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Do Collective Epistemic Virtues have to be Scaled-Up Individual Virtues?

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Can groups of people possess epistemic virtues? There has been some attention to this question in recent years in social epistemology and ethics. Interestingly, most defenses and criticisms of collective virtues so far have focused on proving or disproving that groups can have collective versions of individual virtues. Trying to or disprove that a group can have a good motivation that supervenes motivations of individuals, for example, is a typical strategy. But maybe group virtues are a completely different kind of animal. Does it make sense to demand that they resemble individual virtues? I propose that group virtues can be something different that individual virtues, and whether this is plausible or not depends on the theory we adopt about how virtues are grounded.

The Argument in Brief

In recent years, many social epistemologists and ethicists have shown interest in the idea of collective virtues. Collective virtues are virtues which are possessed by groups of people, or collective agents, rather than individual persons. Some argue that often when we say things like "this company is creative" or "this family is open-minded" we are attributing virtues to the group. In social epistemology, various philosophers have discussed collective epistemic virtues (Lahroodi 2007; Smart 2018; Levy and Alfano 2020). Some work on collective epistemic vices (the negative opposite of epistemic virtues) also exists (Broncano-Berrocal and Carter 2019). Collective moral virtues have also been debated in recent years (Fricker 2010; Beggs 2003; Cordell 2017; Konzelmann Ziv 2012; Sandin 2007; Astola 2021).

Responsibilists believe that epistemic virtues are a subspecies of moral virtues (Zagzebski 1996). This means that at least for those with responsibilist convictions, the work on collective moral virtues is also likely to be relevant for investigating the epistemic activity of groups. Collective virtue accounts have explanatory advantages for both ethics and epistemology. For example, it allows us to explain and morally evaluate positive and negative group phenomena which supervene individual actions and cannot be explained with reference to individual virtues (Astola 2021).

I noticed that many existing accounts of collective virtue tend to share a common assumption, that collective virtues must be upscaled versions of individually virtuous psychologies. This assumption makes arguments for collective virtues vulnerable to a particular kind of criticism. Critics of the concept of collective virtue also share the preoccupation with collective virtues needing to resemble individual virtues. Criticisms of collective virtues tend to go along these lines:

> Individual virtues always contain internal component x;
> A collective of people cannot collectively possess component x;
> Therefore, collective virtues cannot exist.

Underlying this argumentation scheme is the assumption that to be called a virtue, the structure of group virtues should resemble individual virtues. But let us ask, why should it? Arguments such as the above only work if one assumes that the good of moral virtue is grounded in the goodness of the psychological components of virtue. Some virtue theorists,

notably those endorsing agent-based virtue theories, hold this view (Slote 1995). In my view, the current work on collective virtues makes an implicit commitment to agent-based virtue ethics. This commitment makes it vulnerable to the above critique.

This is why agent-based virtue theories, out of all the types of virtue theories, might be the most difficult to scale up to the collective level. If we are serious about collectivist virtue theory, then perhaps we should consider whether non-agent-based virtue theories offer different pathways to understanding collective virtues. If we were to discard the agent-based virtue theory and adopt exemplarism or eudaimonism about collective virtues, then we may discover a version of collectivism that is less vulnerable to criticism. Exemplarist and eudaimonist virtue theories do not require virtue to have a set of any particular components. Rather they ground the goodness of virtues in their contribution to flourishing or admirability. Therefore, collective virtues remain a viable possibility at least for virtue ethicists and responsibilist virtue epistemologists with exemplarist or eudaimonist convictions.

Collective Virtues in Current Literature

Plato's *Republic* famously draws a connection between individual flourishing and the flourishing of the state. Harmony in the state mirrors the harmony of the soul. All virtues must be present for a state or a person to thrive. Plato scholars have shown that this can be interpreted in two ways.

One interpretation is that if all citizens of a state possess all the virtues, then the state will also be virtuous. The other is that the virtues can be distributed. For example, a state can also flourish if only its ruling class is wise, its soldiers courageous and its craftspeople temperate. The first interpretation corresponds with what is now called summativism about collective virtue, meaning that collective virtues is short hand for describing a collection of virtuous individuals. Every member must possess the full spectrum of virtues, for the state to be called fully virtuous.

In the second interpretation, the state is a supervening entity which has mechanisms that are analogous to the components of the individual soul. The ruling class functions like the ratio, the soldiers like the virtue of braveness and the craftspeople like temperance (Mulgan 1968; Plato, *Republic* 435e 1-3). Not all citizens need to be fully virtuous, it is enough that each class operates as it should. This last interpretation is very close to how collective virtues are conceptualized in current literature in virtue ethics and epistemology.

