

# Believing is said of groups in many ways (and so it should be said of them in none)

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## Abstract

In the first half of this paper, I argue that group belief ascriptions are highly ambiguous. What's more, in many cases, neither the available contextual factors nor known pragmatic considerations are sufficient to allow the audience to identify which of the many possible meanings is intended. In the second half, I argue that this ambiguity often has bad consequences when a group belief ascription is heard and taken as testimony. And indeed it has these consequences even when the ascription is true on the speaker's intended interpretation, when the speaker does not intend to mislead and indeed intends to cooperatively inform, and when the audience incorporates the evidence from the testimony as they should. I conclude by arguing that these consequences should lead us to stop using such ascriptions.

We often ascribe beliefs to institutions and corporations, nations and political parties, juries and committees, communities of expertise and communities picked out by demographic properties. In general, we often ascribe beliefs to collective entities.

Some examples of such ascriptions, which will reappear throughout the paper:

(RASPUTIN) In 1916, Russia believed Rasputin was evil.

(BREST) In 1917, at the beginning of the Brest-Litovsk negotiations, Russia believed Germany's demands would be less severe than they turned out to be.

(CIGARETTES) In the 1960s, Philip Morris International believed that cigarette smoke contains multiple carcinogens.

(HIRING) The hiring committee believes Caleb is the best candidate.

(THEORY) The scientific community believes theory  $T$ .

(SAFE) The tester group believes this batch of pencil sharpeners is safe.

(JURY) The jury believes the defendant is innocent.

(LABOUR) The university believes that women's labour is worth less than men's.

(IPCC) The IPCC believes that global mean surface temperature will not rise by more than 3C in the coming century.

That's a long list! But the length is intentional. In the first two sections of this paper (Sections 2-3), I use these examples to argue that group belief ascriptions are highly ambiguous, and part of my argument is that each of these ascriptions can be used to say something different about the group they concern. What's more, in many cases, neither the available contextual factors nor known pragmatic considerations are sufficient to allow the audience to identify which of the many possible meanings is intended. In the final two sections (Sections 4-5), I argue that this ambiguity has bad consequences when a group belief ascription is heard and taken as testimony. And indeed it has these consequences even when the ascription is true on the speaker's intended interpretation, when the speaker does not intend to mislead and indeed intends to cooperatively inform, and when the audience incorporates the evidence from the testimony as they should. I conclude by arguing that these consequences should lead us to stop using such ascriptions.

## 1 List's three kinds of collective attitude

This paper builds on the ideas introduced by Christian List in his paper 'Three Kinds of Collective Attitudes' (List, 2014). He too argues that collective belief ascriptions are ambiguous and asks us to stop using them. My argument in the first half of this paper expands on List's by enumerating many more possible interpretations of group belief ascriptions than he considers; and my argument in the second half expands on his by describing in detail a selection of the bad consequences of this ambiguity, explaining why the ambiguity is not solved by contextual factors and pragmatic considerations, and arguing that these bad consequences should lead us to stop using group belief ascriptions in many contexts.

List distinguishes between three kinds of collective beliefs, which he calls *aggregate*, *common*, and *corporate beliefs*. When we say that group  $G$  believes proposition  $p$  in the aggregate sense, we are summarising the views of the members of  $G$  concerning  $p$ . When we say  $G$  believes  $p$  in the common sense, we say that each member of  $G$  believes  $p$ , and believes that each member believes  $p$ , and believes that each member believes that each member believes  $p$ , and so on. And when we say that  $G$  believes  $p$  in the corporate sense, we treat  $G$  as an agent in its own right and say of this agent that it believes  $p$ .

I will use List's taxonomy as a starting point for my argument that group belief ascriptions are ambiguous, but I want to tweak and expand it in a number of ways. First, I want to focus only on aggregate and corporate kinds of group belief. While social scientists do ascribe group beliefs of the common kind, they are really using such ascriptions as terms of art. Such uses rarely occur outside the academy. My focus is not on the use of language in academic circles, so I'll leave it out of my discussion, though of course including it would only bolster my argument by giving yet another possible interpretation of a group belief ascription.

Secondly, I want to broaden the category of corporate group beliefs beyond the scope that List takes it to have. I claim that there are cases in which a group believes a proposition in the corporate sense without counting as an agent. In such cases, there is typically a set of rules or protocols or procedures, either official or unofficial, that stipulate when the corporate entity believes certain sorts of proposition. But often these rules can lead to an ascription without the group in question having any of the other features necessary to count as an agent, such as desires or the ability to perform actions.

Thirdly, and finally, I want to demonstrate how many different kinds of group beliefs there are within these two broad categories that List identifies. Indeed, that's part of the purpose of the list of ascriptions with which I began the paper. In the backstories I'll provide for these utterances, some of them are intended to be different kinds of aggregate ascription, while others are intended to be different kinds of corporate ascription. So a group belief ascription is ambiguous not just between two kinds of collective belief, but between at least those ten, and in fact many more. This is important for two reasons that will become relevant in the second half of the paper, when I argue that the ambiguity I've been describing in the first half has bad consequences. First, if there were just two different meanings that a group belief ascription might have, we might expect that context and pragmatics would nearly always ensure that an ascription is correctly understood by its audience. But when there are so many possible meanings, this becomes less likely; and, indeed, we'll see that very often it simply isn't true. Secondly, some of the bad consequences arise even if context or pragmatics are sufficient to determine that the ascription is an aggregative one or that the ascription is a corporate one. That is, it is the ambiguity between different meanings within one of the two kinds that List identifies that is sometimes responsible for the bad consequences.

## 2 Aggregate group belief ascriptions

In this section and the next, I consider aggregate and corporate group belief ascriptions. I use the sentences from the beginning of the paper to illustrate

the range of possible meanings that fall under these two categories. As I proceed, I come across some of the existing accounts of group belief, which claim there is just a single concept and offer a straightforward account of it in terms of truth conditions that are supposed to apply to all ascriptions. These are clearly at odds with my claim that there is a rich and varied set of such concepts between which many ascriptions are ambiguous. So, as I encounter them, I try to show that they do not cover all cases of group belief. In most cases, they do capture one of the concepts, however, or come very close to doing so. Such accounts are often accompanied by arguments to the effect that competing analyses are wrong. I try to show that each such argument fails.

Sometimes, when we ascribe a belief to a group, we intend to summarise the attitudes of its members. These are what List calls aggregate group belief ascriptions. For instance, this is the natural reading of the ascription labelled (RASPUTIN) from the introduction. It is natural to hear this in most contexts as saying that, in 1916, a majority of Russians believed that Rasputin was evil.

We might want to summarise the views of a groups' members for a number of reasons. We might want to use that summary to set our own opinions, especially if we think the members are more expert or better informed than we are. Or we might want to know about the spread of opinion within the group simply out of historical interest, perhaps to understand what it was like to live in a historical moment or to trace a trend in views over time or to explain a historical event. And there are further reasons besides these.

