

DEFENDING JOINT ACCEPTANCE ACCOUNTS OF GROUP BELIEF AGAINST THE CHALLENGE FROM GROUP LIES

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ABSTRACT: Joint acceptance accounts of group belief hold that groups can form a belief in virtue of the group members jointly accepting a proposition. Recently, Jennifer Lackey (2020, 2021) proposed a challenge to these accounts. If group beliefs can be based on joint acceptance, then it seems difficult to account for all instances of a group telling a lie. Given that groups can and do lie, our accounts of group belief better not result in us misidentifying some group lies as normal assertions. I argue that Lackey's argument is not decisive. The cases she proposes as challenges for joint acceptance accounts can be dealt with in the joint acceptance framework. I present two different readings of Lackey's central case, showing that in both readings Lackey's example of a problematic group lie should not be identified as a lie, but rather as an epistemic mistake by the group. What kind of mistake the group makes depends on the exact reading of Lackey's case, but either way the group is not telling a lie.

KEYWORDS: group lies, group belief, joint acceptance, Jennifer Lackey

Introduction

Joint acceptance accounts of group belief (e.g. Gilbert (1989, 1994, 2014)) hold that groups can form a belief in virtue of the group members jointly accepting a proposition. These accounts are well equipped to explain why and how group beliefs can differ from the beliefs that individual members have. According to joint acceptance accounts a group might have a belief that p , even if no single individual member has the belief that p . Recently, however, Jennifer Lackey (2020, 2021) proposed a challenge to these accounts. If group beliefs can be based on joint acceptance, then it seems difficult to account for all instances of a group telling a lie. Given that groups can and do lie, our accounts of group belief better not result in us misidentifying some group lies as normal assertions. Not only for purely theoretical reasons, but also because our theoretical framework ought to help us with social, moral and practical issues. We want to hold groups accountable for their lies, so we better identify group lies correctly. Hence, if Lackey is right, we should abandon joint acceptance accounts of group belief.

My aim is to argue that Lackey's argument is not decisive. The cases she proposes as challenges for joint acceptance accounts can be dealt with in the joint acceptance framework. The paper is structured as follows: I start with the joint acceptance account and Lackey's argument against it. I then present two different readings of Lackey's central case, showing that in both readings Lackey's example of a problematic group lie should not be identified as a lie, but rather as an epistemic mistake by the group. What kind of mistake the group makes depends on the exact reading of Lackey's case, but either way the group is not telling a lie.

Joint Acceptance Accounts of Group Belief

The guiding idea of joint acceptance accounts of group belief is that groups form beliefs by their members deciding together what to believe. And they can decide to believe that p , even when no individual member believes p . A board of directors might jointly accept that Maggie is the best candidate for a job, even though no single member believes that to be the case. Perhaps some members have ranked Maggie as the second-best candidate, and others ranked her as the third. But nevertheless, Maggie might be the best compromise candidate for the group, so the members jointly accept that Maggie is the best candidate for the job.¹ This sort of case can be captured nicely by identifying the group belief with something that the group members have agreed on – something that they have *jointly accepted*. This is the basis for the conception of joint acceptance account I am working with. Of course, these accounts are not always spelt out in terms of 'acceptance.' Gilbert speaks of joint commitments (Gilbert 1989, 1994, 2014) rather than joint acceptances. But for my purpose I bundle theories that follow this guiding idea as joint acceptance theories. The bundle includes accounts by Gilbert (1989, 1994, 2014), Tuomela (1992) and Tollefsen (2009), who are the primary targets for Lackey's criticism. The details of the accounts do not matter much for my purpose. The important part is merely the role of jointly accepting that p as the cornerstone in forming a group belief. However, not every single group member has to be part of the joint acceptance. Only *operative* members are required. In many groups not everyone is part of the decision-making process. Some members have a say and some do not. The workers at a local Apple store are part of Apple, but they do not decide what Apple intends or believes. Only a select few people at the top of the company do. 'Operative members' is therefore introduced as a technical term picking out those members of the group that are relevant for the group's decision-

¹ For similar arguments see Gilbert (1989), Schmitt (1994), Tollefsen (2009).

making. These are also the members that can determine group beliefs by joint acceptance.

With this picture of a joint acceptance account in place I can proceed to Lackey's challenge for joint acceptance proponents. This challenge is based on cases of group lies.

The Challenge from Group Lies

Groups lie. There is not only a theoretical option for groups to lie, but groups have lied in the past. Of course, not always and all the time, but sometimes with large and unwelcome consequences. Perdue Pharma claimed that less than 1% of patients become addicted to their opioid painkiller as part of their marketing campaign (Meier 2018). This number was not only false, but Perdue Pharma knew that it was false. Perdue Pharma lied and as a result those painkillers were widely prescribed and lead to many people's addiction to painkillers.

