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Belief, Acceptance, and What Happens in Groups

Some Methodological Considerations

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Introduction

The vast majority of the discussions in epistemology have focused on the epistemic states of human individuals.¹ Those discussions consider, for example, what it is for individual human beings to believe that such-and-such or to know that such-and-such. For present purposes we will call the inquiry in question *individual epistemology*.

Individual epistemology leaves outside its purview a whole range of everyday ascriptions of epistemic states. For in everyday thought and talk ascriptions of belief and other epistemic states commonly include ascriptions both to human individuals and to groups made up of individuals.

Thus we might speak of Jones's belief that the team will win, or of the team's belief that it will win. We might speak of Smith's belief that there is an after-life, or of her bible-study group's belief in an afterlife. Robinson might say that she believes her country is the best in the world, or she might say, in reference to the relevant citizen body, "We believe this is the best country in the world".

Ascriptions of epistemic states to groups raise the question of what it is for a group to have beliefs, knowledge, and so on. We shall call the inquiry that focuses

¹ Here we use "states" in a broad non-technical sense to include e.g. episodes and dispositions.

on these questions *collective epistemology*.² This inquiry is by now well under way with a rapidly growing literature.³

The broadest concern of this paper is the relation between individual and collective epistemology.⁴ It approaches this relation by considering some prominent contributions to collective epistemology. These include a relatively long-standing debate that invokes a distinction between “belief” and “acceptance” in specified senses of these terms. Among other things we shall argue that these contributions to collective epistemology throw into high relief an important methodological caveat that is often ignored: One should not assume that accounts and distinctions arrived at within individual epistemology are appropriately applied within collective epistemology, however central they are to individual epistemology.

8.1. Cohen on Belief and Believers

Twenty years after its publication, L. Jonathan Cohen’s *An Essay on Belief and Acceptance* is still one of the most cited sources for authors engaged in collective epistemology. Cohen has made his own contributions to the subject. In addition, his accounts of the nature of belief and acceptance have heavily influenced the continuing debate in collective epistemology that we shall discuss. We start, therefore with some discussion of Cohen’s work. We focus, first, on his ideas about belief.

On Cohen’s view, “belief that p is a disposition, when one is attending to issues raised, or items referred to, by the proposition p , normally to feel it true that p and false that *not- p* .”⁵ This account of belief, as Pascal Engel points out, has much in common with Hume’s conception of belief as belonging to the passive side of the human mind.⁶ At some length, Cohen situates “credal feelings” within the realm of sentiments when, on his use of the phrase, he writes:

What is important here is not to provide a phrase that is a synonymous equivalent for the word ‘belief’, but to place belief in its right conceptual category. Specifically, it is classifiable as a disposition to have a certain kind of mental feeling, not as a disposition to perform a certain kind of action.⁷

² Cf. (Gilbert 2004). We allow that either collective epistemology or individual epistemology could in principle have one or more skeptical outcome. Some have argued that individuals are not knowers; some have argued that they are not believers. As we discuss later, some have argued that groups are not believers.

³ See, e.g. (Gilbert 1987; Gilbert 1989; Tuomela 1992; Clark 1994; Schmitt 1994; Cohen 1995; Tuomela 2000; Wray 2001; McMahan 2002; Tollefsen 2002; Bouvier 2004; Mathiesen 2006; Pettit 2010).

⁴ We take *social epistemology* to be something of a mongrel category depending on how it is interpreted. In any case, it is not our specific focus here. For a classic source see (Goldman 1999).

⁵ (Cohen 1995, 4).

⁶ (Engel 2000, 11); echoing (Cohen 1989, 20).

⁷ (Cohen 1995, 11).

While the ability to believe, on this view, is inextricably linked to feelings, what Cohen refers to as “acceptance” is not. In his words,

To accept that p , is to have or adopt a policy of deeming, positing, or postulating that p —i.e. of including that proposition or rule among one’s premises for deciding what to do or think in a particular context, whether or not one feels it to be true that p .⁸

Cohen holds that the distinction between belief and acceptance is significant because it makes an important difference to human life that we are able both to believe and to accept propositions and that we understand that this is so.⁹

8.1.1. *Cohen on groups and belief*

Given his understanding of belief it is no surprise that Cohen was skeptical about group or collective belief.¹⁰ Focusing on organizations, he says:

When we look closely enough, and get behind the metaphor or the accidents of vocabulary, we find that organizations are typically engaged in accepting premises or pursuing goals, not in experiencing beliefs or desires. No doubt this is for two main reasons. First, organizations share with human adults the ability to formulate what they accept or decide in language . . . Secondly, an organization is not exposed at all to the chemical or physiological stimulation of feelings.¹¹

This suggests the following general argument. Groups are incapable of having or being disposed to have feelings; believing involves having or being disposed to have feelings, in particular credal feelings; so groups are incapable of belief.

In assessing that argument, let us assume, first, that groups cannot be *disposed* to have feelings if they cannot *have* feelings, and, second, that groups are indeed incapable of having feelings in the sense at issue here. The second assumption would seem to be true, if feelings are understood essentially to involve *subjective experiences*. We shall so understand feelings here.¹² It follows from these assumptions that groups cannot be disposed to have feelings. Given these assumptions, then, we must allow that *if* any believer must be disposed to experience credal feelings,

⁸ (Cohen 1995, 4).

⁹ (Cohen 1995, 61) Cohen maintains that the distinction between belief and acceptance also gives us important insights into questions about the epistemology of animals, infants, and artificial intelligences as well as into persistent philosophical problems including Moore’s paradox and self-deception. Compare (Engel 2000, 11).

¹⁰ We use the phrases “group belief” and “collective belief” interchangeably in what follows.

¹¹ (Cohen 1995, 55)

¹² Cf. Cohen’s phrase “mental feeling” in one of the above quotations. It is of course common in everyday speech to refer to the emotions of groups as in “The team was furious with its manager” and “We just loved the opera”. One can take these seriously without allowing that groups have subjective experiences of their own. For detailed discussion of a particular ascription of collective emotion see (Gilbert 2001). Gilbert (2014) discusses collective emotions generally.

then groups are not believers. This argument, however, does not clinch the case against group belief.