However, there is not just one meaning that an aggregate group belief ascription might have. Rather there are (at least) three places where ambiguity enters even after we know that the ascription in question is an aggregate one. I describe these in the coming three sections.

## 2.1 The set of members of the group whose views are summarised

First, the name we use to pick out the group in a group belief ascription can be ambiguous. Consider (RASPUTIN) and (BREST) from above. In both, the name used to pick out the group is 'Russia'. However, on the natural interpretation of the first, the ascription summarises the views of all Russians alive in 1916, while on the natural interpretation of the second, it summarises the views only of the diplomats attending the negotiations in Brest-Litovsk in 1917, or perhaps even just the chief negotiators. So the same term, occurring in different sentences, can pick out a different set of individuals whose views are then summarised in the group belief ascription.

What's going on here? I think the natural account appeals to the lin-

guistic phenomenon of metonymy, where a name for one thing is used to refer to something closely related to it, as when I say that Downing Street is holding a press conference, when I mean that the UK government is, or that the Kremlin is getting edgy, when I mean that the Russian government is. Let us suppose that the term ‘Russia’, when used normally, refers to a nation. Then, when I assert (RASPUTIN), I use it metonymically to refer to the set of all Russians alive in 1916, and when I assert (BREST), I use it metonymically to refer to the set of all members of the Russian diplomatic team at the negotiations.<sup>1</sup>

Now, metonyms always give rise to ambiguity, since it’s always possible that the term refers literally and possible that it refers metonymically. However, in the case of names for group entities, like nations, it seems there is even greater ambiguity, since there are many different subsets of the set of all members of the group to which we can refer metonymically using its name—the set of all Russians, the set of diplomats, the set of members of the government etc. And, moreover, it is more difficult to disambiguate this sort of metonymy because exactly the same predicates can be appropriately applied to each of the possible referents. When I say ‘They’re digging up the pavement in Downing Street’, I ascribe a property that could not be appropriately applied to the metonymic referent of ‘Downing Street’. So pragmatic considerations make it easy to disambiguate. But that’s not the case for group belief ascriptions. It is just as appropriate to ascribe aggregate group beliefs to any of the subsets to which ‘Russia’ might refer.

Nonetheless, in the cases of (RASPUTIN) and (BREST), there seem to be natural readings of them that resolve the ambiguity. What accounts for that? In both cases, I think it’s background information and pragmatic considerations that do the work. Let’s consider (RASPUTIN). In a context in which Rasputin is discussed without introduction, it might be assumed that the audience knows enough about how he was viewed by certain people in Russia to rule out certain competing interpretations. They might note that, if the speaker is using ‘Russia’ to refer to the set consisting only of members of the Imperial Family, then their assertion will be false, since those people mainly thought Rasputin good. If they use it to refer to the members of their court, then it will again be false, since that group was divided. And if they use it to refer to the group of noblemen who assassinated

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<sup>1</sup>Thank you to Anthony Everett for helping me think this through. I had originally rejected the metonymic approach. I thought on that approach the group name—e.g., ‘Russia’—would have to refer to one of the possible subsets of the set of members of the group—the set of all Russians in 1916, the set of all members of the Bolshevik government in 1916, the set of all negotiators in Brest-Litovsk, and so on. This would thereby privilege that set as the set of people whose views are summarised in the aggregate group belief ascription. I rejected the approach because I couldn’t see how we would pick out one of those as the term’s referent in a non-arbitrary way. But Anthony convinced me that the group name could refer literally to a more complex group structure, like a nation, and only metonymically to a particular subset.

him, it is true but adds no new information, and thus violates the conversational norm of saying only informative things. This illustrates an important point that we will return to in the second half of the paper. Sometimes, we can disambiguate the scope of an aggregate group belief ascription, but it often requires a reasonable amount of knowledge about the situation. So, when your listeners do not have the same knowledge you have, your assertion might well remain ambiguous.

## 2.2 The level at which the aggregation takes place

A second source of ambiguity in aggregate group belief ascriptions lies in the choice of level at which the aggregation is to take place. After all, within a particular individual, a belief doesn't usually materialise out of nowhere. The individual tends to have bases for their belief. These will typically consist of a body of evidence, beliefs based directly on that, perhaps further beliefs based on those, and then inference from those beliefs to the belief in question. When we aggregate the attitudes of the members of the group in order to determine what the group believes, at what level should we aggregate? The level of the belief, or the level of its bases? Two of the accounts that Jennifer Lackey considers in her recent book, *The Epistemology of Groups*, disagree over this. Here's the Conservative Summative Account (CSA), which says that we should aggregate at the level of the belief in  $p$  itself; this view is sometimes ascribed to Anthony Quinton (Quinton, 1975; Lackey, 2020):

CSA: A group  $G$  believes that  $p$  if and only if all or most of the members of  $G$  believe that  $p$ .

The version of the Premise-Based Aggregation Account (PBAA) that Lackey ascribes to Philip Pettit (2003) says we should aggregate at the level of the beliefs on which belief in  $p$  would be based. As Lackey states it, it applies only in cases in which there is some set of propositions  $q_1, \dots, q_n$  such that each member of the group believes the following biconditional:  $p \leftrightarrow (q_1 \ \& \ \dots \ \& \ q_n)$ . With this assumption in place, this version of PBAA says:

PBAA-1: A group  $G$  believes that  $p$  if and only if, for each  $q_i$ , all or most of the members of  $G$  believe  $q_i$ .

CSA and PBAA-1 come apart on cases like the doctrinal paradox (also known as the discursive dilemma) (Kornhauser & Sager, 1986). The following backstory to the ascription (SAFE) from the introduction gives a case that PBAA-1 seems to get right and CSA gets wrong. In a factory that manufactures pencil sharpeners, there are 100 people assigned to checking the safety of these products before they're released to market. They all observe the factory's machinery performing the same 100 safety tests on a batch.

Let  $p$  be the proposition that this particular batch of sharpeners is safe, and let  $q_i$  be the proposition that it passed the  $i^{\text{th}}$  safety test. And suppose all testers believe the biconditional  $p \leftrightarrow (q_1 \ \& \ \dots \ \& \ q_{100})$ . On the basis of their joint observation of the tests, for each  $i$ , the  $i^{\text{th}}$  tester comes to believe each  $q_j$  except  $q_i$ . As a result, each fails to believe  $p$ . However, for each  $q_i$ , 99 out of 100 of the testers believe  $q_i$ . According to PBAA-1, the group believes  $p$ , namely, that the batch is safe. It seems to me that this is the correct verdict.

Nonetheless, PBAA-1 seems to get things wrong in cases like (RASPUTIN). To see this, notice that you need not know the basis on which Russians in 1916 believed Rasputin evil in order to know whether this ascription is true. You need only know that most of them believed it.

