

On Group Lies and Lying to Oneself:
Comment on Jennifer Lackey's *The
Epistemology of Groups*

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in *Asian Journal of Philosophy*, 2(73) 2023
Please cite published version.

1 Introduction

In *The Epistemology of Groups* [2021], Jennifer Lackey is interested in an exotic variety of lie: the lie told by a group. The possibility of such lies is invoked from the book's earliest pages as a motivation for the subsequent inquiry into notions like group belief and group assertion, and is the central subject matter of the book's culminating chapter. The capacities to believe and assert, Lackey reminds us, are prerequisites for the capacity to lie, and so for being held responsible for lying (5). An intuition that groups can lie is therefore an intuition that groups can have beliefs and make assertions. And eliminativism about group belief or assertion then has a very real social and political implication: that groups could never coherently be held responsible for lying.

However, across a range of cases from corporate malfeasance to professional negligence, we see Lackey make her case that an incorrect picture of what it is for a group to have a belief (or justified belief, or knowledge, or the capacity for assertion) is almost as morally dangerous as denying that they can have them altogether. When our discourse about collective intentional states goes unregulated, it becomes a further device by which responsibility can be laundered or evaded altogether. In contrast, her account of group level phenomena is meant to offer "the basis not only for understanding how groups are responsible for their linguistic behavior, but also for determining when it is appropriate to trace this responsibility to the individual members of the group and the spokespersons who represent them" (188). However, I want to draw out an entailment of Lackey's total view that I worry amounts to letting groups off the hook for bad behavior in precisely the way that she wants to avoid. I'll close though by drawing out what I think is a positive generative potential of her view: it helps us understand how groups, like individuals, have internal mechanisms for evading responsibility not just before others but also before themselves.

2 Groups Discourse and the Evasion of Responsibility

Lackey draws our attention to the way that a strategic agent may benefit by shopping around among the many convenient logics of responsibility that our groups discourse sometimes provides. Where accusations are levelled against a group, one strategy is to spare the group as such and find individual scapegoats: a few individuals in the collective who can take the fall for everyone else. So it seems to have gone in the case of Volkswagon's allegation that the massive deception that allowed them to skirt emissions standards between 2008 and 2015 was the fault of "a couple of software engineers" (qtd in Lackey, p. 1). Another strategy is to use the group as a Faraday cage which conducts all blame and punishment across its own surface and leave the individuals within relatively untouched. So it goes in cases like that of National Semiconductor's failure to test chips sold to the US Defense Department, where, as Lackey reports, "National Semiconductor took complete responsibility for defrauding the government at the level of the company and denied that any individual employees were deserving of blame" (3).

When others' accusations of wrongdoing go searching for an object in our vicinity, are we to be able to offer forth whatever object is most convenient to us, whether it be the group itself or specific individual members? Are such moves legitimate, or do they amount to using our notions of collectivity in order to lie to others and ourselves about our responsibilities? Lackey, and indeed the literature on group belief that precedes her, insists that there must be some principled way of understanding how the beliefs (and, indeed, actions) of the group are related to those of the individual, so that who bears responsibility in any given case is not decided at the convenience of the guilty.

But Lackey shows us that the dominant, non-summative accounts of group belief, for instance, still allows convenience to indirectly play too great a role. On views like those of Gilbert [1989], Tuomela [1992], and Pettit [2003], what a group believes depends not on the beliefs of the group members, but on various actions under members' voluntary control, like voting or explicit expressions of acceptance. Lackey (30-41) asks us to consider a case in which a tobacco company like Phillip Morris features a board whose members all individually know that smoking causes cancer, but whose explicit expressions of acceptance, or pattern of voting, are strategically devised to satisfy the non-summativists' conditions on the group's genuinely believing that smoking is non-addictive and perfectly healthy. Surely, Lackey urges us, we should want to be able to say that any statements made by Phillip Morris to the effect that smoking is safe are lies, given that all the board members know them to be untrue. But lying requires daylight between what is said and what is believed, and the non-summativists' accounts allow a savvy group to craft its beliefs to align perfectly with its statements— so it will turn out that the group isn't lying at all. In other words, these inflationary accounts offer a sort of moral cover to the board and its members: whatever they may have done, these accounts suggest, they

didn't *lie* to the public.

In contrast, Lackey embraces a moderate deflationism about group belief, on which a group believes something just in case a significant percentage of its "operative members" do, and moreover these members' bases for this belief, taken together, don't form an incoherent set (48-49). In this way dishonest groups, and their members, can't escape attributions of lying by taking any strategic voluntary actions. Lackey also does some work to proof the notion of group assertion against evasions of responsibility, though this time by moving in an inflationary direction. Groups, she establishes, sometimes assert through a spokesperson (149-150). Dishonest groups can't then get off the hook merely by scapegoating their spokespeople.