Fricker (2010) argues that institutions can have virtues in two distinct ways. They can arise out of group members' joint commitment to a motive or goal. For this, it is not required that the group members commit to that motive or goal as individuals. For instance, members of an amateur dramatics society may not by themselves be committed to the continuation of their society, but in their role as members, they are. This commitment held by the members is thus irreducible to the individual commitments.

The second way in which institutional virtue can arise is through the practical identities of members. A person, who is a part of a group, can take on a practical identity (wearing a hat) as a manifestation of their membership. An example of this could be a church committee, consisting of people who are judgmental towards poor people in their daily lives. Even such

members may display more understanding attitudes in the actions of the church committee, feeling that it is the stance of the church to refrain from judging others for their lack of wealth. Fricker's strategy is to argue that different components of virtue, like motivation, can have an irreducible group analogue. Therefore, given that it is also common to speak about groups as if they have certain virtues or vices, we may as well attribute virtues and vices to groups.

Fricker maintains that her argument works whether one has a skill-based or motivation-based virtue theory. She constructs the skill-based version of her argument, which states that "A collective C has a skill-based virtue V just when the members of C, *qua* members of C, commit to achieving the end of V, and they achieve this end reliably" (Fricker 2010, 243; see Byerly and Byerly 2016, 41). An example of this would be a night-watch group, who jointly act in a way that results in collectively vigilant behavior. A motivational account would state: "A collective C has a motive-based virtue V just when the members of C, *qua* members of C, commit to achieving the end of V because it is good, and they reliably achieve this end" (Fricker 2010, 242; see Byerly and Byerly 2016, 40).

The addition of "because it is good" refers to a joint recognition of the value of V. An example of this would be a diligent and thorough research team where "Its members all jointly commit to the motives of diligence and thoroughness; and the team lives up to those motives by proving reliable, over an appropriate span of time and contexts, in achieving their ends" (Fricker 2010, 242). In both cases, the argument rests on the idea of practical identity, or committing to a cause or activity *qua* being a group member.

Beggs (2003) takes a different strategy in arguing for group virtues. He argues that a group manifesting a certain kind of virtuous behavior, when none of the individuals can be credited with the virtue themselves, is enough to constitute a group virtue. He emphasizes the importance of virtuous behavior in the group being stable and its members being committed enough to the group to have it stay that way. Beggs does not require a group motivation, but states that is thesis merely relies on a certain kind of group agency, where actions can be predicated to the group collectively rather than distributively.

In Beggs's view, a group can possess a group virtue simply by systematically behaving in a virtuous manner, regardless of the motivations by which the virtuous behavior comes about. Let's say that a church committee decides to engage in extensive charity work, because all the members are desperate to post about charity work on social media and impress their friends. Even in such a case, the group as a whole is behaving virtuously, even if the individuals are not.

Fricker endorses the practical identity or joint commitments, which are intrinsically collective, as bases of collective institutional virtue. Cordell argues that this is not enough to make a virtue irreducibly collective. Both the joint commitment and the practical identity are irreducible to the personal commitments of the members. But this does not undo the fact that each member still chooses to take that practical identity individually, or commit to the group commitment individually. To quote Cordell (2017): "[Fricker] shows the irreducibility of a group of hat-wearers' motives to a group of non-hat wearers' motives, but then takes this to show the irreducibility of the group motive *per se*" (48). He means that just because a group of "hat-

wearers" may share motives which the same group as non-hat wearers would not share, it does not mean that the motivations in such a group are irreducible to the motives of the members. The same problem goes for practical identities. Hence, Cordell shows that Fricker's definition of group virtues does not describe anything irreducible, but rather something which is better described as a collection of individual traits, attitudes or commitments.

Cordell (2017) also criticizes another conceptualization of collective virtue, that of Beggs. Beggs argues that a group displaying a certain trait, which is over an above any trait displayed by individuals within the group, can be said to have a collective virtue. The basis of Beggs's argument is that "virtue" is simply a description of behavior and if that behavior is manifested, then the virtue can be predicated to the group. This, Cordell argues, is too lenient regarding the definition of virtue. If any "good" group trait can be a virtue, then this undermines the purpose of using the terminology of virtues and vices in the first place, rather than just collective good and bad.

Byerly and Byerly (2016) argue for collective virtues via a different route. Their argument however also rests on the assumption that the existence of collective virtues depends on the existence of collective analogues of individual psychological phenomena. Byerly and Byerly take virtue to be a disposition towards a certain kind of belief, and a certain kind of action. In seeing virtues as dispositions, the authors claim to take an Aristotelian approach. Instead of looking for collective analogues of skills or motivations, as Fricker does, they construct a theory of collective dispositions and show how this notion has advantages over collective skills or motivations as a basis for collective virtue.