What explains the difference between these two cases? Here's one suggestion. In the case of (RASPUTIN), we are primarily interested in the prevalence of the view that Rasputin was evil—that is, our primary interest in learning whether the group believes  $p$  is to learn the prevalence of belief in  $p$  among members of the group. In (SAFE), in contrast, we are primarily interested in the prevalence of the views about the 100 different safety tests; we are only interested in the prevalence of the view about the safety of the sharpener because it supplies evidence about the prevalence of the views about the other propositions—that is, our primary interest in learning whether the group believes  $p$  is to learn the prevalence of belief in each  $q_i$  among members of the group.

Here's another case, besides (RASPUTIN), where it seems we want to aggregate at the highest level. I'll state it as a counterexample to a second version of the Premise-Based Aggregation Account, which applies when there are some propositions  $q_1, \dots, q_n$  and  $r_1, \dots, r_n$  such that each member of the group believes the following biconditional:  $p \leftrightarrow [(q_1 \ \& \ \dots \ \& \ q_n) \vee (r_1 \ \& \ \dots \ \& \ r_n)]$ . With this assumption in place, this version of PBAA says:

PBAA-2: A group  $G$  believes that  $p$  if and only if all or most of the members of  $G$  believe  $q_1 \ \& \ \dots \ \& \ q_n$  or all or most of the members believe  $r_1 \ \& \ \dots \ \& \ r_n$ .

Let's consider a fictional case in which intuitively (THEORY) is true but PBAA-2 says that it is false. There is an area of science in which two theories vie for precedence,  $T_1$  and  $T_2$ . Half of the scientists working in this area believe the conjunction of the following propositions:

- ( $q_1$ )  $T_1$  is simpler than  $T_2$ ,
- ( $q_2$ )  $T_2$  is more explanatory than  $T_1$ ,
- ( $q_3$ ) simplicity always trumps explanatory power in theory choice.

These scientists consequently believe  $T_1$ . The other scientists believe the conjunction of the following propositions:

- (r<sub>1</sub>)  $T_2$  is simpler than  $T_1$ ,
- (r<sub>2</sub>)  $T_1$  is more explanatory than  $T_2$ ,
- (r<sub>3</sub>) explanatory power always trumps simplicity in theory choice.

These scientists consequently believe  $T_1$  as well. So all scientists believe  $T_1$ . But they do so on the basis of diametrically opposed beliefs. According to CSA, (THEORY) is true in this case, and I think that's intuitively the correct verdict. For one thing, attributing belief in  $T_1$  would help to explain a lot of the group's behaviour. Why does the scientific community fund and pursue research projects that are of interest only if  $T_1$  is true? Why does the scientific community endorse and teach from textbooks that give much greater space to expounding and explaining  $T_1$ ? Why do departments in this area hire those with the mathematical expertise required to understand  $T_1$  when that expertise is useless for understanding  $T_2$ ? In each case, we might say: because the community believes  $T_1$ . However, according to PBAA-2, the group does not believe  $T_1$ , since no majority believes  $q_1 \& q_2 \& q_3$  and no majority believes  $r_1 \& r_2 \& r_3$ .

This backstory for (THEORY) also provides a counterexample to Jennifer Lackey's own favoured account of group belief, which she calls the Group Agent Account (GAA) (Lackey, 2020, Section 1.5):

GAA: A group  $G$  believes that  $p$  iff (i) there is a significant percentage of  $G$ 's members who believe that  $p$ , and (ii) are such that adding together the bases of their beliefs that  $p$  yields a belief set that is not substantively incoherent.

GAA is an interesting compromise between CSA and PBAA. Like CSA, its first clause aggregates at the highest level. Its second clause does not aggregate at a lower level, but it does place a constraint on the relationship between beliefs at the lower level—it demands they must not be substantively incoherent.

However, in the example of the scientific community from above, for half of the members, the basis of their belief in  $T_1$  is  $q_1 \& q_2 \& q_3$ , while for the other half, it's  $r_1 \& r_2 \& r_3$ . And  $q_1$  contradicts  $r_1$ ,  $q_2$  contradicts  $r_2$ , and  $q_3$  contradicts  $r_3$ . The bases are about as incoherent as can be.

Lackey does not merely appeal to intuition to support GAA. She also gives arguments why any case in which the first clause of her analysis is satisfied but the second isn't shouldn't count as a group belief: (a) first, she claims that such a state cannot coherently figure in accounts of collective deliberation; (b) secondly, she claims it cannot be subject to rational evaluation.

On (a): it seems to me that the group belief could figure in deliberation. Suppose the community is deliberating about whether to invite a  $T_1$ -theorist or a  $T_2$ -theorist to give the keynote address at the major conference

in the area. It seems that the group's belief in the superiority of  $T_1$  could play a role in the discussions: 'Yes, we want the speaker who will pose the greatest challenge intellectually, but we don't want to hear a string of falsehoods, so let's go with the  $T_1$ -theorist,' they might reason, and all would assent to this.

On (b): Lackey asks what we would say if the group were to receive new evidence that  $T_1$  has greater simplicity and less explanatory power than we initially thought. For the first half of the group, this would make their belief in  $T_1$  more justified; for the second half, it would make their belief less justified. What would it do to the group's belief? Without an account of justification for group belief, it's hard to say. But I don't think the incoherent bases rule out an answer. For instance, we might be reliabilists about group justification. And if we are, then we look at all the times that the members of the group have made judgments about simplicity and explanatory power that have the same pattern as they have this time—that is, half one way, half the other—and we look at the proportion of those times that the group belief—formed by whatever aggregation method we favour—has been true. If it's high, then the belief is justified; if it's not, it's not. And we can do that for the group before and after this new evidence comes in. And by doing that, we can compare the level of justification for the group belief. Of course, this is not to say that reliabilism is the correct account of justification for group beliefs. But it does suggest that incoherent bases don't create a barrier to such accounts.

### 2.3 The prevalence required for an ascription

A final source of ambiguity in ascriptions of group belief in the aggregate mode lies in the choice of threshold above which the proportion of members of the group who believe the relevant proposition or propositions must lie in order for the group to believe. As we've seen in the accounts already described—namely, CSA, PBAA, and GAA—they say that all or most of the members must believe the relevant propositions: in CSA and GAA, all or most must believe  $p$ ; in PBAA, for each basis for a belief in  $p$ , all or most must believe it. But this suggests that a majority is sufficient, and that seems too lenient for many cases: if, in 1916, 62,820,010 Russians believed Rasputin was good, while 62,820,011 believed he was evil, I think it would be a push to say that (RASPUTIN) is true. But of course there is no magic threshold that applies in all cases. It is usually determined by contextual factors.

