

Introduction

Groups engage in epistemic activity all the time—whether it be the active collective inquiry of localized epistemic communities such as scientific research groups or crime detection units, or the heavily institutionally structured evidential deliberations of tribunals and juries, or the more spontaneous and imperfect information processing of the voting population. In the philosophy of mind and action there is a matured literature advancing competing theories of what groups are and how they do what they do.¹ Such debates principally turn on whether groups are best construed as no more than the sum of the individuals that compose them acting in concert, or whether certain forms of practical and intentional interdependencies suffice to generate a new agent, a distinct group agent that is greater than, or at least different from, the sum of its parts. More recently, social epistemology has also flourished, expanding and making connections with other areas of philosophy.² With these two philosophical lenses now beginning to align themselves, the new vista before us is that of *collective epistemology*—a natural next step for social epistemology.³

¹ A few indicative landmarks in this expansive territory might be Gilbert (1989) and (2000); Bratman (1999); List and Pettit (2011); Tuomela (2013).

² See, for instance, recent edited collections in social epistemology: Goldman and Whitcomb (2010); Haddock, Millar and Pritchard (2010). Also Grasswick and Webb (2002) which was part of an issue of *Social Epistemology* devoted to the theme of 'Feminist Epistemology as Social Epistemology'; in which general connection see also Grasswick (2013).

³ To track the rise of 'collective epistemology', see Gilbert (2004), and Tollefsen (2006); the special issue of *Social Epistemology* edited by Mathieson (2007), and most recently collections edited by Schmid (2011), and Lackey (2014).

One of the key aspects of group agency is the deliberation that lies behind it, and the various epistemic commitments and capacities that are involved in such deliberations. The relevant debates in epistemology, concerning such things as competing accounts of collective belief, justification, and knowledge, have now begun to flourish. The essays in this book, however, are not on the whole directly focussed on these issues, but rather explore different epistemic aspects of the behaviour of different sorts of group—institutional bodies, the moral community, informal groups, religious communities, the state, or simply the population at large. To this extent the book is part of an expansionist trend in epistemology of the last decade, consisting in the exploration of new epistemological projects that go beyond the traditional problems such as the refutation of scepticism, the nature of warrant or the analysis of knowledge. The essays collected here explore different aspects of the epistemic practices of groups, thereby indicating the great range of ways in which epistemological issues permeate the well-functioning, or otherwise, of different kinds of human collectivity.

This volume collects essays by leading philosophers of different but coinciding persuasions in order to generate a more multi-lateral conversation than is ordinarily possible—but which is highly desirable given the manifestly common concerns, and the breadth of significance associated with these matters of collective epistemic practice. The essays each explore some region of our collective epistemic practice; and each essay has a particular focus that brings it under one of the following broad section headings: Epistemology, Ethics, Political Philosophy, Philosophy of Science. The essays in the Epistemology section address topics that make them fit squarely within the core social

epistemological remit; the essays in the other sections address epistemological strands running through topics that primarily belong in other subject areas of philosophy. Together the essays indicate the richness and complexity of the philosophical issues generated by thinking about the epistemic life of groups. In what follows we give a brief outline of the individual papers, before closing with remarks about some of the central issues raised.

§1: Epistemology

Sanford Goldberg's paper 'Mutuality and Assertion' illustrates the importance of collective epistemology to a core topic in recent epistemology, namely epistemic disagreement. Goldberg's central question is this: can assertions be warranted under conditions of systematic disagreement – disagreement of the sort we find in philosophy, politics, religion, and the more theoretical parts of the social and natural sciences? On the one hand, he argues, there are strong reasons to regard assertion as governed by a demanding epistemic norm (such as knowledge), and it is plausible to think that in contexts of systematic peer disagreement we sometimes (often?) fail to attain knowledge. On the other, the practice of assertion persists in these areas, even under conditions of systematic peer disagreement. Indeed, the practice of philosophy would appear to depend on this practice. Goldberg proposes that this tension can be resolved by appeal to the hypothesis that the standard set by assertion's norm is fixed in part in terms of something beyond the individual: namely, what is mutually believed by the speaker and her audience in the context in which the assertion is made. This is what he terms the *Mutual Belief Norm*. His paper aims to provide independent

grounds for this hypothesis. His central argument is that we can do so by appeal to Grice's guiding idea that conversation is a co-operative activity between agents, so that the rationality of speech contributions is to be understood by reference to the group context in which they are operating.

