

Lackey, Jennifer, ed. *Essays in Collective Epistemology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 253.

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We commonly ascribe knowledge or belief to social groups or organizations, as in “the CIA did not know in advance about the 9/11 attack,” or “Jews do not believe in the divinity of Jesus.” The discussion of the meaning and significance of such claims is part of the domain of collective epistemology, which is a growing and thriving research area in social epistemology.

Many of the papers in the book address notions and issues in individual social epistemology—including testimony, epistemic agency, belief, and peer disagreement—and examine how they play out in the collective case. With respect to testimony, Lackey argues that an individual’s testimony is a generative source of knowledge; i.e., a recipient of a testimony may acquire knowledge from testimony alone, even if the testifier herself does not know or believe what she testifies to. Lackey applies a similar line of reasoning to collective testimony to develop a deflationary account of group testimony, according to which there need not be a group that collectively believes or knows in order for a group to testify. Rather, it suffices that there is a speaker (not necessarily a member of the group) who satisfies certain conditions, among them correctly representing the group’s collective position.

With respect peer disagreement, one position in this debate states that the mere existence of a person who opposes my view, and whom I regard as my epistemic peer, constitutes a reason for me to revise my view. In his paper, Christensen argues that the same considerations in support of this position in the individual case apply to the collective case. But the final judgment, namely, whether I should revise my belief or not, that this position casts on particular cases in which a group opposes my view is less decisive than in cases in which I disagree with an individual. This is because in the group cases, there are complicating factors that do not exist in the individual cases, especially the idealized toy examples that are common in the individualistic peer-disagreement literature.

Several other papers in the book also examine how familiar notions in individual epistemology play out in collective epistemology. Pettit develops his previous work (with List) on the conditions under which a group is an epistemic agent or may be attributed epistemic agency. Briggs et al. develop a formal account of the coherence of the beliefs of a group, and argue that the norm of coherence for beliefs for both an individual and a group is weaker than logical (i.e., deductive) consistency. Wright argues that that groups, just like individuals, may possess moral and epistemic virtues in line with Stoic philosophy. Goldman develops a process-reliabilist account of the justification of a group belief.

The analysis in some of the papers is reductive in the sense that the phenomenon at the level of the group is analysed in terms of the respective phenomenon at the level of the individual group members (Goldman, Pettit, Briggs et al., List). Other papers take a non-reductive approach (Bird, Lackey, Wright, Gilbert and Pilchman).

While all of these papers draw parallels between epistemic phenomena at the level of the individual and the level of the group, only Gilbert and Pilchman explicitly discuss the philosophical methodology that should be employed in such analyses. They argue that an analysis of collective epistemic phenomena should not be prejudiced toward individualism by modelling collective phenomena on individual phenomena (but some of the papers in the book commit this alleged methodological error nevertheless). Accordingly, Gilbert and

Pilchman argue that group belief is a *sui generis* form of belief, rather than a form of acceptance, although it lacks features that are allegedly inherent to belief as such in the individual case.

Sosa's paper stands out among the rest of the papers, as it does not directly discuss collective epistemic phenomena. Sosa presents an argument against the view commonly dubbed "pragmatic encroachment," according to which whether a subject knows a proposition *inter alia* depends on her stakes regarding that proposition. Sosa resists pragmatic encroachment by denying the principle, commonly endorsed by proponents of pragmatic encroachment, according to which knowledge is sufficient for rational action.

While the book covers much ground in collective epistemology, some themes and approaches are underrepresented in it. We may identify two meanings of "collective epistemology" in the current literature in social epistemology. The first meaning – or research program, which is well represented in the book, focuses on the ontology of groups, their constituents, and their properties. It addresses issues such as the nature of group belief, group agency, and group knowledge. This approach does not usually challenge received views and theories in individual epistemology, but rather adds another level of analysis to them.

The second program, which also goes by the heading of collective epistemology, studies individuals' epistemic dependence on other members of society. A controversial claim within this program is that substantive elements that feature in the traditional analysis of individual knowledge; namely, the elements to which concepts in standard "*S* knows that *p*" analyses refer, extend beyond the individual subject's body or mind into the bodies or minds of other subjects. For example, according to Goldberg (2010), segments of a reliable cognitive process that generates a justified belief, according to process reliabilism, may extend through testimony from the believing subject's cognitive system to other subjects' cognitive systems. A similar claim, within an evidentialist account of justification, is that the justificatory status of a subject's belief may depend on evidence that is located in other subjects' minds (Miller 2015). Orthodox individualistic epistemologists have resisted such claims. Among them is Goldman, who writes, referring to Goldberg, but does not elaborate, "I am not persuaded by this kind of move in the case of testimony among individuals. But I am happy to accept it for collective belief" [24]. It is too bad that Goldman and others in the book do not address such views further, and the challenge they pose to the individualistic orthodoxy.

As opposed to the individualistic orthodoxy in analytic epistemology, social epistemologists who study collective *scientific* knowledge are more open to acknowledge individuals' deep epistemic dependence on others. In recent years, much work has been done on collective *scientific* knowledge, but it is hardly represented in the book. Bird is the only author in the book who discusses science. Perhaps because the scientific community is much less formally structured than academic search committees or judicial tribunals, which have become the standard examples for analysing collective epistemic phenomena among social epistemologists of mundane knowledge, Bird has the most relaxed view in the book about the conditions a group should meet to collectively possess knowledge. Bird is also the only author who addresses, though briefly, the status of technological artefacts in collective knowledge and agency, which is a pressing issue in the theories of collective scientific knowledge outside analytic epistemology, in science and technology studies (STS).

More attention to collective *scientific* knowledge might have revealed some of the blind spots in the book. For example, Lackey argues that a hearer may acquire knowledge from a speaker even if the speaker's evidence for her claim is defeated (hence, the speaker does not justifiably believe or know). When reflecting on mundane knowledge, this claim may seem right. But when reflecting on scientific knowledge, things change. Empirical research shows

that scientists often enough testify to the truth of a hypothesis, even when their evidence for it is defeated, or worse – defective. Such scientists may be reliable testifiers in that they have a reliable gut feeling; namely, if a hypothesis they consider is true, they would probably testify to it. Suppose that such a scientist, whose evidence is at best defeated, is the only one in the scientific community who works on confirming a certain hypothesis. It follows from Lackey's claim that a layperson or other members of the scientific community who justifiably trust that scientist may come to know that hypothesis from the scientist's testimony, even if nobody in the scientific community possesses undefeated or non-defective evidence for it! This conclusion seems wrong (Miller 2015).

Another argument in the book that could have benefited from the literature on collective scientific knowledge is Christensen's. As mentioned, Christensen argues that considerations from real-world cases complicate the question of when to revise one's belief in light of an opposing view of a collective. But the literature on the social epistemology of scientific consensus and dissent (e.g., Biddle and Leuschner 2015; Miller 2013) has already systematised such considerations into theories of when deference to an epistemic community's view is justified. (List also discusses the conditions under which deference to a majority is epistemically justified, but his account is too formal to apply to real-world cases.)

Essays in Collective Epistemology is a superb collection of top-of-the-art papers on collective epistemology. But it should not be taken as a representative sample of the wide range of views and approaches to collective epistemology within analytic social epistemology. Particularly, those who are interested in collective scientific knowledge, the epistemology of consensus and dissent, and our epistemic dependence on others will be wise to supplement this fine book with other sources.

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References

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