One prominent such factor lies in the stakes of decisions that are likely to be made by those who hear the ascription. Something like this happens also in cases of individual belief. I stand outside an operating theatre watching the preparations for surgery and my friend asks if the nurse thinks the patient is well enough to undergo the procedure. I know the

nurse is 70% confident the patient is well enough. I say: ‘The nurse believes the patient is well enough.’ Next, the surgeon comes by and asks me the same thing. It wouldn’t be appropriate to say to them: ‘The nurse believes the patient is well enough.’ 70% confidence is high enough to ascribe belief when I’m telling my friend, since they will make no major decision based on the information, but it is not enough to ascribe the belief when I’m telling the surgeon, who may well use it to decide whether or not to perform the procedure. And the same thing happens in the case of group belief, as we can see from (IPCC). Suppose you are interested in what the IPCC thinks about global mean surface temperature rise merely out of intellectual curiosity, or because you’re writing a history of the organisation. I know that 70% of those involved in the IPCC reports believe that temperatures won’t rise by more than 3C. When you ask whether the IPCC believe that, I say they do. But when a policymaker asks me in order to inform some decision whose success is sensitive to truth of the claim, then I might set a much higher threshold.

Just one final note before we move on from aggregate group belief ascriptions. The accounts I’ve mentioned above all suggest that it is only the prevalence of the relevant beliefs among its members that determines whether or not a group believes a proposition. But it seems that the split between suspension of judgment and outright disbelief among those members who do not believe might also be relevant. For instance, if 70% of Russians in 1916 believed that Rasputin was evil while the remaining 30% suspended judgment on the matter, I think I’d be inclined to judge (RASPUTIN) true. But if the 30% who didn’t believe instead explicitly disbelieved, and thought he was good, I think I’d be inclined to judge it false. So it could be that the contextually determined threshold that fixes the truth of many aggregate group belief ascriptions is not the threshold above which the proportion of believers must lie, but perhaps the threshold over which the proportion of believers *minus the proportion of disbelievers* must lie.

The upshot of this section is that there are many ways in which an aggregate group belief ascription might be ambiguous. It might not determine the subset of members of the group named whose attitudes are relevant; it might not specify the propositions such that the attitudes of the members of that subset towards those propositions are relevant; and it might not pick out the prevalence of pro and anti attitudes towards those propositions that is required for belief. In certain cases, I noted contextual or pragmatic factors that might help to disambiguate any such ascription. In the second half, when I note the bad consequences of the ambiguity, we’ll see that some consequences occur even when the ambiguity could be resolved by contextual or pragmatic factors, since those factors aren’t available to the typical audience.

### 3 Corporate group belief ascriptions

Christian List contrasts aggregate group belief ascriptions with corporate ones. According to him, a corporate group belief ascription is true when it is appropriate to think of the group in question as an agent in its own right and, when thought of in this way, it is correct to ascribe that agent a belief in the proposition in question. In this section, I describe four different sorts of meaning that a corporate belief ascription might have. In the first two, functionalism and interpretivism, we do indeed treat the group in question as an agent. But in the second two, we do not. So the category of corporate group belief ascriptions is wider than List imagines.

#### 3.1 Functionalism and Interpretivism

We begin with the two agential accounts of corporate group belief ascriptions. These correspond to two different accounts of belief from the individual case. The first is the Functionalist Account (FA):

FA: A group  $G$  believes  $p$  if and only if there are states of  $G$  that are functionally related to one another and to the actions of  $G$  in such a way that  $G$  counts as an agent, and one of those states is functionally related to the others in such a way that it counts as a belief in  $p$ .

The second is the Interpretivist Account (IA):

IA: A group  $G$  believes  $p$  if and only if the behaviour of  $G$  is best explained and predicted by ascribing to  $G$  a belief in  $p$ .

With an appropriate backstory, (IPCC) provides a case that functionalism gets right. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (or IPCC) is a highly structured collective entity with many rules and protocols that govern how its evidence should be gathered, processed, and used to form beliefs about certain matters, which are then passed through different committees, where they are aggregated and conjoined to produce further beliefs that are then passed to further committees that then aggregate and conjoin them to give the final considered view of the organization, which is then asserted in its reports. It would not be difficult to identify states and actions of the organization—certain committees having written certain reports, for instance, or certain spokespeople announcing certain claims—that are related to one another in the ways required to count as evidential states, basic belief states, inferred belief states, and actions. And this would be sufficient to render (IPCC) true.

Of course, the interpretivist is likely to agree that (IPCC) is true. And indeed, if an ascription is true on the functionalist account, it is likely true for the interpretivist, for if a group has the sort of states that are related as

they must be to count as beliefs, etc., then it is likely that we can predict its behaviour by treating it as an agent. But there will be cases in which the interpretivist ascribes a belief but the functionalist doesn't. One such case is (LABOUR). We might suppose that no-one who belongs to the university in question believes that women's labour is worth less than men's, while at the same time supposing that the pay structures, promotions procedures, and the working environment are such that the university's collective actions are best interpreted by ascribing to it that belief. In these cases, there may well be no states of the collective entity that are related to each other in the ways required to ascribe beliefs on the functionalist account. But it seems that there is a sense in which (LABOUR) is true nonetheless. Indeed, it is one of the key discoveries from thinking about institutional, systemic, or structural racism that collectives can behave as if they are agents with prejudiced beliefs even when their members do not share those beliefs, and even when there are no specific states of those collectives that might stand in functional roles that render them beliefs (Carmichael & Hamilton, 1967).

### 3.2 Corporate entities that aren't agents

So now that we've met the two main varieties of corporate group belief in which we treat the group as an agent in its own right, I'd like to argue that the category is broader than this. It is possible to treat a group as a structured corporate entity that is not an agent. Indeed, I think there has been too much effort spent on trying to identify exactly what would count as treating a collective entity as an agent, given that it is possible to ascribe beliefs to them even when we can't or don't.

Let me begin with what is perhaps the most common example given of group belief, namely, that ascribed in (JURY). Suppose that each member of the jury believes that the defendant is guilty. Each believes this because they have seen the same evidence that conclusively proves his guilt. However, the judge for the case has ruled that evidence inadmissible. What's more, without that evidence they would not believe him guilty, and indeed would believe him innocent. The judge instructs them to ignore the inadmissible evidence. They do so and agree to find the defendant not guilty. In this case, I think, it is correct to assert (JURY).

Now, since all of the jurors believe that he's guilty, we can tell that this isn't an aggregate group belief ascription. But I think it isn't an agential corporate group belief ascription either. After all, there is no sense in which the jury is functioning or behaving like an agent. First, note that, *contra* the implications of a functionalist ascription, there are no states of the jury that are related as the functionalist requires. For the functionalist would presumably require: (i) an evidential state that is the result of some input that comes from outwith the group, (ii) a belief state that is caused by the evidential state, and (iii) an action state that is caused at least partly by the

belief state—this might be the jury’s assertion of its verdict, for instance. The evidential state must be related to the inputs from the outside world in the right way, the belief related to the evidential state in the right way, and the action related to the belief state in the right way. But at some point in this chain, the inadmissible piece of evidence gets dropped: either the group belief formed on the basis of the group evidence doesn’t respond to the evidence correctly, or it does but then the group action taken on the basis of that belief doesn’t respond to the group belief correctly. And the result of this is that one of those points in the chain won’t constitute the right sort of relationship between the states it joins that is required for them to count as the propositional attitudes we need to ascribe the group belief.