Miranda Fricker's paper 'Fault and No-fault Responsibility for Implicit Prejudice—A Space for Epistemic Agent-regret' explores different forms of epistemic responsibility, individual and collective, as regards the influence of prejudice on judgement. On the whole, if one makes judgements that are significantly influenced by prejudicial bias, then one is epistemically at fault, so that epistemic blame would be justified, including self-blame. What about cases where the prejudice in question is an 'implicit bias' (non-conscious, automatic, evidence-resistant, and possibly contrary to one's beliefs)? Here too, Fricker argues, the default is that we stand as blameworthy, though allowing that there may often be extenuating circumstances that diminish the degree of appropriate blame. Compare an entrenched character trait of which the subject is unaware partly because it does not fit with her self-conception—'implicit' selfishness, perhaps.

Fricker asks, however, whether there are circumstances in which we are guilty of implicit prejudice and yet where blame *is* entirely inappropriate (not merely extenuated). An example might be a case of *environmental epistemic bad luck*: where there is prejudice in the epistemic environment, *and* one has no reason to suspect that this is so, resulting in an *epistemically innocent* inheritance of environmental prejudice. Where this is so, argues Fricker, we confront the space of a 'no-fault epistemic responsibility'—the epistemic analogue of 'agent-

regret'. We are not epistemically blameworthy, and yet we still have responsibility, as is revealed in the fact that there are epistemic obligations which apply to us specifically because it was through *our* epistemic agency that the prejudiced judgement was made. The fulfilment of those epistemic obligations, it is argued, will typically require the promotion of collective institutional measures to militate against the influence of prejudice in the future. This will be the case insofar as the practical remit of the individual's obligation coincides with an existing responsibility of the institution—for instance where an individual employee has responsibility for a given promotions process with the organisation. This coincidence of areas of responsibility means that the individual's responsibility to ameliorate a situation of potential bias quickly generates a collective, organisational one. And so, Fricker concludes, any counter-biasing epistemic responsibilities of individuals acting under the auspices of an institutional body (as an employee, for instance) will tend to beget collective epistemic responsibilities to take ameliorative counter-biasing measures.

Hans Bernhard Schmid contributes the third paper to this section: 'On Knowing What We're Doing Together: Groundless Group Self-Knowledge and Plural Self-Blindness.' Schmid is concerned with whether an influential view about intentional behaviour at the individual level is also true at the collective level. This is the view that in order to act intentionally, an agent needs to know what she is doing, where this knowledge is 'groundless' – that is, non-observational and non-inferential. His central question is this: Is our knowledge of what we are doing *together with others* of the same groundless kind? Schmid begins by

highlighting the central features of groundless self-knowledge on Anscombean lines: these are first-person identity, first-person perspective, first-person commitment, and first person authority. He then considers an argument that such knowledge is not available at the group level, on the grounds that a requirement for group knowledge is that each individual needs to know what her partners are doing, and this would seem to require observation and inference. Schmid concludes, however, that a moderate version of the claim that there is groundless group self-knowledge is defensible, if we maintain that the relevant knowledge involves plural pre-reflective and non-thematic self-awareness of what it is that the group members are jointly doing. Thus there is indeed a common structure to individuals' and groups' knowledge of their actions.

§2: Ethics

Elizabeth Anderson's paper 'The Social Epistemology of Morality: Learning from the Forgotten History of the Abolition of Slavery' opens the section on Ethics. Anderson's concern is how social groups learn from history, and how the organization of social groups bears on the prospects for improvements to group beliefs. Anderson's focus is on the particular history of slavery. She notes that during the 19th century, the belief that individuals have a right against being enslaved became a nearly worldwide consensus. Most people today believe that this change in moral convictions was a case of moral learning. But Anderson is concerned with how we can know this, or similar claims about moral progress, without begging the question in favour of our current beliefs? She proposes to

answer this question by developing a naturalized, pragmatist moral epistemology through case studies of moral lessons people have drawn from the history of abolition and emancipation. Anderson argues that processes of contention, in which participants challenge existing moral and legal principles governing interpersonal relationships, play critical roles in moral learning. Contention may take the form of argument, but takes many other forms as well, including litigation, protest, and revolution. Anderson concludes that progress in moral inquiry requires that groups are receptive to and open to the perspectives of others, and not simply of those in authority; it requires 'the practice of epistemic justice by and for all.'

In 'Changing our Mind', Glen Pettigrove considers the ways in which groups revise their beliefs, and proposes an account of group belief revision that allows modifications along a number of different dimensions. In particular, Pettigrove proposes an account of group belief revision that can accommodate modifications of (i) propositional content, (ii) non-propositional content, (iii) understanding, and (iv) conception. He develops his account by focusing on communities that are less discussed in the literature on social epistemology, namely moral and religious communities. By focusing on these communities, Pettigrove argues that Margaret Gilbert's account of group belief revision needs to be supplemented: while the view is adequate to changes in collective propositional knowledge-that, it fails to capture or accommodate revision of collective holistic knowledge-that, and in particular cannot accommodate revision to belief in groups such as religious communities or charitable organizations, which are built around normative commitments.

