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Reply to Critics: Collective (Telic) Virtue Epistemology

J. Adam Carter

Thanks to Jeroen de Ridder and S. Kate Devitt for their very helpful comments on my chapter “Collective (Telic) Virtue Epistemology.” They've both given me a lot to think about, and — while I can't engage with all of their rich remarks in this brief space — I will focus on one core criticism from each and offer some thoughts in response.

I'll begin with de Ridder's comments. His critique of my proposal can be summed up simply: that it is too strong, such that it will imply that there is less group knowledge than we take there to be.

In a bit more detail, de Ridder takes issue with my characterisation of what a collective *judgment*, construed within a telic virtue epistemological framework, would demand of a group, and the worry is that it is too much. Let's look at the details. On my proposal, a group *G* *judges* that $\langle p \rangle$ if and only if the *G* constitutively attempts, with intention, to get it right (whether $\langle p \rangle$) aptly by alethically affirming that $\langle p \rangle$ ¹. This core proposal is, crucially, meant to be in principle open to very different kinds of glosses in collective epistemology. It is, for example, open to a Gilbert-style² ‘joint commitment’ gloss as well as a distributed-cognition-style gloss. What a collective judgment would demand of its members will be different depending on whether one favours one approach rather than the other. De Ridder challenges, specifically, the shape the proposal would take *if* one were to opt to give it a joint-commitment gloss — according to which we get the result that a group judges that $\langle p \rangle$ just when antecedent to affirming whether $\langle p \rangle$, the group jointly commits to (i) alethically affirm whether $\langle p \rangle$; (ii) to get it right $\langle p \rangle$ aptly through (i).

De Ridder takes it that, suitably unpacked, judging *knowledgeably*³ will require the following of the group members: that they

¹ See §3 and §5 of my chapter in this volume for details of what some of the key terms here mean. For the most recent detailed account of both the notions of ‘constitutive attempt’ and ‘alethic affirmation’ as they feature in this proposal, see Sosa (2021).

² See, e.g., Gilbert (1987). For a more recent development on the view, see Gilbert (2013).

³ Within a telic virtue epistemology, a judgment (individual or collective) is apt iff its constitutive aim (viz., the aim of getting it right aptly by alethically affirming) is aptly

- Commit to alethically affirm that p as a group;
- Know that all other group members are similarly committed to alethically affirm that p as a group;
- Commit to the use of a decision procedure for determining their view as a group;
- Know that all other group members are similarly committed to the use of this procedure as a group;
- Believe (perhaps implicitly) that this procedure is truth-conducive, either in general or at least on this particular occasion, which is to say they must believe (perhaps implicitly) that their use of the procedure makes it likely to produce a true output.

I am sympathetic to de Ridder's worry here; this does look like a lot! I'd like to canvass three lines of response. Firstly, I think we should resist the fifth of de Ridder's five proposed requirements, bearing in mind that telic virtue epistemology — on both the individual and collective level where I'm envisaging it — is externalist through and through.⁴ Second, the brunt of the requirements here are simply implicated by what joint commitment requires in simply taking up any kind of epistemic attitude.⁵ Third, and this is perhaps most important, the pairing of the core proposal with a joint-commitment account is optional; §5 shows how the view can be given different theoretical glosses when paired with a social-distributed accounts of group belief, including, e.g., Durkheimian functionalism (Bird (2010)) and dynamical systems theoretic approaches (Palermos (2020)).

I turn now to Devitt's discussion, which was largely sympathetic to my proposal. For the sake of this discussion, I want to focus on one kind of alternative she considers, in the following passage:

I'd like to introduce a model for the mind that provides a way of examining group beliefs and individual beliefs from a neuroscientific perspective. In the book 'A Thousand Brains', Hawkins (2021) describes the brain has consisting of 150,000 smaller 'brains' in cortical columns (like strings of spaghetti) through the thickness of the neocortex. Each column has a sensory-motor model of the world (forming

attained. See §3 of my chapter in this volume for details; for the canonical presentation of these ideas at the individual level, see Sosa (2015).

⁴ For an early discussion of this point in bi-level virtue epistemology, see Sosa (1997).

⁵ See Mathiesen (2006) and Carter (2015) for discussion.

dynamic doxastic states) and a unique frame of reference. These brain parts compare their models (aka beliefs about the world) with the models of other cortical columns and somehow vote on the most-likely-to-be-true version of the world to succeed. The unity of consciousness is achieved by the coordination of these smaller brains to form a singular belief for the human that drives actions. The unified belief is an amalgam, not a summation of 150,000 viewpoints. Neuroscience seem a fruitful way to conceive of how many human beliefs could combine into proper group beliefs. Each human is a like a ‘cortical column’ with a model of the world and shares the output of this model with other humans to form group-level beliefs. Group beliefs are distributed over the extended mind of humanity, paper, books, phones and physical objects and landscapes.

I have two comments on the above, one ponderous and the other supportive. The ponderous comment is as follows: let’s assume that the above picture is correct. If so, how would we explain a particular kind of group belief that arises only through certain kinds of normative relationships between group members. For example, consider — to borrow a case often used by Jennifer Lackey (2021) — Philip Morris’s stance that there is no connection between smoking and lung cancer. How on the above proposal could we make sense of the thought that Philip Morris could hold on to this belief even when the company’s individual members know better?

The supportive comment is that the above proposal strikes me as offering a potentially fruitful way to make sense of how distributed knowing—as it is developed by Edwin Hutchins (1995)—might be viewed as realised in a way that is broadly symmetrical to how individual knowledge is realised. While my chapter doesn’t engage with this in much detail, an interesting line of further research would be to see just how distributed cognition, construed along the lines of an *almsgamation* as sketched above by Devitt, might be brought together with the kind of telic virtue epistemology at the collective level I’ve defended.

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