Second, note that, for the same reason, namely, the mismatch between the input of evidence and the output of assertion, the jury is not behaving in a way that can be explained by treating them as an agent. And, what’s more, the jury simply doesn’t perform sufficiently many actions to trigger an interpretivist response anyway. For that, you need a whole pattern of behaviour that is best explained by positing belief and desire states.

But if (JURY) is correctly interpreted neither as an aggregate group belief ascription nor as an agential corporate one, then how should it be interpreted? I propose that (JURY) says this: (i) there are certain rules and protocols by which groups of this nature—that is, juries in criminal trials in the country in question—come to have beliefs; (ii) those rules and protocols say that the members must come to their group belief as a matter of collective assent following a period of discussion in which no appeal is made to any inadmissible evidence, so that we are confident that the discussion would have proceeded in exactly the same way had the group not possessed the inadmissible evidence; and finally (iii) following these rules and protocols in this case leads to ascribing to the group the belief that the defendant is innocent. This is what makes (JURY) true.

Here’s another sort of corporate belief ascription that fits neither the functionalist nor interpretivist account. Agnes, Bethany, Caleb, and Dragan are candidates for a job. The three members of the hiring committees rank them differently, as shown in the table below:<sup>2</sup>

	Member 1	Member 2	Member 3	Borda score
Agnes	1	1	4	6
Bethany	2	4	1	7
Caleb	3	3	3	9
Dragan	4	2	2	8

Now, suppose the panel discusses the candidates after sharing their rankings and agree to present Caleb as the best candidate, despite the fact

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<sup>2</sup>The Borda score of a candidate in an ordinal ranking like this is just the sum of the positions assigned to them by each of the rankers.

that none believe he is—perhaps they justify this by noting that he's the only one whom no-one thought worst. In this case, I think (HIRING) is true. But again: none of the members of the group believe the proposition in question, so it isn't an aggregate ascription; there are no states we can find that would support a functionalist ascription; and there is not sufficient collective behaviour by the hiring committee to support an interpretivist ascription.

Instead, this is the sort of case that motivates Margaret Gilbert's Joint Acceptance Account (JAA) (Gilbert, 1987):

JAA: A group  $G$  believes that  $p$  if and only if it is common knowledge in  $G$  that the members of  $G$  individually have intentionally and openly expressed their willingness to jointly accept that  $p$  with the other members of  $G$ .

I think Gilbert's account identifies an important sort of situation in which we ascribe group beliefs. But I think she mistakenly takes to be a general feature the rules and protocols that only govern certain sorts of corporate entities, such as a hiring committee or jury or library committee of an Oxford college. To see this, consider the hiring committee again. And now let's suppose that the rules that govern it do not permit discussions between its members. Suppose instead that those rules say explicitly that the group should hire whomever has the lowest Borda score—in this case, that's Agnes. Then I think it is a lot less clear that we should say that (HIRING) is true. There's a sense in which the committee does believe that Caleb is best, but there is also a sense in which it believes Agnes is. The ascription is ambiguous between these two senses. On the first, it is the official rules governing the committee that determine that it believes; on the second, it is the unofficial protocol that the committee determined itself and followed of their own accord.

### 3.3 Group belief and corporate responsibility

I have argued that, in some cases, where a collective discussion followed by joint acceptance is the official procedure by which belief is determined within a group, Gilbert's account gets things right. But Jennifer Lackey (2020, Section 1.2) has raised an important objection against any such Gilbertian ascription. Earlier, Anthonie Meijers and K. Brad Wray objected to Gilbert's analysis by noting that it makes group beliefs the sort of thing that the members of the group can choose to have (Meijers, 1999; Wray, 2001). That is, it entails voluntarism about group belief. And they take this to refute it since beliefs are not the sort of thing we can choose to have. Gilbert (2013) has responded by arguing that philosophers only think that non-voluntarism is an essential feature of belief because they take the individual case to be the paradigm case, while group beliefs are considered

secondary in some sense. If we were to consider group beliefs paradigm, we would never think that it isn't possible to choose beliefs.

However, Lackey bolsters the non-voluntarist objection by noting a worrying lesson it teaches us about Gilbert's view. Lackey's key example is (CIGARETTES). Suppose that, by the early 1960s, the executives and chief scientists of Philip Morris have all seen the same evidence that shows conclusively that cigarette smoke contains multiple carcinogens, and they've all come to believe this on that basis (Cummings et al., 2007). However, they discuss the issue and note that it would be better for the company if it could honestly assert that this is false. So, they decide collectively to take as their joint view that there are no carcinogens in cigarette smoke. According to Gilbert's JAA, the group thereby comes to believe that. But if the company goes on to assert it, it seems that it is lying. So, according to Lackey's objection, JAA must be wrong.

Now, there is a cheap way to avoid Lackey's objection. We might say that (CIGARETTES) is false in the scenario described because the official rules and protocols that determine whether or not Philip Morris believed something—the rules and protocols analogous to the jury's ban on inadmissible evidence—do not permit the sort of discussions that led to this joint acceptance. There is presumably a corporate reporting structure that includes minutes of meetings and the relationships between committees and so on. And we might say that, when we examine that structure, we'll see that, in the non-agential corporate sense of group belief that appeals to official procedures, it isn't true that Philip Morris believed that cigarette smoke contains no carcinogens.

But that merely pushes the objection back one step. For who is it who sets the official rules and protocols that determine whether Philip Morris comes to believe something? Surely Philip Morris itself. So now the question is why Philip Morris couldn't simply set up the rules and protocols in that way and thereby evade the charge of lying?

In fact, I think they could do that. And in some sense they would then believe that cigarette smoke contains no carcinogens. But the key point is that they wouldn't thereby lose their liability. For corporations can be found liable on the basis of their epistemic structures, whether they are simply poorly designed by accident or by design. This is akin to the following sort of case for individuals: I'm about to offer you a drink from a bottle in the fridge. Just as I pour it, a message arrives on my phone from my housemate. All I can see on my home screen is: 'Be careful! One of the bottles in the fridge contains white spirit, not water! It's the...'. I don't open the message to find out which bottle is the dangerous one, and I give you the drink from the one I was holding. It turns out to be the white spirit and you become seriously ill. In this sort of case, I am liable even though I didn't know that the drink I was about to give you was harmful. I am liable because I have designed my evidence-gathering procedures in such

a way that I will not learn of important information that might prevent me from harming you. And the same, I think, goes for Philip Morris in the case we're describing. The corporation is liable because the epistemic structures and procedures it's put in place are inadequate to providing them with beliefs that will ensure the safety of their consumers. They are guilty of what Hagemann & Grinstein (1997) call wilful blindness in their critical examination of *United States v. Bank of New England, N.A.*, one of the most widely discussed cases in which the presence or absence of corporate belief was important for the charge of corporate liability.