Collective understanding is the focus of Michael Brady's contribution to this volume, 'Group Emotion and Group Understanding.' Brady aims to explain how group emotion can have positive epistemic value in so far as it promotes group understanding; and he argues that this epistemic good would be very difficult to achieve, in many cases, without group emotion. After outlining philosophical, psychological, and neuroscientific support for the view that individual emotion promotes individual understanding, Brady applies this picture to group emotion and group understanding, and illustrates the connection between the two by focusing on the phenomenon of *public inquiries*. On this view, these inquiries are both motivated by group emotion, and aim at the attaining and dissemination of information so that some group understands what has happened. Without group emotion, he argues, it is unlikely that this collective epistemic good would be achieved. If this is correct, then group emotion is more valuable, from an epistemic standpoint, than traditional thinking on this issue supposes.

§3: Political Philosophy

Fabienne Peter's paper 'The Epistemic Circumstances of Democracy' focuses on a long-standing question in political philosophy, namely: 'does political decision-making require experts, or can a democracy be trusted to make correct decisions?' Peter notes that the traditional debate about this issue is *instrumentalist*, in so far as it is thought that the determining factor for the legitimacy of political institutions is the epistemic status of the outcomes of decision-making processes. Supporters of democracy argue that this system produces optimal outcomes and hence can be trusted, whilst critics of democracy argue that outcomes of democratic decision-making are sub-optimal

and hence the system cannot be trusted. Peter argues—against the instrumentalist approach—that attempts to defend democracy on epistemic instrumentalist lines are self-undermining. She proceeds to develop an alternative, procedural, epistemic defence of democracy, arguing that there is a *prima facie* epistemic case for democracy whenever there is no procedure-independent epistemic authority available on the issue that is to be decided.

In ‘The Transfer of Duties: From Individuals to States and Back Again’, Stephanie Collins and Holly Lawford-Smith consider whether a standard model for the transfer of duties from individuals to collectives applies to states’ duties. On the standard model, individuals sometimes pass their duties on to collectives, which is one way in which collectives can come to have duties. This involves certain crucial epistemic transactions: notably, that the individual communicate to the collective the knowledge that she wills the transfer of duty; and that the individual makes all reasonable efforts to bring it about that she has a reasonable belief that the collective will indeed discharge the duty appropriately. The collective discharges its duties by acting through its members, which involves distributing duties back out to individuals. Individuals put duties in and get (transformed) duties out. But can this general account make sense of *states’* duties? If so, to what extent? Do some of the duties we typically take states to have come from individuals having passed on certain individual duties? The authors note that there are complications to the picture: states can discharge their duties by contracting fulfilment out to non-members; states seem able to dissolve the duties of non-members; and some duties of states are not derived in this way. They argue that these complications do not undermine the general

account and its application to states. Furthermore, Collins and Lawford-Smith show that the application has an interesting upshot: by asking which individuals *robustly* participate in this process of duty transfer-and-transformation with a given state, they show how we can begin to get a grip on who counts as a *member* of that state.

A different political problem is taken up by Kai Spiekermann in his paper 'Four Types of Moral Wriggle Room: Uncovering Mechanisms of Racial Discrimination.' Spiekermann describes recent experiments in behavioural economics which reveal that individuals frequently use so-called 'moral wriggle room' to avoid complying with costly normative demands. 'Wriggle room' describes our tendency to shape and modify our belief-system so as to convince ourselves that our behaviour is morally appropriate or satisfactory, and to thereby avoid stringent moral obligations. Spiekermann develops a typology of 'moral wriggle rooms' that helps to illustrate different opportunities for strategic information manipulation, and shows how moral wriggling can often operate in an unconscious, yet systematic way. He then notes that the experimental literature tends to be focused on individual behaviour; however, failures to meet obligations of inquiry are rooted in social practices and institutions. For example, one's individual ability to maintain biased beliefs is much higher when all of one's peers have the same biased beliefs. As a result, problems generated by moral wriggling must be addressed the level of the group. Spiekermann illustrates this issue for social moral epistemology using the case study of racial discrimination, and considers a number of options we might employ to mitigate this problem.