For one thing, Cohen's account of belief has not generally been accepted, and a variety of criticisms have been made of it. Raimo Tuomela, for instance, argues that, when distilled, Cohen's credal feelings are little more than "the thought that the content of the belief is true."¹³ In other words, so-called credal feelings are not really *feelings* at all. Leslie Stevenson criticizes Cohen's appeal to credal feelings in another way. Stephenson identifies examples that one might very naturally call credal feelings—like the feeling that one's spouse is in the house despite knowing that he or she is dead—but that do not intuitively seem like beliefs. So credal feelings may not, after all, be the mark of *belief*.¹⁴

Irrespective of the correctness of Cohen's account of belief, there is another reason for thinking that the above argument does not clinch the case against group belief. The argument relies on Cohen's account of belief. That account, however, was based on the individual human case.¹⁵ A plausible way of seeing Cohen's account, then, is as an account of belief *as it occurs in individual human beings*. If Cohen's account of belief is seen in this way, then, even if it is correct, it leaves open the nature of belief in the *collective* case.

8.2. Methodological Remarks: With Reference to Plato's Approach to Justice

The point just made suggests some important methodological points. We preface our discussion of them by recalling Plato's methodology in the *Republic*. Though he is primarily concerned with justice, as opposed to belief, his procedure is instructive.

Plato's overarching aim is to understand what it is for an individual human being to be just. Early in his discussion, however, he notes that justice is commonly ascribed both to individual human beings and to political societies (*poleis*). He then suggests that an inquiry into the nature of justice in the individual case may benefit from an inquiry into the nature of justice in the collective case. Presumably justice in the one case and justice in the other will have something in common. Both, after all, are cases of *justice*.¹⁶

¹³ (Tuomela 2000, 128).

¹⁴ (Stevenson 2002, 111).

¹⁵ That this is so is clear enough from his discussion in, say, (Cohen 1989) where all of the initial expository examples concern individual human beings. He is, of course, operating in the context of a long epistemological tradition in philosophy and cognitive science that betrays no interest in the collective case. Cohen is an exception here but his discussion of the collective case is relatively cursory and comes after the main expository work has been accomplished.

¹⁶ (Plato, Grube, and Reeve 1992 Bk II, 368 b–e).

Plato investigates the collective case first. Taking account of some of the salient features of this case he goes on carefully to probe the individual case, an inquiry that proceeds to a large extent in its own terms.

For present purposes the main point about Plato's procedure is not his starting with the collective case. His stated reason for doing so is not, indeed, particularly convincing. The main point is that Plato clearly sees it as both possible and appropriate to engage in *two distinct inquiries* in relation to justice: an inquiry into the nature of justice in the collective case, and an inquiry into the nature of justice in the individual case. Though he believes the results of the former may be expected to help with the investigation of the latter, he also believes that, by and large, each should be investigated on its own terms.

There are several lessons for epistemology here. In contemporary epistemology inquiries into the nature of belief and so on have started with the individual case. The results of these inquiries may well help to throw light on the nature of the collective case. Nonetheless caution is required with respect to the use of results deriving from the individual case in approaching the collective case. There may be significant disanalogies between these cases, despite their having some features in common. Careful, independent investigation of the collective case—as of the individual case—is required in order properly to understand it. Quite possibly, such careful investigation of the collective case will help to throw light on the individual case as well.¹⁷

Let us return for a moment to the argument, drawn from Cohen's work, to the effect that groups are not believers. A proponent of this argument may be ignoring the methodological points just made. For he (or she) may be adopting uncritically a concept of belief developed within individual epistemology—the concept articulated in Cohen's credal feelings account—when approaching the collective case.

Whether or not application of a given concept is warranted in relation to the collective case can only be decided given the details of that case. We take it that a full appreciation of this will involve an inquiry into the intended referents of those everyday statements that, on the face of it, ascribe beliefs to groups—an inquiry central to collective epistemology.

Later we shall argue that the methodological points made in this section are apt to help us to understand the stalemate that has arisen in a current debate in collective epistemology. This debate owes much to Cohen though its proponents generally do not accept all of the particulars of his account of belief. The debate focuses

¹⁷ See e.g. (Priest ms).

on a particular account of the referent of those everyday statements that appear to ascribe beliefs to groups, an account whose accuracy it does not dispute.

Before turning to that account, and the debate it has prompted, we briefly note some of the problems associated with a different type of account. This is the account that may first come to mind, and that Cohen, for one, appears to espouse. It is the failure of this type of account, among other things, that has led theorists to focus on something different.¹⁸

8.3. Collective Belief Ascriptions: The Failure of Summativism

Although Cohen doubts that there are collective beliefs—in light of his understanding of belief—he is aware of the prevalence in everyday life of what are, on the face of it, ascriptions of beliefs to groups: utterances such as “The team believes it will win”, “My bible study group believes in an afterlife”, and so on. We shall refer to all such statements as *collective belief ascriptions*. We include under this label statements such as “We believe that. . .” where no established label for a type of group is at issue. In such cases it may be clear both to the speaker and the audience that the speaker’s words are not simply elliptical for “We all believe that. . .” or “We both believe that. . .” Rather a belief is here ascribed to *us* as opposed to each one of us.

This is what Cohen says about collective belief ascriptions:

When a community or nation is said to believe or desire that *p* this is normally a figurative way of saying that most of its individual members or most of its official representatives believe or desire that *p*.¹⁹

He suggests, then, that when someone appears to be ascribing a belief that *p* to a group he (or she) is really ascribing that belief to most of the group’s members or most of its official representatives.

Years earlier, Anthony Quinton had written something similar:

Groups are said to have beliefs, emotions, and attitudes . . . But these ways of speaking are plainly metaphorical. To ascribe mental predicates to a group is always an indirect way of ascribing such predicates to its members. With such mental states as beliefs . . . the ascriptions are of what I have called a summative kind. To say the industrial working class is determined to resist anti-trade union laws is to say that all or most industrial workers are so minded.²⁰

¹⁸ The next section covers ground familiar to those specializing in collective epistemology, and is intended largely for non-specialists.