These Arguments only Make Sense if the Goodness of Virtues is Grounded in the Goodness of Certain Psychological Dispositions

What all of the above accounts of collective virtue have in common, is that they all, in one way or another assume that collective virtues consist of upscaled versions of individual psychological phenomena. Fricker tries to show that collectives can have equivalents of motivation and skill. Cordell (2017) tries to argue that Fricker's and Beggs's accounts of collective virtue are not functionally equivalent to individual virtue. Byerly and Byerly (2016) try to show that collectives can have dispositions like the ones that exist in virtuous individuals. This preoccupation with collective virtue resembling individual virtue makes sense in the context of virtue theories that ground the goodness of virtue in the goodness of the psychological components of virtue. This is why it seems like all of these authors are, perhaps implicitly, committed to agent-based virtue theories.

To clarify this, let us examine what is meant by the grounding of goodness in a virtue. Every moral theory has a foundational concept, or source of intrinsic good. One can ask, for any such intrinsic good, why it is good or what makes it good? One way to ask this question is to ask: in what is its moral goodness grounded? I assume that for one moral fact to be grounded in another means roughly that the former fact is explained by the latter and that the truth of the latter is necessary for the truth of the former. I acknowledge that metaphysical grounding is a contested notion, and that both explainability and necessity as components of grounding

relations are also contested.[1] However, for my purposes here defining grounding in this way suffices.

In agent-based virtue theories, the answer to the question "Why be virtuous?" lies in the inherent goodness of the psychological dispositions making up a virtue. For Slote, who endorses an agent-based view of virtue ethics, a virtue is good because it is constituted by a good motivation. The intrinsic goodness of virtue is located in the motivation. The goodness of a good motivation is not grounded in anything else (Slote 1995). Slote's agent based virtue ethics has been criticized for its inability to distinguish between doing the wrong thing and doing the right thing for the wrong reasons. Sidgwick presents a counterexample where a prosecutor does his duty by prosecuting the defendant but does so with malicious intentions. In such a case, Slote's agent based virtue theory would conclude that the prosecutor acted wrongly. After all, in Slote's theory motivation is everything and the concept of a right action is derived from the virtuousness of the agent. Slote dismisses this criticism by showing that a prosecutor who, horrified by his own malice, fails to prosecute is failing in terms of having the correct motivation out of a sense of duty, to prosecute (Van Zyl 2005).

If one accepts a view like this, then the most important thing about virtues is the possessor's motivation. Due to this, the primary method of establishing whether someone possesses a virtue is to check whether they have a virtuous motivation. If an agent-based virtue theorist like Slote wanted to check whether a particular type of agent is capable of possessing a virtue, then the logical place to start is by determining whether the agent is capable of a virtuous motivation. For instance, knowing whether philosophical zombies can have virtues requires determining whether philosophical Zombies can have something like a virtuous motivation, or stable character traits. This will of course go for determining whether a group agent can possess a virtue. It must be determined whether a group agent can have good motivations.

How would one go about determining whether a collective can have good motivations or not? Presumably, exactly in the way Fricker goes about it. The first question one is faced with is: "what grounds a good motivation?" Intuitively, one may answer that a good motivation is grounded in certain cognitive phenomena experienced by an individual mind. Only individuals experience cognitive phenomena, therefore, one may be inclined to think that groups cannot have motivations. However, Fricker (2010) argues, using Gilbert's plural subject thesis, that virtuous motivations can be shared. Postulating the fundamentality of "we intentions" and collective agency above individual agency are ontological moves that state that the concept of "motivation" is not necessarily grounded in the cognitive phenomena of an individual. Fricker argues that collective virtues can exist, because it is possible for motivations to be collective. In Fricker's argument it is clear that the existence of collective virtues is seen to depend on the possibility of collective motivations.

Cordell's (2017) argument attacks the step that Fricker makes between the claim "groups can have motivations" and "practical identities of group members can constitute a group motivation." Cordell argues that practical identities are better explained as individual commitments of individuals to the group, or individuals insofar as they are group members,

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[1] For a more nuanced discussion of grounding, see Trogdon (2013).

not as one supervening group commitment. The lack of a collective and supervening group motivation means that the prospects of collectivism are limited according to Cordell. Cordell also draws the conclusion that upscaling motivations is problematic, and therefore collective virtues probably cannot work. In the making of this inference, Cordell implicitly commits to the view that a good motivation is the most essential property of virtue.

Similarly to Fricker and Cordell, Byerly and Byerly (2016) also commit to an agent-based grounding of virtue in their account of collective virtues. Namely, they define the virtue as a disposition and argue that collectives can have good and bad dispositions. However, not all virtue theories ground the good of virtues in the goodness of psychological dispositions or motivations. Exemplarist and eudaimonist virtue theories have a different grounding, which means that a different kind of argument may be possible for showing that groups can have virtues.