With this quick review of Lackey's views on group belief and group assertion under our belts, we can see that an interesting feature of Lackey's total view is that groups are uniquely vulnerable to asserting things they don't believe without realizing it. Consider the following case:

UNINFORMED SPOKESPERSON: A spokesperson for a pharmaceutical company gets put on the spot when she is asked at a press conference whether the company's signature product, an extended release opioid, is safe even when the coating of the pill is crushed or otherwise tampered with. The spokesperson doesn't know what the beliefs of the company are on this matter, but it is an issue that falls within the domain she was authorized to speak about on the group's behalf. She doesn't have time to consult with members of the group about what they actually believe, or even to let the group members know about what she plans to say, but she makes her statement in accordance with her best guess about what the group believes: that the product is safe even when the coating is tampered with. However, the vast majority of members of the board actually believe that tampering with the coating makes the product unsafe. Moreover, they all believe this for the same reasons: confidential internal tests, which the spokeswoman had no way of knowing about, have shown that tampering with the pill coating eliminates the delayed-release properties of the pill, which increases patients' risk of overdose and addiction.

On Lackey's view, this is a situation in which the pharmaceutical company has asserted that their medication is safe while not believing that it is safe. Note that it is a feature of her view, not a bug, that it makes this combination of group states possible: if a view did not allow groups to assert things they didn't believe, groups could never correctly be described as lying, which would amount to allowing them to evade responsibility. But cases like this one do have a further interesting feature: it seems that the group doesn't realize it is making an assertion contrary to its beliefs at the time that it makes it. On Lackey's view, the group believing that it was saying something it didn't believe would require a significant number of operative members believing this. But in this case they

don't; the company's operative members won't find out about this statement until after it's made. So the corporation doesn't realize it's asserting something it doesn't believe at least at the time of the assertion. And there's more: given Lackey's characterization of group belief, the company might fail to realize it said something it didn't believe even *after* individual members become aware of the spokeswoman's statement. Deflationary views of group belief, including Lackey's moderate deflationism, have the interesting consequence that groups have a particular susceptibility to having false beliefs about their own beliefs. This will reliably occur, for instance, in cases of what psychologists sometimes call *pluralistic ignorance*, where everyone in a group is convinced that they have a minority view when in fact they are in the majority. Suppose that in UNINFORMED SPOKESPERSON the operative members of the company do all believe that the medication is unsafe when tampered with for the reasons stated above, but don't realize that their colleagues have seen the test results they have, and so take it their colleagues believe it is safe. It remains true that the majority of operative members believe that the medication is unsafe when tampered with, and that their reasons for believing this form a coherent set, so on Lackey's view the group believes that the medication is unsafe. But because a majority of members believe that all the others believe the medication is safe, and their reasons for believing this form a coherent set, Lackey's view may also entail that *the group believes that it believes that the medication is safe*¹. It is wrong about its own beliefs. If this is the state of affairs even prior to the spokesperson's assertion, certainly her assertion will do nothing to improve the company's lack of self knowledge. So it may fail to realize it said something it didn't believe even after it knows what assertions it has made.

Let's be clear about the degree to which this would be an unusual condition of groups: it's not that individuals have no susceptibility to what we'll call "BB failure" (i.e. occasions on which they believe that p but don't believe that they believe that p), and I'm prepared to believe that in cases of BB failure individuals too may sometimes assert things they don't believe without realizing they're doing so. But because I am not sure there is an individual-level analog to pluralistic ignorance cases, it is my contention that, on Lackey's view, groups have at least an *additional* susceptibility to this circumstance. By way of a small digression, I note that there is a further disanalogy between individual belief and group belief on an account like Lackey's which I suspect has some bearing on their different vulnerabilities to BB failure: individual level belief is often taken to be *transparent* in a way that, on Lackey's account, group belief will not be. Transparency in this context refers to the fact that, to determine whether I believe that p, I do whatever is required to determine

¹I am skipping over some important details here: insofar as members of the group may not even think of groups as the sorts of things that have beliefs, it may be false, read de dicto, that they, and therefore the group, has any beliefs about the group's beliefs at all. It would already be a notable consequence of Lackey's view if groups systematically failed to have beliefs about their own beliefs in this way. But I am assuming here that some sort of de re reading of group belief statements will suffice to allow Lackey's view to generate affirmative conclusions about reflexive higher order group beliefs.