¹⁹ (Cohen 1989, 383).

²⁰ (Quinton 1975, 9) cited in (Gilbert 1987; Gilbert 1989). Since then Quinton has become the poster-philosopher for views of the kind he expresses here.

We shall call an account of the referent of everyday collective belief ascriptions an account of *collective belief*. One can think of Quinton and Cohen as offering such an account. It may be tempting to accept their proposals since irrespective of these authors' contributions, one's initial attempt at providing an account of collective belief is likely to take the following form:

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

Borrowing Quinton's term, we shall refer to this as a "summative" account of collective belief. A *summative account of collective belief*, by definition, places at its core the condition that *all or most members of the group in question have the belief that is ascribed to the group*. We shall refer to this as the *summative condition*.²¹

More complex summative accounts than the one just formulated are possible. For instance, one might add to the above the condition that everyone in group G knows that all or most members of G have the pertinent belief.²² We shall therefore refer to the account consisting of the summative condition alone as the *simple summative account* of collective belief.²³

The simple summative account clearly has its attractions. For one, it appeals only to the beliefs of individual human beings, an appeal with which we can assume most theorists are comfortable. Further, it makes no allusions, implicit or explicit, to a "group consciousness" or the subjective experiences of groups. It is, one might say, completely realistic. As Margaret Gilbert has argued for some time, however, there are good reasons to reject the simple summative account and, indeed, to reject all summative accounts of group belief.²⁴

The following simple example may help to make the point. Joe meets Karen and, wanting to say something pleasant, comes out with "Lovely day!" Karen, wanting to be agreeable says "Yes, indeed!" Joe and Karen then come across Fred, who grumbles about the day's weather. Karen confidently responds, on behalf of Joe and herself "We think it's a lovely day!" Karen's statement seems to be on target, as a statement of collective belief, irrespective of any personal beliefs of the parties regarding the weather.²⁵

²¹ Call an account of collective belief "correlative" if, according to that account, a group cannot believe that p unless at least one member of the group believes that p. All summative accounts are correlative, but not vice versa.

²² An account discussed in (Gilbert 1989, ch. 5) and elsewhere adds a more complex, "common knowledge" condition to the summative condition. The initial philosophical discussion of "common knowledge" is in (Lewis 1969).

²³ For presentation of several different summative views see (Gilbert 1989). For a smaller range see (Gilbert 1987).

²⁴ (Gilbert 1987; Gilbert 1989; Gilbert 1996) and elsewhere.

²⁵ Cf. (Gilbert 1989, 288f.).

This is not the place further to discuss this example. For present purposes the important point is as follows: this and related examples strongly suggest that what is properly acknowledged to be “our” belief may not be the opinion of all or most—or, indeed, any— individual group members. If, indeed, a group *G* can believe that *p* without any of its members believing that *p*, no form of summativism, however complex, can be right.

8.4. Collective Belief Ascriptions, Belief, and Acceptance

Suppose that no summative account of collective belief is correct. The question remains: to what exactly do everyday collective belief statements refer? In what follows we shall not pursue this question for its own sake. Rather, we focus on a debate that has arisen in connection with a particular non-summative account of collective belief, the joint commitment account of Margaret Gilbert.²⁶

As a way into this debate we return briefly to Cohen’s discussion. Cohen denies that groups have or, indeed, can have beliefs, and offers a summative account of the referents of collective belief ascriptions. He does not deny that groups can *accept* propositions in his sense. Indeed, he asserts that they can and sometimes do accept propositions in that sense.²⁷ Cohen’s openness to the idea of a group’s being able to accept propositions may prompt the following question: Is the phenomenon to which collective belief ascriptions refer a matter of acceptance in Cohen’s sense?

In the years following Cohen’s publications on belief and acceptance several authors have considered an analog of this question with respect to collective belief according to Gilbert’s joint commitment account of it.²⁸ More specifically, they have considered Gilbert’s account in light of distinctions between belief and acceptance that to some extent echo Cohen’s distinction, though the pertinent accounts of belief generally either ignore or fail to give a central role to credal feelings.²⁹

²⁶ We explain “joint commitment” and what we are calling the joint commitment account later in the text.

²⁷ As far as ordinary language use is concerned, to say that someone “accepts” a certain proposition is at least sometimes to say that he believes it. For instance, were *X* to say “Jack will not be elected.” and *Y* to reply “I accept that.” a reasonable gloss on what *Y* says may well be “I believe that”. Evidently Cohen would not agree that groups accept propositions in this vernacular sense.

²⁸ These authors include (Meijers, 1999; Tuomela 2000; Wray 2001; Gilbert 2002; Tollefsen 2003); Hakli (2006) continues the discussion with reflections on the foregoing material. We say more about the belief-acceptance distinction as it tends to figure in the debate shortly.

²⁹ (Wray 2001) is one who does include credal feelings in his account of belief.

Before focusing on these discussions, we need to explain Gilbert's joint commitment account. This was developed in order to account for a range of contexts in which everyday collective belief ascriptions are made, with further reference to important aspects of the situation once a collective belief was formed. With respect to the latter, Gilbert focused in particular on the fact that parties to an established collective belief take themselves to be in a position to rebuke one another for denying the truth of the proposition in question in certain contexts—though they may choose not to issue such rebukes, which may be the right decision all things considered.

8.5. Gilbert's Joint Commitment Account of Collective belief

As the label we are using for it suggests, joint commitment in Gilbert's sense is central to her account of collective belief.³⁰ The account runs roughly as follows:

The members of a population, P, *collectively believe that p* if and only if they are jointly committed to believe that p as a body.

This formulation involves several technical terms that will now briefly be explained.

First, what is it for two or more individuals to be *jointly committed* in some way?³¹ We can answer this question by starting with the more familiar idea of the personal commitment of a given individual.