Given that groups can lie, good accounts of group belief have to be suitable to identify group lies as group lies. Accounts of belief play this role because belief is part of a plausible account of lying that Lackey works with.²

A lies to *B* if and only if (1) *A* states that *p* to *B*, (2) *A* believes that *p* is false, and (3) *A* intends to be deceptive to *B* with respect to whether *p* in stating that *p*.

(2) is a belief condition for lies. Hence, the account of group belief influences whether (2) is satisfied or not in case of a potential group lie. Only if the group believes that *p*, the group can lie by claiming that not-*p*. Lackey's strategy is to use this connection to show that joint acceptance accounts of group beliefs identify some cases as normal assertions, even though we intuitively take the cases to be group lies. The paradigmatic case is the following:

TOBACCO COMPANY Philip Morris, one of the largest tobacco companies in the world, is aware of the massive amounts of scientific evidence revealing not only the addictiveness of smoking, but also the links it has with lung cancer and heart disease. While the members of the board of directors of the company believe this conclusion, they all jointly agree that, because of what is at stake financially, the official position of Philip Morris is that smoking is neither highly addictive nor detrimental to one's health, which is then published in all of their advertising materials. (Lackey 2020, 195)

Intuitively Philip Morris lies, says Lackey. But the joint acceptance account of group belief entails that the group is not lying at all. Hence, the joint acceptance account has to be false.

² And has independently argued for in Lackey (2013).

To see why the joint acceptance account gives us this result let me consider the conditions for lying again. Philip Morris lies here if and only if (1) the group states that smoking is not detrimental to one's health to its consumers, (2) believes that 'smoking is not detrimental to one's health' is false, and (3) intends to be deceptive to the consumers with respect to whether smoking is not detrimental to one's health in stating that smoking is not detrimental to one's health. But if the joint acceptance account is true, then (2) is not satisfied. The board of directors – the operative members of Philip Morris – jointly accept that smoking is not detrimental to one's health. And if joint acceptance determines group belief, then Philip Morris believes that smoking is not detrimental to one's health. Philip Morris just asserts what it believes. And asserting what one believes is not a lie. What we end up with is an intuition that Philip Morris lies and the joint acceptance based result that Philip Morris does not lie. Only one of these can be right and the other has to go. Hence, we should drop the joint acceptance account of group belief (Lackey 2020, 196-197).

There is little room to resist that joint acceptance accounts entail that the group is not lying in TOBACCO COMPANY. The case stipulates joint acceptance in a way that results in group belief under the joint acceptance accounts. Nevertheless, there is room to argue that the joint acceptance based result is correct. TOBACCO COMPANY is not a case of a group lie. To go this route, one needs to propose a different explanation of the intuition that Philip Morris is doing something blameworthy that we want to hold them accountable for.

Defending Joint Acceptance

A defence of joint acceptance accounts against Lackey's argument cannot merely claim that Lackey's proposed intuition is wrong. I need to explain why one wants to blame Philip Morris in TOBACCO COMPANY, if not for lying. The intuition that Philip Morris is doing something improper is hard to deny, so I need to provide a different story of what exactly is going wrong. My suggestion is that Philip Morris does something epistemically improper. The reason why we want to blame Philip Morris is that the group commits an epistemic mistake – and does so intentionally. This epistemic mistake is what we want to hold Philip Morris accountable for. Identifying the epistemic mistake involved depends on how exactly the case is understood. Hence, I discuss two different readings that lead to two different kinds of epistemic mistakes. Both are ways of forming epistemically improper beliefs that explain why we have the intuition that something bad is going on in TOBACCO COMPANY.

To distinguish the two kinds of improper belief I use the concept of epistemic expectations from Goldberg (2018). These are epistemic expectations one has towards other agents in a community. Goldberg distinguishes two kinds of these expectations: basic epistemic expectations and non-basic epistemic expectations. The former are based on an entitlement to expect other people to use reliable belief-forming processes and an entitlement to expect that other people update their beliefs appropriately given newly acquired beliefs or evidence. I can expect other members in my community to form their beliefs on reliable methods rather than, say, wild guessing. And I can also expect other members in my community to be at least minimally coherent.

Non-basic epistemic expectations are primarily about the evidence we expect an agent to have in a particular situation. This is best illustrated by pointing to the phenomenon of normative defeat. Take Kornblith's (1983) example of a physicist who believes his pet theory. Suppose that physicist could easily come across counterevidence to this theory, but whenever there is a chance for counterevidence he refuses to engage with the source of that potential counterevidence. When there is a talk that might contain counterevidence he does not attend. If a journal article might contain counterevidence he does not read that article. There is a clear sense in which the physicist is doing something epistemically improper. His way of gathering evidence is flawed, such that he does not have evidence that he should have. The community expects from a physicist that they look for available evidence, but this physicist violates our expectations. He does so to a degree at which he loses justification for his belief. He is not justified, because the evidence he should have constitutes a normative defeater. This is exactly what Goldberg has in mind when he talks about non-basic epistemic expectations: expectations about the evidence that someone should have (Goldberg 2016, 2018).