So, just as we saw in the previous section that there are many different sorts of aggregate group belief ascription, so in this section we have seen that there are many different sorts of corporate belief ascription. There are those that answer to the functionalist or interpretivist accounts, and those require us to treat the group as an agent. But there are also those that answer to the rules and protocols, either official or unofficial, of the corporate entities to which they're ascribed.

## 4 The consequences of ambiguity

We have now seen just how ambiguous group belief ascriptions are. They are ambiguous between aggregate and corporate meanings; among aggregate versions, there is ambiguity concerning the set of individuals to whom the group name refers, the level at which the aggregation should be done, and the prevalence of the pro attitudes that are required for such an ascription; and among the corporate versions, they are ambiguous between agential and non-agential versions, while the agential versions are ambiguous between functionalist and interpretivist versions, and the non-agential ones are ambiguous between those that appeal to the official rules and protocols of the corporation in question and those that appeal to the unofficial rules and protocols. In this section, I want to argue that this ambiguity has bad consequences, and that we should avoid making group belief ascriptions for this reason.

Before I begin, let me enumerate some of the many situations in which philosophers recommend that we avoid or abandon certain parts of language because of the bad consequences of using them.

Sometimes, philosophers argue that using the part of language in question inflicts direct psychological harm on certain individuals who hear it. For instance, this happens in the case of slurs when they are heard by those against whom they're directed (Anderson et al., 2013).

Other times, philosophers argue that using the part of language in question inflicts indirect physical or psychological harms, perhaps because it leads certain constituencies in its audience to think in a particular way that then makes certain directs harms more likely in the future. For instance,

this happens in the case of language that dehumanises a group of people. As Lynne Tirrell (2012) has argued, hearing this sort of language can make parts of its audience more likely to support or even participate in genocide. There is also a case to be made that the possibility of indirect harms provides at least part of Carnap's motivation for rejecting metaphysical language, which he took not only to be nonsense, but nonsense whose use gave support to a certain sort of right-wing politics, including the Nazism that was on the rise in Europe throughout the 1930s (Carnap, 1931 [1959]; Vrahimis, 2012). And Sarah-Jane Leslie (2017) and Sally Haslanger (2012) have argued that hearing assertions involving generics leads us to essentialize certain groups, which in turn leads us to ascribe negative properties to all members of the group on the basis of only one or two instances, and so to blame or ostracize innocent members of the group.

And yet other times, philosophers argue that using the part of language in question creates a bad epistemic or ideological environment. This might be because the language has some feature that makes it more likely that false and pernicious beliefs will spread through the community in which it is used, even when the speakers who use that language are not trying to deceive their audience. For instance, Joshua Habgood-Coote (2019) argues that we should stop using 'fake news' and 'post-truth' for this reason.

The argument I wish to make about group belief ascriptions is a combination of the second and third sort of argument described here. That is, I will argue that using such ascriptions in certain common contexts leads to epistemic harms by making it likely that false beliefs will spread throughout a population; but I will also argue that these beliefs are not just false but pernicious; they make certain non-epistemic harms more likely.

#### 4.1 The problem with generics

To introduce the problem, let me say a little about recent work on generics. A generic sentence has the form *Fs are G*. Examples include:

- (MOSQUITOS) Mosquitos carry the West Nile virus.
- (LABRADORS) Labradors are friendly.
- (SCOTS) Scots are violent drunkards.
- (BOOKS) Books are hardback.

Recent research suggests that, for certain sorts of property *G*, people are inclined to infer from *A very small proportion of Fs are G* to *Fs are G*, and also infer from *Fs are G* to *A large proportion of Fs are G* (Cimpian et al., 2010; Khemlani et al., 2012). The properties for which this is true are sometimes called *striking properties*, and they tend to be ones in which we have a significant practical interest. So I would be inclined to accept (MOSQUITOS) after I learn that around 1% of mosquitos carry the West Nile virus, but I

would not be inclined to accept (BOOKS) after I learn that around 20% of books are hardback, since I have a significant practical interest in avoiding West Nile virus, but not in avoiding or obtaining hardback books.

In the language of philosophers of logic, this research suggests that the introduction and elimination rules for striking property generics that people tend to use are not harmonious (Prior, 1960; Belnap, 1961; Dummett, 1991). Consider the binary logical connective *tonk*, which we'll write \*. The introduction rule for tonk is: From  $p$ , infer  $p * q$ . And the elimination rule is: From  $p * q$ , infer  $q$ . Then, chaining such inferences together, you can infer any  $q$  from any  $p$ . But such an inference is clearly not truth-preserving. So the inference rules for tonk are not harmonious. Similarly, chaining together the inferences about striking property generics mentioned above, if  $G$  is a striking property, we can infer *A large proportion of Fs are G* from *A very small proportion of Fs are G*. But of course this is not a truth-preserving inference either, and indeed it is an inference that will result in a lot of false beliefs, including ones that are likely to cause substantial non-epistemic harm, for instance, if people infer (SCOTS) from a couple of incidents of violent drunk Scots.

While this might seem like a distinctive feature of striking property generics, it is in fact something that they share with many uses of ambiguous language. After all, if a sentence  $S$  is ambiguous between two different meanings  $p$  and  $q$ , it is possible that I might infer  $S$  when I learn  $p$  and then infer  $q$  from  $S$ . Of course, that is unlikely to happen over a short space of time within one person. However, it might happen over a longer period of time if that person stores their evidence that  $p$  as the sentence  $S$ , and then forgets that it was based on  $p$  and infers from  $S$  that  $q$ . And it might happen if I learn  $p$ , then utter  $S$  to you, and you interpret  $S$  as  $q$  and come to believe that. In both cases, the inferences are not truth-preserving, and in both cases the inference might lead to false beliefs.

Now, it is hardly groundbreaking to point out that ambiguous language could lead to the adoption or spread of false beliefs. That point was never in doubt. The real questions are these: (i) Is it likely to lead to false beliefs? (ii) If so, are the false beliefs to which it is likely to lead very far from the truth? For instance, take the English sentence ‘Bob went to a bank on Tuesday’. The term ‘bank’ is ambiguous between the side of a river and a financial institution. So, if the sentence is misunderstood, it will very likely lead to a belief that is far from the truth. But, fortunately, it is very unlikely to be misunderstood, because nearly always prior evidence and context will determine which of these is most likely to be true and relevant and appropriately assertible in the conversational situation. So in this case the answer to (i) is *no*.