If Jake decides to go to the store, then there is a sense in which he has *committed himself* to going to the store. He now has, if you like, a commitment of the will. A commitment in the sense we have in the mind is a normative constraint on behavior. Roughly, all else being equal, the committed person ought to conform to his commitment, in a sense of "ought" that is not specifically moral.³²

Through Jake's decision he accrues a personal commitment. By definition, when there is a *personal* commitment the committed person has unilaterally brought his commitment into being and can rescind it unilaterally by changing his mind.³³

³⁰ In prior work Gilbert has referred to this and related accounts of other collective phenomena as "plural subject" accounts. In her technical terminology, those who are jointly committed with one another in some way constitute, *by definition*, a plural subject. Since some have tended to read more than was intended into the phrase "plural subject", we have avoided that phrase here.

³¹ For a longer treatment see e.g. (Gilbert 2006 ch. 7). See also the introduction and chapter 2, in particular, in (Gilbert 2013a).

³² (Gilbert 2013b).

³³ There are richer notions of commitment, but we are operating with a simpler, yet important, notion. See (Gilbert 2013b).

In order for two or more people jointly to commit them all, it is neither necessary nor sufficient for each of those involved to make an appropriate personal commitment. That would indeed involve all of their wills. For joint commitment, however, their wills must be involved in a different way.

In the basic case of joint commitment, on which we shall focus, all of those involved must openly express their readiness together to commit them all in a specified way.³⁴ This suffices jointly to commit them all: they are now jointly committed in the way specified.

Once they are jointly committed the concurrence of each is required for the joint commitment to be rescinded, absent special background understandings. Thus one cannot unilaterally free oneself from its constraints. Things would be different if, rather than jointly committing them all, each had made a personal commitment of some kind. In that case each would be in a position to free himself from his personal commitment, without any input from the others.

In non-basic cases there are special “authorizing” joint commitments such that, for example, one person can bring it about that a given plurality of persons are jointly committed in a particular way. For instance, the members of a given group may be jointly committed to believe as a body whatever proposition their leader expresses belief in, in a particular context. So, if the leader, in the right context, says “Eating meat is wrong,” the members are now jointly committed to believe as a body that eating meat is wrong. In this kind of case the jointly committed persons may in principle be unaware of the content of their joint commitment. Cases involving special background commitments of the kind in question are, evidently, special cases, though they may be common. We set them aside here.

What is it to be jointly committed to believe *as a body* that *p*, for some proposition *p*? Roughly, the parties are jointly committed to emulate, in relevant contexts, a single believer—a single party who believes that *p*—by virtue of the actions, including the verbal utterances, of each. In order to conform to the commitment so understood, an individual member of *P* must act, or refrain from acting, in certain ways. For instance, she must not express beliefs contrary to or inconsistent with *p* in relevant contexts—not in an unqualified manner. It may be unproblematic for her to express such contrary beliefs when she is not speaking as a party to the joint commitment. But when she is, she must keep to “the company line.” Alternatively, she must qualify her statement as in “*Personally*, I doubt whether *p*.”

³⁴ “Openly” will suffice for present purposes. See (Gilbert 1989, ch. 4) for a more detailed discussion of the requirements of joint commitment formation that appeals to a particular account of “common knowledge”.

On this account, certain collective beliefs, such as those about the repugnance of an activity, will be more demanding than others, strongly impacting as they do our actions other than our verbal utterances. If we collectively believe that it is bad to smoke cigarettes, then I am not only constrained with respect to my speech, I am also constrained with respect to my cigarette smoking. If we collectively believe that everyone should do what they can in favor of energy conservation, I am constrained in my decision as to what car to buy, and so on. In contrast, if we collectively believe that the universe came into being with a big bang, while this may restrict my liberty to publicly doubt the theory, our joint commitment is unlikely to affect the way each of us goes about his daily round.

Gilbert has argued elsewhere for an important aspect of joint commitment that goes beyond anything that is involved in a concatenation of personal commitments. If Jake and Sue have jointly committed one another in some way then by virtue of that joint commitment and that alone, Jake is *obligated to* Sue to act in a way that conforms to the joint commitment, and the same goes for Sue.³⁵ Each has the correlative right against the other. In other terms, each owes the other conforming action.

This feature of Gilbert's account counts in its favor, she argues, since it provides an explanation for central aspects of the way people behave in the context of what they take to be a collective belief. These include something mentioned earlier: the parties to an established collective belief take one another to be in a position to rebuke one another for denying the truth of the proposition in question in certain contexts. One whose right to an action has been violated has the standing to rebuke the person who has offended against them.

The simple summative account favored by both Cohen and Quinton lacks this advantage. More generally, the prevalence of a particular belief among the members of a given population does not suffice to endow them with obligations towards each other to express, or at least not outwardly deny, the belief in question.³⁶

Note that there is nothing in the joint commitment account of collective belief that entails that all, most, or, indeed, any of the members of the relevant population personally believe what they believe *collectively*, either before or after the collective belief is formed. Prior to its formation, people can be ready, and express their readiness, together to commit one another to believe that *p* as a body without believing that *p* themselves. Of course all or most of them may believe that *p*, and this may be a common situation. It may also be the most desirable situation from a

³⁵ See e.g. (Gilbert 2006, ch. 7).

³⁶ See (Gilbert 1987; Gilbert 1989, ch. 5). For further discussion of the relevant notions of right and (directed) obligation, see e.g. Gilbert (2013a, ch. 13).

variety of points of view. In principle, however, one or more or even all of the parties may fail to have any personal views on the matter, or themselves think that not *p*. Nonetheless each one may be ready to join with the others to commit them all to believing that *p* as a body, as explicated here. Their motives may vary: one may wish to be done with discussion, one may be deferring to a more powerful person or wish to curry favor with him, and so on.³⁷

Once the collective belief is formed, there may be a tendency on the part of the people involved to form the corresponding personal belief. After all, they are committed to expressing that belief when acting as members of the group, and owe such expression to the other parties. It is plausible to suppose that one with no prior personal view on the relevant matter is likely to form the corresponding personal belief. Here too, however, it is not logically necessary that the personal views of any of the members will come to align themselves with the collective view.

Clearly, then, the joint commitment account is not a summative account. It neither states nor logically implies that all or most members of the population in question themselves believe what the group believes in a given case.