To my knowledge Lackey has not explicitly endorsed these two kinds of expectations. However, she does accept normative defeat in other contexts (e.g. Lackey (2005)), so the general idea of epistemic expectations that are relevant for evaluating epistemic agents is something that Lackey should accept. With epistemic expectations in my toolset I can now proceed with the two different readings of TOBACCO COMPANY. The first reading will involve basic epistemic expectations, and the second reading will involve non-basic epistemic expectations. In both interpretations the group fails to satisfy a relevant epistemic expectation. Therefore, Philip Morris holds an improper belief, but does not lie.

The First Reading

TOBACCO COMPANY includes the stipulation that Philip Morris is aware of the massive amounts of scientific evidence about the health effects of smoking. How exactly we read the case depends on the interpretation of Philip Morris being aware of that scientific evidence. The first option is to accept that Philip Morris has this scientific evidence as part of the group's evidence. Nevertheless, the group forms the belief that smoking is safe by joint acceptance.

Looking at the basic epistemic expectations of the group it is easy to see that they are violated. Even if we stipulate that Philip Morris is generally reliable, the coherence requirement is violated. The beliefs of agents are expected to be appropriately updated based on the evidence agents have. The group has evidence about the detrimental health effects of smoking, but does not update the group's belief accordingly. Hence, the basic epistemic expectation is not satisfied. The belief is epistemically improper. This is the source of the intuition that Philip Morris is doing something wrong and blameworthy in TOBACCO COMPANY, according to the first reading. The community expects agents to have a certain degree of coherence between evidence and beliefs. Philip Morris does not have that coherence, so the community should hold Philip Morris accountable for the improper epistemic practices. Even though the group is not lying, the group is still acting in a way that it ought not to. Moreover, Philip Morris acts in a way that might be bad for the community overall and therefore should be minimized and sanctioned. We are entitled to hold them accountable to a standard set by the basic expectation partially because that is required for our practice of testimony. Testimony cannot function well if we cannot expect other people to be minimally coherent regarding their beliefs and evidence.

I have now argued that the first reading – that the group has the scientific evidence as part of their body of evidence – leads to a violation of basic epistemic expectations by Philip Morris. This violation is blameworthy and the group should be held accountable for it. Hence, the intuition that Philip Morris is doing something wrong is explained, but now identified as an intuition caused by the group acting epistemically improper, not by lying.

The Second Reading

The second reading understands Philip Morris being aware of scientific evidence differently. One can also read it as the individual members of Philip Morris having the scientific evidence as part of their individual evidence, without Philip Morris as a group having that piece of evidence. This option is only available if the group evidence is not determined by the evidence the individual members have. A joint

acceptance account of group evidence as proposed by Schmitt (1994), Hakli (2011) or Schwengerer (2021) is an option that seems a good fit here. Joint acceptance for group belief goes well with joint acceptance for group evidence. The reading then goes as follows: the group jointly accepts that there either are no relevant scientific studies about tobacco's health effects, or that the studies are unreliable. They do so for financial reasons, but that is no obstacle to group evidence under a joint acceptance account. The group evidence is now compatible with the group's belief that smoking is safe, because they have no reason to believe otherwise. Hence, there is no internal inconsistency in the group in this second reading. The group fulfils its basic epistemic expectations. However, the group can still be criticized with regard to non-basic expectations. This is exactly what Schwengerer (2021) suggests to deal with problematic consequences of arbitrary justification in the joint acceptance accounts of group evidence. Just like individual agents, groups are under normative expectations about the evidence they should have in a particular situation. Groups can fail to satisfy these expectations when their evidence does not match the evidence the group ought to have. The group can lack evidence it should have, or have evidence it should not have. In the second reading of TOBACCO COMPANY the group lacks evidence it should have. The group should have these scientific studies as part of their evidence. It should have that evidence partly because we expect tobacco companies to know about the safety of their products, and partly because the individual group members know about the studies. The studies are easily accessible for the group, but nevertheless the group does not jointly accept the studies as evidence. Hence, the group fails to fulfil its non-basic epistemic expectations. This is what we blame Philip Morris for. It is not a lie, it is a failure to fulfil the non-basic epistemic expectations the community has towards the group.

Conclusion

I have shown in two different interpretations of Lackey's case against joint acceptance accounts of belief that her argument is not decisive. Proponents of joint acceptance accounts can make a reasonable case that TOBACCO COMPANY is not a group lie, but a form of an epistemic mistake. The group does not fulfil its epistemic expectations. In the first reading the group fails to satisfy basic epistemic expectations, in the second reading non-basic epistemic expectations. Both are failures that we want to hold the group accountable for. But they are not lies. This way the joint acceptance accounts can capture why we intuitively think there is something wrong about the group's actions in TOBACCO COMPANY, but can explain that intuition in a way that is compatible with joint acceptance proposals

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for group belief. This does not entail that groups cannot lie, but merely that cases that are put forward by Lackey against joint acceptance accounts can be dealt with. Other forms of group lies in which groups jointly agree that *p* and then claim that non-*p* were no problem to begin with.

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