§4: Philosophy of Science

James Owen Weatherall and Margaret Gilbert's paper 'Collective Belief, Kuhn, and the String Theory Community', opens the final section of the volume, in which scientific aspects of collective epistemology are discussed. The paper begins with Gilbert's well-known account of collective belief: this involves a joint commitment of certain parties, who constitute what she refers to as a plural subject. Gilbert has, in previous work, argued that ascriptions of beliefs to scientific communities commonly involve appeal to collective belief understood in her sense. This raises a potential problem when it comes to scientific change, however. For if Gilbert's view of collective belief as involving joint commitment is correct, and some of the belief ascriptions in question are true, then the members of some scientific communities have obligations that may act as barriers both to the fair evaluation of new ideas and to changes in scientific consensus. The authors argue that this may help to explain Thomas Kuhn's observations on 'normal science', and go on to develop the relationship between Gilbert's proposal and several features of a group of physicists working on a fundamental physical theory called 'string theory', as described by physicist Lee Smolin. Weatherall and Gilbert argue that the features of the string theory community that Smolin cites are well explained by the hypothesis that the community is a plural subject of belief. As a result, reflection on the practices of an actual scientific community provides further support for Gilbert's account of group belief.

The final paper in the volume focuses on issues of trustworthiness in scientific research. In 'Collaborative Research, Scientific Communities, and the Social Diffusion of Trustworthiness', Torsten Wilholt argues for the thesis that when we trust the results of scientific research, that trust is inevitably directed, at least in part, at collective bodies rather than at single researchers. As a result, he proposes that reasonable assessments of epistemic trustworthiness in science must attend to these collective bodies. Wilholt supports his thesis by first explaining the collaborative nature of most of today's scientific research. He argues that the trustworthiness of a collaborative research group does not supervene on the trustworthiness of its individual members, and points out some specific problems for the assessment of epistemic trustworthiness that arise from the specific nature of today's collaborative research. Wilholt then argues that the social diffusion of trustworthiness goes even further; on his view, we always also need an assessment of the trustworthiness of the respective research community as a whole. Communities, he claims, play an essential role in the epistemic quality management of science. To see why this role is indispensable, Wilholt investigates and delineates three dimensions of what is desirable in a method of inquiry: the reliability of positive results, the reliability of negative results, and the method's power. Every methodological choice involves a trade-off between these three dimensions. The right balance between them depends on value judgments about the costs of false results and the benefits of correct ones. Conventional methodological standards of research communities impose constraints on these and thereby harmonize the implicit value judgments. Trusting that the research community has done this in a suitable way is thus always part of placing our trust in a scientific result.

Together these papers indicate the extraordinary reach and internal diversity of the emerging field of Collective Epistemology. The strange individualism of English language philosophy is a historical contingency with a complex aetiology, and it has impacted on many different areas of philosophical discussion in ways that are not always easy to diagnose. But, in addition, it has also simply concealed many important philosophical questions from view, and one such is the range of questions addressed by the authors contributing to this book—questions relating to collective epistemic practice and its significance for how we know everyday things, how we pursue a shared moral life, how we conduct ourselves in professional contexts, how we design and modify our political institutions, and the forms of inquiry that govern the advancement of science. There are of course many other possibilities for collective epistemology than are exemplified here. Our hope is that this book will help further extend philosophy's conception of the proper domain of epistemology, thereby opening up many new promising avenues of understanding.

Michael Brady & Miranda Fricker

References

Bratman, Michael (1999) *Faces of Intention: Selected Essays on Intention and Agency* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)

Gilbert, Margaret (1989) *On Social Facts* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press)

Gilbert, Margaret (2000) *Sociality and Responsibility: New essays in plural subject theory* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield)

Gilbert, Margaret (2004) 'Collective Epistemology', *Episteme* Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 95-107

Goldman, Alvin and Whitcomb, Dennis (2010) eds. *Social Epistemology: An Anthology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)

Grasswick, Heidi E. and Webb, Mark Owen (2002) 'Feminist Epistemology as Social Epistemology', *Social Epistemology: A Journal of Knowledge, Culture and Policy*, 16(3): 185–196

Grasswick, Heidi, "Feminist Social Epistemology", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2013 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2013/entries/feminist-social-epistemology/>

Haddock, Adrian, Millar, Alan, and Pritchard, Duncan (2010) eds. *Social Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)

Mathieson, Kay (2007) ed. *Collective Knowledge and Collective Knowers*, Special Issue of *Social Epistemology: A Journal of Knowledge, Culture and Policy* Vol. 21, Issue 3

Lackey, Jennifer (2014) ed. *Essays in Collective Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)

List, Christian and Pettit, Philip (2011) *Group Agency: The possibility, design, and status of corporate agents* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)

Schmid, Hans Bernhard, Sirtes, Daniel, and Webe, Marcel (2011) *Collective Epistemology* (Epistemische Studien: Schriften Zur Erkenntnis—Und Wissenschaftstheorie) (Frankfurt: Ontos Verlag)

Tollefsen, Deborah (2007) 'Collective Epistemic Agency and The Need for Collective Epistemology' in Nikos Psarros and Katinka Schulte-Ostermann eds. *Facets of Sociality* (Frankfurt: Ontos Verlag)

Tuomela, Raimo (2013) *Social Ontology: Collective Intentionality and Group Agents* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)