Plausibly, conversations, whether brief or extended, are a primary context for the formation of collective beliefs. Gilbert has argued elsewhere that this idea fits well with her account of collective belief: one can interpret what happens in a typical conversation, short or long, as at least in part a matter of collective belief formation according to her account.³⁸ In a conversation, propositions are proposed for collective belief by one participant and accepted or rejected by the other or others. If the proposal is accepted the interlocutors are jointly committed to believe the pertinent proposition as a body.

One further aspect of Gilbert's account should be mentioned here. She has argued that a central type of collective or social group is constituted by one or more joint commitments. Thus, for example, two or more people who previously did not together constitute such a group constitute one by virtue of the emergence among them of one or more collective beliefs.³⁹ Examples of groups of the kind in question include typical families, teams, clubs, and associations of various kinds. They also

³⁷ See (Gilbert 1989, ch. 5) for further discussion. In arguing for her account of collective belief, including the radical conceptual disjunction between a collective belief and the beliefs of the people involved, Gilbert has tended to focus on cases in which a group belief emerges in informal discussion or on the basis of a simple majority voting procedure. More recently, drawing on work of Laurence Sager and Lewis Kornhauser, and often in conjunction with Christian List, Philip Pettit has discussed various formal procedures for "aggregating" the personal beliefs of group members such that the resultant belief is distinct from that of any of the members. See e.g., (Pettit 2010).

³⁸ See (Gilbert 1989, ch. 5); for a more recent, extended discussion see (Gilbert and Priest 2013).

³⁹ For detailed discussion, see (Gilbert 1989; Gilbert 2006).

include relatively transient groups such as two people playing an impromptu game of catch.

Generally speaking, the authors we primarily engage with here—the “rejectionists”—do not question the accuracy of Gilbert’s account of the referent of at least some collective belief ascriptions. That is not their central concern. Rather, assuming that Gilbert’s account more or less accurately describes a real phenomenon, they argue that—whatever people may call it in everyday speech—the phenomenon in question is not belief, but acceptance.

To keep things clear and avoid prejudging the issue, we shall refer to the phenomenon Gilbert’s account describes as collective belief*. Here the asterisk after “belief” is intended to imply agnosticism on the question whether the phenomenon in question is belief or not. The previously mentioned authors have become known as *rejectionists*, then, on account of their rejection of the idea that collective belief* is belief.⁴⁰

Although our primary interest in the debate between rejectionists and their opponents is methodological rather than substantive, our methodological points will usefully be made in light of a relatively detailed focus on the substance of the debate.

8.6. Belief and Acceptance after Cohen

The following accounts of belief and acceptance are representative of those appealed to by rejectionists.⁴¹ Notably, these accounts are quite complex: both acceptance and belief are characterized in terms of as many as six features.

Acceptance is: (1a) voluntary, (2a) aimed at utility, (3a) shaped by pragmatic goals, (4a) not subject to the ideal of integration, (5a) context-dependent, and (6a) does not come in degrees. Belief, in contrast, is (1b) involuntary, (2b) aimed at truth, (3b) shaped by evidence, (4b) subject to the ideal of integration, (5b) context-independent, and (6b) comes in degrees.⁴²

These accounts and others much like them may be found appealing for several reasons. One is descriptive efficacy. These theoretical distinctions between belief and acceptance seem at least roughly to track a significant distinction that is

⁴⁰ (Gilbert 2002) introduced the label “rejectionist”; (Tollefsen 2003) labeled those who argue that collective belief is belief as “believers”. We shall refer to those who oppose rejectionists simply as their opponents for reasons that will emerge.

⁴¹ There are some exceptions including (Hakli 2006), and (Wray 2001), who, as noted earlier, associates belief with credal feelings. In order to keep our discussion to manageable proportions we shall work with these representative accounts.

⁴² See (Mathiesen 2007, 209–16).

represented in everyday speech. Thus we might say that a philosopher accepted that moral statements are truth-evaluable for the sake of a particular argument though he did not believe that moral statements are truth evaluable. Or we might say that a scientist provisionally accepted a hypothesis he knew to be unproven while working out how to test it experimentally. We might also say that in constructing his closing argument a trial lawyer did not accept his client's guilt, though he believed his client was guilty. Finally, we might also say that a philosopher accepted God's existence for the purposes of a proof of some kind, while acknowledging that, at the same time, the philosopher believes in God's existence. Thus, depending on the context one may be said to accept a proposition one does not believe, not to accept a proposition one does believe, or to accept a proposition that one does believe.

8.7. The Rejectionist Credo (1): Collective Belief* is Acceptance

We now turn to the debate between rejectionists and their opponents. Rejectionists agree with Wray when he asserts that "... the phenomenon that concerns Gilbert is a species of acceptance" and not a species of belief.⁴³ They have put forward a number of arguments for rejectionism which, evidently, has two distinct parts. First, in brief, collective belief* is not belief. Second, collective belief* is acceptance.

Gilbert countered the rejectionists' conclusions in her paper "Belief and acceptance as features of groups".⁴⁴ She argues, for one, that collective belief* is not acceptance, as the rejectionists claim.⁴⁵

In so arguing she focuses on what rejectionists say about the relationship of the will to acceptance, as opposed to belief. According to rejectionists a belief cannot be voluntary. That is, I cannot bring a belief of mine into being by an act of will, or not directly. Acceptances, in contrast, are directly willed into being: in order for me to accept some proposition I must directly will this acceptance into being.⁴⁶

The identity of the agent who wills the acceptance and the agent who thenceforth bears the acceptance is important in this connection. It seems that, without special authorization, no person or group can accept a proposition on the behalf of another person or group. Rather, acceptances must be willed *by the relevant agent*. That is, they must be willed into being by the one who thereafter accepts the proposition in question. In the case of my acceptances, then, I am the relevant agent. In the case of your acceptances, you are the relevant agent. In the case of collective

⁴³ (Wray 2001, 319). See also (Wray 2003).

⁴⁴ (Gilbert 2002).

⁴⁵ (Gilbert 2002, 59–63).

⁴⁶ In this discussion, Gilbert focuses on (Meijers, 1999).

belief*, if it really is acceptance, as the rejectionists claim, the social group whose acceptance is in question is the relevant agent—the social group itself, and not its members taken one by one.