whether p [Evans, 1982, 227]. Group belief, on an account like Lackey’s, is not transparent in this way: the process by which the group determines whether grass is green is composed of the processes by which all its individual members determine whether the grass is green, which will involve their e.g. looking at some lawns. In contrast, the process by which the group determines whether it believes that p is composed of the processes that all the members use to determine whether the group believes that p , which involves their each thinking about *the other people who are in the group with them*. So the process the group uses to determine whether it believes that p is distinct from the process it uses to determine whether p . Further discussion is needed to explore how this failure of transparency for group level belief might be related to groups’ additional susceptibilities to BB failure, on accounts of group belief like Lackey’s, and how this modifies groups’ profiles as entities that can be held responsible for their actions.

In any case, so far I am just drawing out notable entailments of the view, and while it is interesting that these entailments mean there are differences between individual and group belief, I don’t mean to suggest that what I’ve said so far constitutes an objection. I do however think a serious worry arises when we look at these entailments of Lackey’s view alongside her account of group lies. While we’ve established that in UNINFORMED SPOKESPERSON a group asserts what it doesn’t believe, on Lackey’s view that is not sufficient to show that the pharmaceutical company in this case lied. Lackey argues at length that lying requires not just saying what one does not believe, but also an intention to be deceptive with one’s audience concerning the proposition asserted (186), where this involves concealing information from the audience regarding the truth of that proposition (171). As for what it is for a group to have an intention—deceptive or otherwise— Lackey defers to the existing literature, noting that “unlike with group belief and group assertion, much work has been done on group intentions, so this condition can be filled out with one’s preferred view” (186).

What do the going accounts of group intention say about whether there is a deceptive intention in UNINFORMED SPOKESPERSON, such that the group’s assertion might amount to a lie? One range of accounts give the clear verdict that there is no such intention here. These are deflationary accounts: accounts on which for the group to intend to ϕ all or most members of the group must intend, or bear some similar attitude, to ϕ ing. For instance, according to Michael Bratman, two people sharing an intention to ϕ requires that they both intend to ϕ , among other things [Bratman, 1993, 106]. For Margaret Gilbert, a set of people share an intention to ϕ when they’ve established up-front that they are “jointly committed” to ϕ -ing, where a joint commitment occurs when all parties come to commonly know of one another that they have individually and openly expressed a willingness to be so committed [Gilbert, 1989, 180-199]. Clearly neither Bratman’s nor Gilbert’s conditions are satisfied in UNINFORMED SPOKESPERSON: the members of the group have not individually expressed their willingness to commit to being deceptive in the group’s assertion that the medication is safe, and indeed they don’t individually intend to be deceptive in the

group's making of that assertion— they don't even know that the assertion is taking place until afterward!

So deflationary accounts of group intention, together with Lackey's account, yield the verdict that UNINFORMED SPOKESPERSON was not an instance of group lying. Is this a troubling consequence? Certainly UNINFORMED SPOKESPERSON is an instance in which the net effect of the pharmaceutical company's action is a deception of the public, but is it perhaps blameless in a way that should make us content to withhold the judgment that it is a lie? Whether or not one feels that way about the case as described so far, I think there are clearly additions that might make us feel otherwise. Suppose that it is no accident that the spokesperson is as uninformed as she is, or that the operative members of the corporation are unaware of the spokesperson's statement until after. A single scheming company executive has deliberately brought these circumstances about, specifically so that it would be impossible to say that the company intended to deceive the public. And from our theoretical vantage, this looks like a deliberate evasion of the criteria for group lying, and a way of dodging responsibility for the company's de facto deception. This addition to the case doesn't do anything to help it meet the conditions on deflationary accounts of group intention, but what it does do is make these accounts incompatible with what I have taken to be Lackey's overarching program here, which is ridding our discourse about group phenomena of the resources for evading responsibility. There is evidence that Lackey agrees with this: after stating that we should be able to plug any account of group intention we want into her account of group lying, she goes on to revise this in a footnote, noting that "this is not entirely true, as some views of group intention will be unable to accommodate most of the instances of lying discussed in this paper" (186, fn 32). While she singles out Bratman's as such a view and suggests that this exclusion will generalize to accounts of collective intention that "require common knowledge", we've in fact shown that the worry generalizes more broadly than that: any account of what it is for a group to intend to ϕ in ψ -ing that requires individuals in the group have any intentional states at all related to ψ ing will fail to count UNINFORMED SPOKESPERSON and cases like it as instances of group lies.