Now consider the sentence ‘The most recent *New York Times* article detailing recent research on the lab leak theory is fake news’. Joshua Habgood-Coote (2019) argues that the term ‘fake news’ is ambiguous between a range

of meanings, none of which is privileged. So there are a number of different meanings for this sentence corresponding to the different meanings of the term. And so in many situations when it is heard, it will be misunderstood and in many of those situations, it will lead to a false belief. So it is likely to lead to false beliefs and the answer to (i) is *yes*. But, as Pepp et al. (2019) point out, the different meanings between which the term ‘fake news’ is ambiguous are all quite close to one another. So while the sentence might lead to a lot of false beliefs, they’ll be very close to being true. For instance, on one understanding of the term, it means news that is false and known to be false to its purveyors and communicated with the intent to deceive; on another, it means news that is false and known to be false by its purveyors and communicated with the intent to muddy the epistemic environment so that people are less able to distinguish true reports from false. If the NYT’s report is said to be fake news in the first of these senses, but heard to be fake news in the second, it will result in a false belief about the intentions of the NYT, but not a dramatically false one. So the answer to (ii) is *no*.

So, I want to argue now that group belief ascriptions are likely to lead to false beliefs, and in particular false beliefs that are far from the truth. That is, for this part of language, the answers to (i) and (ii) are both *yes*. Given constraints of space, I’ll discuss just two different sorts of cases in which this occurs. But once the general pattern is apparent, it should be obvious how to generate more. What’s more, in each case, I’ll explain how the epistemic harms caused by the ambiguity can then lead to psychological, physical, and political harms.

## 4.2 Ambiguity in the scope of an aggregate ascription

We saw above that aggregate group belief ascriptions are often ambiguous in their scope. That is, the name of the collective entity to which they ascribe the belief does not pick out a unique set of individuals, but rather could refer metonymically to any of a number of different groups of very different sizes. In (RASPUTIN), ‘Russia’ picks out all Russians in 1916; in (BREST), it picks out the chief negotiators for Russia at the Brest-Litovsk conference. Now consider the following two sentences:

(UKRAINE) Bangladesh believes that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is just.

(WEALTHY) The UK believes it should increase taxes on higher earners.

And let us suppose that (UKRAINE) is true as an aggregate group belief ascription when ‘Bangladesh’ refers to the set of members at the top of the Central Government of Bangladesh, but false when it refers to the set of all Bangladeshi citizens—that is, most top government officials believe the

invasion is just, but most citizens do not. Then it is clear the harm that could be done if the sentence is uttered sincerely and truthfully with the first meaning, but heard by an audience with the second meaning. The first harm would, of course, be epistemic: it would lead people to form false beliefs. One false belief would be just the quantified claim that most Bangladeshi people believe the invasion is just. But this could easily lead to lots of false beliefs about individual Bangladeshi citizens and their attitude to invasion. These epistemic harms could then give rise to physical and psychological harms. They could lead to animus towards individual Bangladeshi citizens, perhaps an increase in hate crimes against them, as well as a general view of Bangladesh as a more militaristic and anti-democratic country than it is, which might affect popular opinions on foreign policy positions in the future and thereby affect foreign policy itself. Indeed, as I write this, some people are cheering the Lithuanian government's decision to withhold a donation of COVID-19 vaccines to Bangladesh on the grounds that Bangladesh did not condemn the invasion at the United Nations. So, the harms that result from this sort of misunderstanding are very similar to those that result from the lack of harmony between the introduction and elimination rules for generics that Sarah-Jane Leslie and others highlight. In both cases, we come to believe of a large group of people that they have some reprehensible feature—being violent drunkards for Leslie, being militaristic or anti-democratic for us—when in fact only a tiny tiny proportion have that feature.

(WEALTHY) shows that things can also run in the other direction. Let's suppose that this ascription is true if 'the UK' refers to the whole population of the country, but false if it refers only to the members of the UK government. Then, as for (UKRAINE), if (WEALTHY) is uttered and misunderstood, there will be epistemic harms due to the false beliefs that result, but possibly other harms if people vote to retain the government on the basis of a misunderstanding of their fiscal policy.

How likely is this sort of ambiguity to result in widespread false beliefs? There are a number of reasons why ambiguous language doesn't always result in widespread false belief. First, contextual and pragmatic factors often help us disambiguate ambiguous language. We saw this above in the case of (RASPUTIN) and (BREST), where background knowledge of the situation and the conversational context allows us to narrow down the range of possible meanings that could be expressed by the sentences. These factors might not narrow down the range completely, of course, as we see when it remains unclear whether (BREST) attributes the belief just to the chief negotiators or to the entire Russian diplomatic delegation. But it narrows it down sufficiently that the belief formed on the basis of hearing (BREST) will not be so wildly wrong, as it would be if it were misunderstood as talking about the whole population of Russia.

So disambiguation often requires detailed background knowledge. One

problem with this is that such group belief ascriptions are commonly used in situations in which the audience does not have the background knowledge required. This might be because of general ignorance about the group in question, as often happens when media in Europe or the US ascribes beliefs to Bangladesh, or because of specific ignorance of the relevant views of a well-known group, as when UK media ascribes beliefs about levels of taxation, when this is not a topic on which either public or government opinion is well known.

What's worse, when we hear any utterance, we use our background beliefs, or priors, to determine how we will interpret it. So, if someone's background degree of belief is reasonably high that Bangladeshi people tend to be militaristic or anti-democratic, then they will be more likely to interpret the utterance as ascribing the belief with this wide scope. If the utterer is a reliable source of testimony, then they will likely then store this belief as part of their evidence, and that will in turn make them more likely to interpret such utterances this way in the future, thereby bootstrapping themselves to a high degree of belief in the anti-democratic beliefs of Bangladeshi people outside the country's government.

### 4.3 Ambiguity between aggregate and corporate ascriptions

In the previous section, we saw some of the bad consequences that can result when a group belief ascription is intended as an aggregate ascription with a particular scope, but heard as an aggregate ascription with a different scope. In this section, we'll be concerned with the consequences that can arise when an ascription is intended as an aggregate ascription but heard as a corporate ascription. A particularly troubling instance of this is the following sort of sentence:

(MARRIAGE) The LGBT+ community believes that marriage equality is a priority.

Now, let's suppose that most of the members of the group to which this ascription refers do indeed believe this. That is, most LGBT+ people in whatever locale this is uttered do believe marriage equality is a priority. So the ascription, intended as an aggregate ascription, is true. Nonetheless, it is heard by its audience as a corporate ascription, perhaps because the term 'community' has connotations of a structured collective entity. Now, we enumerated four different varieties of corporate belief above: functionalist, interpretivist, non-agential official, and non-agential unofficial. Let's suppose it is heard as a corporate ascription of the non-agential official sort. That is, it imputes to the group of LGBT+ people in that locale a set of official rules and protocols by which the group's beliefs are determined. However, there are no such rules or protocols that stand to the group of LGBT+ people in an area as the rules and protocols of the IPCC stand to the

community of climate scientists involved in it or the rules and protocols of Philip Morris International stand to its employees. So the misunderstanding leads to the false belief that such a structure exists.