If there can be a collective belief* that is not willed into being by the relevant agent, however, then it is not a case of acceptance, since acceptances, by their nature, are willed into being by the relevant agent. It follows that collective beliefs* as such are not, of their nature, acceptances.

In support of this general conclusion Gilbert argues that there are cases of collective belief* such that those who jointly commit one another to believe as a body that such and such have not previously together constituted a social group or collective. Rather, it is this very joint commitment, the commitment to believe as a body, that constitutes them as a collective.

Consider the following case: Six unrelated people are sitting in the same compartment of a train.⁴⁷ Each is minding his or her business, reading, staring out of the window, talking on a cell phone, and so on. None of them has yet made eye contact with any of the others. We take it that they do not together form a collective at this time. After a while one of them says, “Phew! It’s far too stuffy in here.” There is a general murmuring of assent as each person says something like “Yes indeed” or “Agreed!” Let us assume that the collective belief* that it is far too stuffy in the carriage has now been established among the six people in question, as is plausible given no special background circumstances.⁴⁸ Assuming, with Gilbert, that the parties to any joint commitment constitute a collective, then, at the moment their collective belief*—with its constitutive joint commitment—is formed, and not before, these six people constitute a collective, if only one whose central feature is its believing* that it is too stuffy in the carriage.⁴⁹

This example shows that, at least in some cases, collective beliefs* are not willed into being by the social group to whom the belief* is subsequently attributed. The relevant group simply did not exist, *qua* social group, at the time. Since any acceptance is only appropriately attributed to the agent that willed it, such collective beliefs* cannot be acceptances.

Examples like the one above suffice to reject the central tenet of rejectionism: that collective belief* as such is a species of acceptance. Moving to a different

⁴⁷ This example draws on (Gilbert 1989, 310).

⁴⁸ This assumption in no way disputes the possibility that, at the same time, all of the six personally believe that the compartment is too stuffy. The point relates only to generation in this context of the applicable collective belief*. The conditions described suffice for this.

⁴⁹ On the possibility of groups whose central feature is a particular belief, consider, for instance the Flat Earth society. Cf. (Gilbert 1989, ch. 5).

example allows us to consider the question of collective belief* and acceptance in a different, more familiar, context, that of an already existing collective.

Suppose the faculty members of a philosophy department gather for their weekly meeting. After the meeting has gone on for many hours, one professor says, "This meeting has gone on long enough." There is a general murmur of assent. Absent any special background considerations, this has the character of a non-controversial case of collective belief* formation. Unlike the previous case, however, the relevant group—the group of department faculty—predates the collective belief* in question, so it could in principle have willed the belief* into being.

Did the group will its collective belief* into being in this situation? We would say not. The wills of the members, qua members, even when publicly expressed, do not suffice to constitute the will of the group itself. They do, of course, establish a new feature of the group: the group has a new collective belief*. A group will, however, must be established as such by the group, however informally.

We take the following to be an example of the formation of a group will. Before they tired, the same faculty members were discussing the dwindling morale in the department. Students are disaffected, faculty do not talk to each other outside department meetings, and so on. A professor who has studied the way in which morale is kept high in athletic teams says "We faculty need [collectively] to believe[*] that this department is one of the best in the world."⁵⁰ The others concur.

We take it that this interchange establishes a resolution of the group of department faculty and to that extent represents the will of that group. Indeed, it is the group's will that it have a certain belief*, namely, that it is one of the best departments in the world.⁵¹

We do not deny, then, that there is a sense in which a group can will that it believe* something. We take it, however, that in many cases, even when the individual wills of the group members, qua group members, are involved, a group believes* something without first willing that it believe* it, let alone willing the collective belief* in question into being.

With respect to the rejectionist claim that collective belief* is acceptance, then, there are humdrum cases of collective belief* that do not bear the relationship to the will of the collective that would be required for these to be cases of acceptance. More precisely, the collective with the belief* did not *itself* will the belief* into being, though that belief* came into being as a result of the exercise of its members'

⁵⁰ The square parentheses are intended to indicate what he means; were he to have written out his statement, he would not have included any such parentheses, but rather understood it (we are assuming) in the terms indicated by the parentheses.

⁵¹ Note that we do not say that the group has *willed a belief* into being*. Rather it is the group's will that it have a particular belief*. We consider the former possibility in due course.

will. Contrary to the rejectionists, then, collective belief* is not acceptance. If it were, it would always be a creature of the group's will.

8.8. The Rejectionist Credo (2): Collective Belief* is Not Belief⁵²

Rejectionists argue that collective belief* is not belief. This may seem to be a doubtful conclusion, if one allows that collective beliefs* are what everyday collective belief ascriptions refer to. Everyday collective belief ascriptions are, after all, ascriptions of so-called beliefs to collectives. Setting that consideration aside, we shall consider a particular segment of the debate over this part of the rejectionist credo.

Gilbert argued at length in "Belief and acceptance as features of groups" that rejectionist arguments to the effect that collective belief* is not belief are not as strong as might be thought. In this vein she has addressed both the rejectionists' claim that beliefs "aim at truth", and their claim that a belief cannot be willed into being, or, in the terms we used above, the claim that belief is involuntary.⁵³ Here we continue the discussion with a focus on the latter claim, with special reference to an article by Raul Hakli that responds to that part of Gilbert's material.⁵⁴ For the purposes of our discussion here we shall accept the rejectionists' assumption that there is a sense in which belief cannot be willed into being.⁵⁵

A central premise in the rejectionists' argument is that whereas belief is such that one *cannot* will one's belief into being, collective belief* *can* be willed into being.⁵⁶ Following Gilbert, we have so far shown that there are collective beliefs* that are not willed into being—not by the group itself. The examples of the people on the train and the faculty members, which were offered in order to argue that collective belief* is not acceptance, both speak to this point. We now address the question: Is it *possible* for a group to will its collective belief* into being, even if collective beliefs* are not always generated this way?

⁵² If rejectionists constitute a collective then they would seem to be a collective whose credo is that they have no credo—given that a credo is a matter of what is believed.