Collective Virtues can also be Grounded in Eudaimonia or Admirability

The foundational concept of virtue theories is the virtue, an inherently good character trait. Virtue ethicists have tried to ground the good of virtue in a naturalistic manner. Eudaimonism grounds the good of virtue in the human need for eudaimonia. Character virtues, as defined by virtue theories, are dispositions to act in a certain way which is good for others, and necessarily also leads to a flourishing life. Because it is in the interest of every person to flourish, the answer to the question "why be moral?" is provided, because it is good for you. Hence, a connection is made between the "telos" of a person, their happiness and their moral obligations, each stems from the human need for flourishing. Eudaimonists do not necessarily see psychological components of virtue, like good motivation, as inherently good. These things can be instrumental to eudaimonia. Eudaimonia is, in turn, grounded in desirability. Desirability provides an answer to the question "why be moral?"

Other virtue ethicists, notably Zagzebski (2017), adopt an exemplarist view on virtue theories. Exemplarism means that the goodness of virtues is grounded in, not eudaimonia or desirability, but admirability. Zagzebski's exemplarism is modelled after the theory of direct reference in philosophy of language. The theory of direct reference states that the meaning of a word is determined by pointing at observable phenomena, i.e. to determine the meaning of "water" one should point at water, not try to define water, i.e. "a colourless drinkable liquid". Zagzebski argues that moral virtues are identified in the same way, by pointing at exemplary people, like Jesus or Socrates. Such people are moral exemplars and they are identified through the emotion of admiration. Hence, in Zagzebski's account, the exact structure of the virtue is not as important for establishing that it is a virtue. In the same way that the meaning of "water" is not established by describing its structure "H2O, clear liquid" but by pointing at it.

Collective Virtues may not have to be Structurally Equivalent to Individual Virtues if they are Grounded in Desirability or Admirability

If we assume that eudaimonism is correct, then what do we make of the question "does trait x count as a virtue?" In order to establish whether a trait is a virtue or not, one would begin by trying to determine whether the trait is likely to, by itself, generally lead the agent to flourishing. Of course, in eudaimonist virtue theory, whether one flourishes or not depends crucially on whether one is contributing to the flourishing of one's community (MacIntyre

1986). Because flourishing in connection with the flourishing of others, is the most inherently good aspect of virtue, it becomes most important for a collective virtue also to lead to flourishing in connection to the flourishing of others outside the collective. It can be debated whether in the case of collective virtues this should be the flourishing of individual group members or the flourishing of the group as a whole. Arguably, both should count.

Eudaimonists disagree on what exactly is meant by a virtue's tendency or ability to produce eudaimonia. However it is generally agreed that the goodness of virtue is grounded in its ability, tendency or likelihood of producing eudaimonia. The significance of virtue as a concept, then, also depends on its reference and connection with eudaimonia. For a eudaimonist, the question of whether virtues can be possessed by collectives becomes the question: "Can collectives display long-term stable collective traits that lead to collective flourishing, in a way that connected to the flourishing of those outside the collective?" An example of a flourishing group might be a military unit with strong internal bonds of trust and friendship, with the collective goal of preserving peace and justice. Another example might be a welcoming and inclusive theatre group, which readily succeeds in its mission to empower people and amplify marginalized voices through the art of performance. Flourishing could be seen as an indication of virtue. No upscaled psychological phenomena needed.

If one adopts an exemplarist view, then one may assert that whether group virtues exist or not depends on whether or not it makes sense to recognize exemplary groups through the emotion of admiration. If people indeed admire groups, then a theory of group virtues can be constructed using the qualities of groups that are admirable. For an exemplarist, the question about the existence of group virtues is: "Are groups sometimes admired morally in a way that is distinct from admiring the members of the group individually?" Again, the examples of the military unit and the theatre group also serve as examples of groups that trigger the emotion of moral admiration, which serves as proof of group virtue.

Both exemplarist and eudaimonist virtue theories have various conditions, depending on the specific version of the theory. Without going into the specifics of what each type of theory tends to require, I think it is worth exploring how eudaimonist or exemplarist grounding of virtue would affect theories of collective virtues. If flourishing or admiration is more important than the existence of an inherently good motivation, then it becomes possible for a virtue to be multiply realizable. Collective virtue theory would perhaps no longer be affected by the style of argument that denies collective agents the possibility of having unified motivations, intentions or supervening thoughts.

A New Direction for Collectivist Virtue Ethics and Epistemology?

It is tempting to believe in the beautiful and elegant idea that what happens in the individual psyche also happens in group dynamics. The idea that the soul mirrors the state reveals a fractal metaphysics, where the same phenomena repeat themselves on different ontological levels. This elegant idea is exactly what lies at the heart of most collective virtue accounts. If we are serious, however, about the potential explanatory benefits of collective virtue theories, it may be worth exploring whether we can construct a theory of group virtues without the problematic assumption that group virtues must contain collective versions of

psychological states. Perhaps this can be done by starting from an exemplarist or eudaimonist grounding of virtues.

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