) all agents in the set share the belief that (b) obtains, we have 2nd degree common knowledge of  $p$  in the group (or, more correctly, common belief that  $p$ ).

From the idea of a group having a belief that  $p$  it follows that there exist epistemic reasons speaking in favour of  $p$ , as Mitova points out. In the next section, I show that epistemic reasons for group-based belief differ depending on the type of group-based belief we are looking at. This insight contributes an important—and currently missing—element to Mitova’s original argument.

## 2 Are epistemic reasons for group-based beliefs always collective reasons?

Epistemic reasons, according to Mitova, can be genuinely collective in that “the reason would not exist without the group’s being a *group* of that kind” (p. 11). The epistemic aim of forming such beliefs is that “the group is in possession of the truth about [or knowledge of]  $p$ ” and that aim “is plainly not attainable by the individual” (p.13). Put differently, collective doxastic reasons, then, are reasons that favour a group adopting a belief where that belief “cannot be attained by individuals alone (in their capacity as individuals)” (p.11).

Let us unpack this making use of the aforementioned distinction between different types of group belief. *Shared beliefs* are first order aggregate beliefs that do not reference other agents’ beliefs. Because of that, it is not obvious that the reasons for holding shared beliefs would be collective in the sense that Mitova has in mind. The truth of the (individual) beliefs—and, by extension, of the shared belief—is attainable by the individual. After all, shared beliefs are just aggregated first order

individual beliefs. It seems, then, that for shared beliefs, we do not require expanding (individualist) notions of epistemic reasons.

What about epistemic reasons for *genuinely distributed beliefs*? The distinct components  $p_1, p_2, \dots, p_x$  of a genuinely distributed belief  $p$  (or the premises from which the  $p$  follows) are held by different members of our group. In what sense would the reasons for such beliefs be collective? It would seem that a genuinely distributed (group) belief  $p$  must be based on a number of different epistemic reasons. Each group member holding individual component beliefs  $p_1, p_2, \dots, p_x$  would have distinct epistemic reasons for holding their respective belief. For instance, they may each have a piece of evidence  $e_1, e_2, \dots, e_x$  to provide them with a reason for their respective belief and to (partially) justify that belief. In this case, the doxastic reason for the group's genuinely distributed belief  $p$  should, arguably, be understood as a set of reasons and as "collective" in that sense.

The picture changes slightly where in addition to a genuinely distributed group belief we have at least one witness of pooled knowledge—a group member who holds all the component beliefs as well as holding the belief that  $p$  (Roy & Schwenkenbecher, 2019). The witness of pooled knowledge may hold the component beliefs  $p_1, p_2$  and  $p_3$  for the same epistemic reasons as the other group members hold their respective component beliefs. However, they may also have entirely different epistemic reasons for those beliefs—their reasons may arise from higher order evidence that each of the group members holding the component beliefs are reliable, conscientious deliberators whose beliefs are always based in sound evidence. In other words, the epistemic reason for the witness's belief that  $p$  might be provided by the fact that the other group members hold the component beliefs in addition to said higher order evidence.

In that case, an irreducibly social element emerges. The epistemic reason for the witness' holding belief  $p$  is itself based in beliefs held in the group: the component beliefs of  $p$  held by members of the group, the logical entailment of those beliefs and the higher order belief in those members' epistemic reliability. The reason for the group holding  $p$  in this sense can be considered *collective* in that it cannot be reduced to any of these components but is instead a complex reason that involves higher order beliefs, the particular relationships between which matter for the complex reason to count in favour of  $p$ . This conclusion holds a fortiori for all higher order beliefs such as *common belief*.

Two comments are due at this stage: the first one is that—following this analysis—all or most of our epistemic reasons turn out to be collective to an extent. After all, most of our beliefs are supported by reasons that are social in some sense: we use first and second order evidence—including other people's beliefs—to form our own beliefs. Maybe such proliferation of collective epistemic reasons would pose no problem for Mitova but it would detract from the implicit assumption she appears to be making that somehow collective epistemic reasons are special. This takes me to my second comment: in putting forward her account of collective reasons, Mitova had a particular practical issue in mind. She set out to point to social identity groups and their privileged access to certain epistemic reasons. Let me turn to her main example in order to get better purchase on the idea that there are special *collective* epistemic reasons involved.

### 3 What do we need collective epistemic reasons for?

Regarding social identity groups—Mitova’s main focus—what purchase does the talk of collective doxastic reasons give us that we otherwise would not have? Her main example gives an indication of why she thinks philosophers and social theorists should be interested in such reasons. Mitova suggests that “At least according to some social epistemologists, being members of certain social groups – especially the oppressed – gives the group knowledge and kinds of evidence that is unavailable, or at least not easily available, to other groups” (p. 12). Social identity groups, in her view, have privileged access to some epistemic reasons (that is, some evidence) because of the role they play in relation to other groups.

For example, black people have unique access to “the fact of double consciousness”<sup>8</sup>—of “looking at oneself through the gaze of the oppressor who has set himself as the norm”. They, therewith, have privileged evidence of white normativity and the invisibility of white privilege. This evidence provides collective epistemic reasons for the group’s believing in white normativity and the invisibility of white privilege, according to Mitova (p. 13). She emphasizes that these are *group* beliefs—but what exactly does that mean? I suspect that Mitova does not have a case of distributed beliefs—as discussed above—in mind here but rather a version of the following:

Due to their social identity, members of these groups can have access to evidence that non-members do not have access to. This is particularly salient in the case of groups divided by social privilege. The reason black people have for believing  $p$  (that white normativity exists as a social fact) is that they are members of a group that is in a unique position to witness  $p$  introspectively. Their very own outlook on the world if you will (their own double consciousness)—and how that outlook reflects the relationship between their own social identity group vis-à-vis other groups—serves them as evidence for their belief in  $p$ ,<sup>9</sup> whereas to others that evidence is not directly accessible in the way it is for the group of black people (by way of introspection). The very insight into their own double consciousness is *shared* by members of the social identity group and that fact itself has become commonly known.<sup>10</sup> The common belief (concerning shared first order experience), then, is evidence for  $p$ —the social fact of white normativity—and it is a group-based belief.

The epistemic reasons for the group-based belief are a combination of first order and higher order evidence, with the latter being group-based evidence that is uniquely accessible and attainable by the group members and is irreducibly social. In that sense, they are epistemic reasons *of* the group. Further, they are epistemic reasons that favour beliefs *about* the group. Naturally, these beliefs are accessible to those outside the group, too, yet the evidence supporting them would be different.

<sup>8</sup> This term was coined by Du Bois (1903).

<sup>9</sup> Further, we might say that the experience of double consciousness is only evidence of white normativity if it is a widespread that is group-wide experience. That is only if sufficient members of the group experience  $R_1, R_2, \dots, R_n$  does  $R$  become a reason favouring  $p$ .

<sup>10</sup> This is not least due to introducing the very concept of double consciousness into academic and public discourses.

Returning to our initial question: what do we need the notion of *collective epistemic reasons* for? At the very least, we need it for better understanding how and why different social identity groups will hold beliefs whose evidence-base is irreducibly social and tied to them being that kind of group. And as Mitova has shown, this provides an opportunity to exercise epistemic humility apropos the distinctive knowledge of social identity groups.

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## Declarations

**Ethical declaration** Not applicable.

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