⁵³ (Gilbert 2002) discusses the issue of "aiming at truth" at pages 51–9, and the issue about the will at pages 59–64.

⁵⁴ (Hakli 2006).

⁵⁵ The extent to which this is true in the individual case has itself been a matter of some debate, a debate we shall not enter here.

⁵⁶ At issue here is directly willing a belief into being. A typical case of willing a belief *indirectly* would be such as this: a husband wishing to believe his wife does not flirt with other men on social occasions deliberately turns away when a man approaches his wife on such an occasion. He thus deliberately precludes himself from confronting evidence contrary to his desired belief. No one disputes that people can will their beliefs into being indirectly in this way.

In discussion of this question Gilbert focused on an example akin to one in the last section, an example we develop a little further for present purposes. Fran and her partner Trudy explicitly adopt as their collective goal their collectively believing* that their future is bright.⁵⁷ Perhaps Fran says to Trudy “We need to believe[*] that our future is bright” and Trudy agrees. The setting of such a collective goal can, we have allowed, be seen as a case of a group’s willing that it believe* something.

Gilbert observes that the setting of this collective goal—this instance of group willing—does not *immediately* produce the desired collective belief* of Fran and Trudy. A new joint commitment must be made, a joint commitment constitutive of the collective belief* in question. Thus, after a pause, Trudy might say, in a cheerful tone, “Our future is indeed bright!” and Fran concur, thus establishing their collective belief* that their future is bright. It seems, then, that the pertinent collective belief* may yet count as a belief, granted the rejectionists’ assumption that beliefs cannot be willed into being.

Reflecting on Gilbert’s discussion, Hakli disputes her judgment that the relevant collective belief* in this case is not willed into being. He writes “Granted that a new joint commitment must be made, nothing special is required for that.”⁵⁸ He concludes that “there is no necessary or conceptual obstacle for the group to form a view according to its will”⁵⁹

One might agree with the point about the lack of necessary or conceptual obstacles while wondering if that is sufficient to refute Gilbert. After all, there are many humdrum ways in which some kind of slippage might have occurred between the formation of the group’s will to believe* and the formation of the collective belief* itself. For instance, the conversation might have been interrupted, the parties thereby losing the opportunity to make the crucial joint commitment. Or one party might have rethought the matter and told the other that she is not sure, after all, if a belief that their future is bright is what is needed, thus stalling or possibly aborting the process of collective belief* formation. Or the parties might simply have lost interest in the whole business and failed to make the necessary final move.

One sympathetic to Hakli’s position might respond that, in spite of this, it is relatively easy for a group to bring a collective belief* into being after resolving to do so. He might, indeed, aver that when Judy and Fran move from setting their collective goal to forming the desired collective belief* without a hitch, this is direct

⁵⁷ (Gilbert 2002) notes that there may be something off-color about the adoption of precisely such a goal in both the collective and the individual case.

⁵⁸ (Hakli 2006, 296).

⁵⁹ (Hakli 2006).

enough a connection between the group's will and the collective belief* to deny to it the name of belief—assuming, of course, that belief is such that it cannot be willed into being directly.

At this point we want to step back from the discussion of collective belief* and belief and note the following: Suppose that, when Judy and Fran do proceed to form their desired collective belief* without a hitch, it *has* been willed into being in such a way that it cannot be belief. Then the result of this and the last section taken together would be this: collective belief* is neither acceptance, nor belief.

8.9. Further Methodological Observations

We shall not pursue further the debate between rejectionists and their opponents. Nor shall we attempt a final conclusion on that debate. Suffice it to say, here, that even if the rejectionists' claim that collective belief* is not belief as they understand it is sustainable, there is reason to reject their claim that collective belief* is acceptance as they understand that.

We want to emphasize the following two observations. First, the disagreements within the debate over rejectionism are about categorization. They concern, more specifically, whether or not certain concepts of acceptance and belief apply in a particular context. Neither side questions that collective belief* happens. Second, in the work of both Cohen, discussed earlier, and those who largely follow him, the relevant articulations of the concepts of belief and acceptance derive from the individual case. The debate over rejectionism concerns the application of these concepts, so articulated, to the case of collective belief*, the details of which are agreed upon by all parties.

This brings us back to the methodological points we brought up in relation to Cohen's rejection of group beliefs, citing Plato's procedure in the *Republic*. These points are clearly pertinent to the debate over rejectionism, in relation both to the account of belief and to the account of acceptance at issue.

We now briefly develop this observation. In order to mark the fact that the basis for the relevant articulations of the concepts of acceptance and belief lies in the individual case, we shall in what follows refer not simply to belief and acceptance but rather to belief-*i* and acceptance-*i*.⁶⁰ With some development, the points made in our earlier discussion suggest that though there is some interest in asking

⁶⁰ Cf. the use of the phrase "individual belief" in Gilbert (2002).

whether collective belief* is belief-i, or, rather, acceptance-i, this is not the most important question to be asked. Indeed, these points recommend an alternative approach to collective epistemology.

For the purposes of the following discussion we shall assume that collective belief* is the referent of everyday collective belief ascriptions. Our points apply to any relevantly similar phenomena that may be invoked as the referents of everyday collective belief ascriptions. We shall also assume that belief-i and acceptance-i—belief and acceptance roughly as characterized by the rejectionists and others influenced by Cohen—are the referents of everyday ascriptions of belief and acceptance to individual human beings.

As illustrated earlier, someone may doubt that either the concept of belief-i or the concept of acceptance-i applies to the case of collective belief*. Suppose we assume, finally, that, indeed, though collective belief* is rampant in groups, groups neither believe-i nor accept-i.

This might tempt us to reconsider the articulated concepts of belief-i and acceptance-i themselves, thinking that collective belief* needs to be accommodated by one or the other—in particular the former, given that it is labeled “belief” in everyday life. So long as we are interested in individuals, however, these concepts and the distinction they mark, or something close to them, may be fine as they are.