So if Lackey is to count these cases as group lies, she is committed to a definite preference for views that allow the group to intend to do something that few if any members of the group are even aware of. Throughout the book, Lackey distinguishes between deflationary and inflationary accounts of group phenomena, and it would be natural to restate this commitment as one to an inflationary account of group intention. Such accounts include functionalist and/or interpretivist views [e.g. List and Pettit, 2011, Huebner, 2014, Tollefson, 2015], on which group-level intention is realized by system states with many different combinations of individual-level properties so long as these states have the functional profile distinctive of intentions (e.g. taking group-level beliefs and desires as inputs and spitting out group-level actions as outputs) or are such that describing them as intentions as part of taking a more general "intentional stance" on the system is helpful for purposes like explanation and prediction. Such views perhaps have a shot at discerning a group intention to be deceptive

in cases like UNINFORMED SPOKESPERSON, and so vindicating the intuition that this case describes an instance of group lying.

But it is a complicated matter whether Lackey can easily embrace these views. In justifying her swing from moderate deflationism about some group-level phenomena to an inflationism about assertion she observes, plausibly, that one can give such authority to someone else to assert on their behalf, but can't have someone else believe or desire on their behalf (161-162). And with this in mind, she states the following principle, "when, and only when, it is possible to grant authority to an another agent or agent-like entity to do something on one's behalf does it follow that inflationism is true" (161). The issue is this: I think it's quite clear that I cannot have someone intend on my behalf. So it follows from Lackey's principle that inflationism about intention is false. If Lackey gives up this principle, she has given up her attempt to make the asymmetry between her accounts of belief and assertion not seem ad hoc. But if she keeps it, she cannot regard UNINFORMED SPOKESPERSON as an instance of group lying, and her total view of group phenomena creates too easy an opportunity for the evasion of responsibility.

In laying out this dilemma, I do want to be careful about some distinctions internal to the category of views Lackey calls inflationary. On some inflationary accounts of group phenomena, the group-level trait supervenes on individual-level properties while not being identical, at a type-level, to any one set of individual-level property-types, and so is not reducible to them; functionalist accounts of group intention are like this. On other inflationary views, the group level phenomenon doesn't even supervene on the properties of the individuals in the group; Lackey's account of group assertion is inflationary in this strong sense. Perhaps her principle should have said that *strong inflationism* is true when and only when it is possible to have someone else perform an action on your behalf. But, if we are right in concluding that her goals commit her to embracing at least weak inflationism about group intention, this revised principle would do nothing to help us understand why it should turn out that group belief and related phenomena are to be understood in moderately deflationary terms, while intention is to be understood in inflationary terms.

3 Coda: When Groups Lie to Themselves

Suppose that Lackey does find a rationale for the alternation between deflationism and inflationism across a range of group phenomena that allows her to embrace inflationism about group intention without contradiction. What I want to observe in closing is that her total view of group phenomena would then offer us an interesting picture of how *groups can lie to themselves*.

Her view certainly makes such lies possible. We've seen that her views on group belief and group assertion combine to allow that a group can say things it doesn't believe. And views of group intention that are likely to allow groups like the one in UNINFORMED SPOKESPERSON to intend to be deceptive with an external audience will also make it possible for a group to intend to be deceptive

with themselves. So groups can satisfy all Lackey's conditions on lying even with themselves as an audience. And because groups can fail to know what their own beliefs are, groups can lie to themselves *successfully* at least when the lie is about what the group itself believes. Groups, like individuals, might have internal mechanisms for avoiding painful or disadvantageous self knowledge.

It's worth really noticing what structural features of Lackey's view makes this possible. In both philosophy and psychology, self deception has long been a puzzling phenomenon: lying seems to require a duality between the liar and the lied-to, but a lie to oneself involves only a single individual. A popular psychoanalytic response to this puzzle historically was to insist that there were divisions internal to the self, say between the unconscious and the conscious, with a censor determining which unconscious drives got expressed in consciousness; in lying to oneself, says this account, one part of the psyche is the deceiver and another part the deceived. We have seen that Lackey's alternation between deflationary and inflationary views effectively splits the group-self into distinct parts, amongst which the intentional states required for lying are scattered: while a group's beliefs effectively reside in its operative members, its assertions (may) reside in its spokespeople, and its token intentions, perhaps, reside in many different places. Lackey's account then suggests that, for groups anyway, something like the psychoanalytic account of self deception ends up being true.

There is more to say here about how, if this perspective is correct, Lackey's view might then be challenged on grounds related to those on which the Existentialists rejected the psychoanalytic account of self-deception. But suffice it to say that I regard all this as interesting evidence of how generative and philosophically powerful Lackey's account really is.

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