However, as before, the misunderstanding leads to further bad consequences than merely a false belief. I'll describe two, both anticipated by Adolph Reed Jr's writings in protest at the notion of a 'Black community' in the 1990s (Reed, 1996 [2000], 2000). He hints at them in this passage:

But who exactly is "the community"? How can we assess the claims of those who purport to represent it? These questions are seldom raised, much less answered. A strain of Jeffersonian romanticism obscures them among the left, for whom community implies an organic entity animated by a collective mind and will. From that perspective we don't need to ask how the community makes its decisions, how it forms its will, because it reflects an immediate, almost mystical identity of interest and common feeling. (Reed, 1996 [2000], 10)

The first lesson I draw from this passage: Suppose you understand an ascription of a group belief to a community, either an LGBT+ community or a Black community, as ascribing to it a non-agential official corporate group belief. Then you will think that there are some official rules and protocols that determine which propositions the community believes, just as there are rules and protocols that determine which propositions Philip Morris International believes. And, on that basis, you will likely come to believe that there is a final stage in the process defined by these official rules and protocols, and at that final stage the view of the community is formed and declared publicly by some sort of spokesperson, either verbally or in some sort of written report. After all, that's how it works for Philip Morris International or the IPCC or a trial jury or whatever other examples we might give. Now, as we noted above, the LGBT+ community, like the Black community that Reed describes, has no such rules or protocols. As Reed is quick to point out, "all social units are comprised of discrete individuals whose perspectives and interests and alliances differ" (Reed, 1996 [2000], 11). In fact, he advocated in favour of much greater bottom-up political organising among Black people that would create the sort of decision-making structure required to create such rules and protocols, and thereby make the term 'community' more appropriate, but his view was that, at the time he was writing, there were none. And the same, I would say, holds for LGBT+ communities in most places even today. And so, if you misunderstand the group belief ascription (MARRIAGE) as a corporate ascription that imputes structure to the LGBT+ community, then you will go looking for this structure and the spokespeople it involves. And of course there are always people who will be happy to be mistaken for playing such roles. Reed pinpoints some particular individuals in the Black community in the 1990s.

So one bad consequence of misunderstanding a group belief ascription like (MARRIAGE), which was intended as an aggregate ascription but is heard as a corporate one, is that the audience will come to assume that those individuals who present themselves as spokespeople for the group genuinely do speak on its behalf.

Now, this may not have further bad consequences in the case of (MARRIAGE), since we assume that most LGBT+ people in the locale in question do think marriage equality is a priority, so if the apparent spokespeople advocate for that, they won't be misrepresenting the attitudes in the group they purport to represent. But members of the audience who hear (MARRIAGE) will likely retain the false belief that these individuals are legitimate spokespeople and they will recall it when they next make a pronouncement. And at that point, they will infer from the pronouncements of these putative spokespeople that they reflect the view of the LGBT+ community as a whole. And since they are merely apparent spokespeople with no genuine authority to speak for the group, this is likely to lead us to false beliefs about what people in that group believe.

The second lesson I draw from the quoted passage from Reed: Those who think more about this apparent corporate structure, with certain unappointed spokespeople at the helm, will wonder how it could ever count as a legitimate epistemic structure. After all, the spokespeople have no way to canvas opinion from the community they purport to represent. So how do their declarations come to stand for the group? This is where the other part of the passage quoted above from Reed comes in. They can only be legitimate if opinion within the community is so homogeneous that they need only consult their close circle of acquaintances within the community to determine what the considered view is. This is what I take Reed to mean by the "mystical identity of [...] common feeling". So, those more thoughtful about the ascription will come to believe that the group is very homogeneous in its opinions. But this simply isn't true. Of course, on some issues, there will be widespread agreement. Indeed, we assumed above that there was among LGBT+ people about marriage equality. But, as before, the problem is that people will assume there is such homogeneity of opinion about other matters as well. If there weren't, how could the spokesperson speak on their behalf without extensive canvassing?

## 5 Avoiding the bad consequences

Let me conclude by drawing a recommendation from what has come before. I hope I have convinced you of two things: first, group belief ascriptions are highly ambiguous; second, even in what are reasonably good epistemic social conditions, namely, where those from whom you draw testimony are well informed and honest, that ambiguity is likely to lead not

only to false beliefs, but to false beliefs that are very far from the truth, and that in turn lead to further false beliefs and sometimes to harmful behaviour. On the basis of this, I want to suggest that we abandon such ascriptions, at least in those settings in which the chance of misunderstanding is high.

The decision to remove a piece of language from your usage is always a cost-benefit analysis. We've seen the potential benefits of removing group belief ascriptions from your usage. What are the costs? The usual cost in this situation is the loss of expressive power. This is a concern that has been raised about suggestions that we should drop 'fake news' (Pepp et al., 2019). The idea is that it picks out a concept that, while currently poorly explicated, is nonetheless not captured by any other piece of language—indeed, the failure to explicate it is sometimes taken to be evidence that we can't replace it by more secure language. I have some sympathy in that case. However, the cases we're discussing here are importantly different. I'm actually rather sympathetic to the idea that there are propositions that we can express using group belief ascriptions in certain circumstances that we cannot express efficiently using other language. For instance, recall (SAFETY) from above. How are we to express the proposition that this expresses without the group belief ascription? We could do it. Indeed, I did do it when I explained the meaning above. But it was very long-winded. And similarly for functionalist ascriptions or non-agential ascriptions. However, there is not really a cost to losing the language in these cases because, in the situations in which they are ambiguous, they're not actually expressing the proposition either. Or, perhaps they are in the sense of having that proposition as their speaker meaning, but that's not what's important when we're thinking about expressive power. We're interesting in having language that our audience will understand in a particular way. And in that sense, they're failing to express what we want them to. They're failing to be heard with the meaning that we intend.

So what's the solution in those cases? Of course, the philosopher, who is so often a central planner when it comes to language use, might wish us to introduce subscripts on 'believes' to distinguish the different meanings. But I don't fancy their chances of success. Rather, I think we must just take greater care to ensure that the intended meaning is clear either by sacrificing concision and being explicit, or by ensuring that the context and pragmatic factors successfully disambiguate. To do the latter, you might provide more of the background information that would push a listener to the correct interpretation, for instance.

It's no surprise that people who rely on the testimony of others will form false beliefs when the testifiers have false beliefs, or unjustified beliefs, or intend to mislead their audience. My claim here is that group belief ascriptions can give rise to these problems even if the testifiers are well-informed and honest and seek to inform their audience. Of course

you might wonder why, if they are honest and seek to inform, they would use ambiguous language. My conjecture is that people don't realise that such language is ambiguous. My evidence for this is that nearly all philosophical accounts of such ascriptions are monist: that is, they offer a single set of truth conditions that are intended to cover all such uses. In this sense, Christian List's argument is an outlier. But, whatever the reason, it does seem clear that well-intentioned, honest people do use the language of group belief ascriptions in ways that lead to exactly the epistemic, psychological, physical, and political harms I've enumerated above. I suggest we stop doing that.

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