Conversely we might be tempted to use the fact that collective belief* is not belief-i as evidence that it is not the referent of everyday collective belief ascriptions. Collective belief ascriptions could just be a *façon de parler* whose real target is some fact about the beliefs-i of individuals. The problem here is that, as discussed earlier, there are arguments against both summative and, indeed, correlative accounts of the target of such ascriptions.⁶¹

We advocate a third response. The concepts of belief-i and acceptance-i, roughly following Cohen’s work, were developed from considerations about individuals. But groups are not individuals, and it is unclear why we would expect concepts and distinctions designed to characterize the cognitive states of the latter to apply cleanly to the former, as the rejectionists, for instance, seem to do.⁶²

Indeed we can see the concepts of belief-i and acceptance-i, on the one hand, and collective belief*, on the other as belonging to two distinct inquiries. The concepts of belief-i, and acceptance-i, roughly following Cohen, are primarily concepts for individual epistemology. The concept of collective belief* is a primarily a concept

⁶¹ For concordant remarks see (Tollefsen 2003, 401–4). For the term “correlative” see footnote 21.

⁶² Cf. Gilbert (2002: 49) with special reference to the rejectionist use of an account of belief derived from the individual case.

for collective epistemology. This being so one should not be surprised if collective belief* fails clearly to be belief-i, let alone acceptance-i. Indeed, though the relations between collective belief*, belief-i, and acceptance-i are of some interest, the question “Is collective belief* belief-i or acceptance-i?” insofar as it presupposes that collective belief* must be one of these, appears to be misplaced.

8.10. Generic Epistemology

Supposing that collective belief* is neither belief-i, nor acceptance-i, what is it? If we want a parallel label, we could reasonably call it belief-c. Here we are assuming, as before, that it is collective belief* to which everyday collective belief ascriptions refer.

The naturalness of this labeling suggests that our discussion should not end with the distinction between collective and individual epistemology. Even if we understand that these are separate inquiries, there will be important questions that straddle the two. For instance: what are the analogies and disanalogies between belief-i and belief-c? What, for that matter, are the analogies and disanalogies between acceptance-i and its opposite number, acceptance-c?⁶³ How can these analogies and disanalogies be explained?

Answers to such questions are likely to throw into better relief the cognitive characteristics of both individuals and groups.⁶⁴ From this perspective, then, there is considerable value in the debate over rejectionism, which has occasioned much consideration of analogies and disanalogies between belief-i and acceptance-i and belief-c.

The pursuit of such questions can be part of either collective or individual epistemology. It can also be part of a third inquiry, which may be labeled *generic epistemology*. The questions of generic epistemology will include such questions as: what—if anything—is common to belief-i and belief-c? What, for that matter, is common to belief *whatever it characterizes*, whether human individuals, groups of human individuals, animals perhaps, or other beings?

With reference to our discussion of Plato’s methodology earlier in this essay, it may be noted that the author the *Republic* does not attempt to formulate a general characterization of justice. His main target, as noted, is what we may now call justice-i. He works towards an account of that by a careful examination of what we may call justice-c. He does not, however, go further than these two accounts, or advance to a further inquiry, beyond both the theory of individual justice and the

⁶³ See (Gilbert 2002); (Tollefsen 2003) on acceptance when “said of” groups.

⁶⁴ See (Tollefsen 2003; Hakli 2006).

theory of political justice, an enquiry that might be referred to as generic justice theory. To use his own terms, he does not attempt to come to grips with the *form* of justice, the *idea* of justice itself, justice as it pertains both to politics and to human beings.

Plato does not explain why he does not pursue a theory of justice in general. Whatever his reasons, and they may be good ones, it is not clear that epistemologists should follow his lead. There may well be merit in pursuing generic epistemology.⁶⁵ At least part of the basis for this would presumably be the combined results of individual epistemology on the one hand and collective epistemology on the other.

In that case there are surely some good pointers already in the literature, features of both belief-i and belief-c. For instance, the idea of belief “aiming at truth”, when suitably articulated, could be a central characteristic of belief in general, something possessed by both individual and collective believers.⁶⁶ This is not the place for an extended foray into generic epistemology.

8.11. Concluding Summary

We first distinguished between the projects of individual and collective epistemology. The former is concerned with the cognitive states of individual human beings and the latter with the cognitive states of collectives. We then argued that those engaged in one of these projects should not rely on accounts and distinctions developed specifically for the other, though they may find much of interest in the results obtained by those engaged in the other project.

As we explained, this methodological point has not generally been respected by researchers in collective epistemology. The opposite methodology is exemplified in influential work by L. Jonathan Cohen, in which he denies that groups have beliefs, as opposed to acceptances, as he understands these states. It is exemplified further by a recent debate in which revised versions of Cohen’s distinction have been brought into play. This is the debate between “rejectionists” and their opponents with respect to whether or not the phenomenon Margaret Gilbert has argued to be the referent of standard everyday ascriptions of collective belief is belief—or acceptance.

The debate over rejectionism has reached something of a stalemate. After reviewing some of its central features, we argued that though important points

⁶⁵ (Gilbert 2002 esp. 47–9).

⁶⁶ See (Gilbert 2002) on the relation of collective belief* to various ideas, from individual epistemology, of belief as having the aim of truth. Also relevant to generic epistemology is Gilbert (1989: 313).

have been made on both sides, there is reason to think that the debate itself is misguided. For, although the collective case is at issue, the debate operates with accounts and distinctions tailored specifically to the case of the individual. This is surely the wrong procedure. Though individual and collective epistemology will doubtless have related results, neither one should rely on accounts and distinction tailored specifically for the other. Rather, those working on either one of these projects should develop concepts of belief and acceptance appropriate to the particular project at hand, without being constrained by the results of the other, however helpful these results may be from a heuristic point of view.

With respect to collective epistemology, then, supposing for the sake of argument that Gilbert's account of collective belief is correct, the collective epistemologist needs primarily to be concerned with the particular features of collective belief*—its relation to truth, the will and so on. The same goes, *mutatis mutandis*, for whatever account of collective belief the collective epistemologist prefers.

In concluding, we briefly argued for the interest of generic epistemology. This is an inquiry that, while paying attention to the results of both individual and collective epistemology, can be seen as a subject in its own right.⁶⁷

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