

Book Review

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Groups as Epistemic and Moral Agents, by Jessica Brown. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024. Pp. xix + 164.

Is it rational to treat some social groups as morally independent agents? Can attitudes, such as beliefs, be attributed to them, and can their actions be evaluated epistemically and morally? If so, what grounds these attributions, especially when their actions or attitudes originate from only a few members, or even a single individual? In *Groups as Epistemic and Moral Agents*, Jessica Brown offers novel and systematic answers to these questions. In what follows, I briefly outline Brown's holistic account of group epistemic properties, before raising concerns about some counterintuitive implications of her treatment of group belief and group evidence.

Brown begins by distinguishing two main camps in theorizing the epistemic and/or moral agency of organized groups: summativism and non-summativism. According to Brown, summative approaches hold that “it is necessary and sufficient for a group to have a property α that some/most/all of its members have that same property”, whereas non-summative accounts reject both the necessity and the sufficiency of this condition (Brown 2024, 2).¹ Brown believes that commitment to summativism in one domain of group phenomena typically carries over to others, with a parallel pat-

1 It seems that this categorization may require some modification. First, it excludes several influential accounts, including those developed by Lackey (2021) or Broncano-Berrocal (2025). Such accounts maintain that a group G can have the propositional attitude p only if some members of G have p , while denying that this condition is sufficient. Moreover, the current categorization precludes any well-known accounts from being classified as summative. One alternative view that may address both concerns would

tern holding for non-summativism. Accordingly, she challenges summative accounts of group epistemic properties and develops a unified, non-summative framework that spans group epistemology and group morality.

Brown begins with proposing a non-summative account of group evidence. In her view, proposition e can count as group G 's evidence even if it is not evidence for any individual member, and conversely, it may fail to be G 's evidence even if it is evidence for all members (Brown 2024, 23). She then offers her constructive account: e qualifies as G 's evidence, if and only if G bears an "appropriate doxastic attitude" toward e , such as knowledge, true justified belief, or justified belief (Brown 2024, 31).

In epistemology, a major role of evidence is to provide justification for beliefs. To explain what it is for G to be justified in believing that p , Brown must both provide an account of group belief and clarify how such a belief can be based on evidence. She addresses the first issue by developing a functionalist, non-summative account of group belief. On a functionalist view, what constitutes a mental state φ in a subject is determined not by her internal structure but by the causal relations φ bears to her behavior and other mental states. Applied to groups, whether p is a belief of G does not depend on the attitudes of individual members. Rather, p is G 's belief iff it plays the functional role of belief within G 's behavior and cognitive economy (Brown 2024, 65). Although Brown does not describe her view in these terms, it is best understood as a methodologically "holistic" account, since it entirely bypasses explanations at the level of individual members.

Brown, then, responds to the second question by expanding her causal approach. Her discussion on group belief for a reason implies that G 's belief that p is justified based on evidence e iff G bears an appropriate doxastic relation to e , r justifies p , and G believes p at least partly because of e (Brown 2024, 41). This framework motivates Brown's reliabilist, testimonial model of justified group belief, offered as one (though not the only) route by which groups can acquire justified beliefs: testimony justifies belief only if the testimonial process is reliable and the hearer lacks undefeated defeaters (Brown 2024, 94). Applied to groups, G is a reliable hearer only if G is sensitive to defeaters and to the reliability of its members, while members count as reliable testifiers if they are sincere and epistemically competent (Brown 2024, 97–98). Brown argues that this model remains non-summative since one can be a reliable testifier for p without believing that p .

Finally, Brown addresses the moral dimensions of group action and responsibility. For G to be responsible for performing an action A , G must be capable of acting for a reason. Non-summative approaches deny that G 's acting for a reason

treat the summation condition as necessary only. Nonetheless, for the purposes of this review, I follow Brown's definition.

must be a function of its members' acting for *that* reason. Thus, *G* may be responsive to a reason grounded in evidence *e* even when *e* is not evidence for any individual member. In her constructive turn, Brown argues that *G* acts for a normative reason *r* only if *r* causally contributes to the action and the group is disposed to act for *r* (Brown 2024, 130). Brown proceeds to argue that *G* is blameless for wrongdoing *A* when *G* is blamelessly ignorant and performs *A* based on that ignorance (Brown 2024, 137).

Brown's holistic framework is innovative, ambitious, and generally coherent. It avoids familiar problems facing individualistic accounts, such as the failure of some summative accounts to explain how a group's belief can diverge from that of its members, or the inability of some non-summative accounts to distinguish between group belief and group acceptance. Here, I just highlight a few challenges that the view may need to overcome.

Consider, first, Brown's functionalist account of group belief, according to which *G* believes that *p* only if *p* plays the functional role of belief for *G*. In explaining this role, she appeals to causal relations between belief and its inputs (e.g., evidence), outputs (e.g., behavior), and other mental states. To unpack what these "causal relations" could be, Brown uses broad notions such as "potential and actual causes," being "apt to cause," and being "disposed to cause" interchangeably (Brown 2024, 65). For instance, evidence of rain is said to dispose one to believe that it is raining, and that belief in turn disposes one to further beliefs and actions, such as inferring that the washing will get wet and bringing it in. However, such descriptions risk being either merely retrospective or dependent on unspecified background conditions. Without clearer criteria for what counts as "functioning as a belief," the functionalist account risks explaining only backward-looking why a proposition was or was not a belief, rather than providing forward-looking guidance for attributing belief.

To illustrate, consider Brown's Hiring Committee case where the group judges that "*X* is the best candidate" even though each member recognizes that the evidence supports *Y* or *Z*. The committee may reach this judgment because *Y* and *Z* would not be approved by the administration, or because *X* is the only compromise candidate. She maintains that a joint commitment account would misclassify this as belief, whereas the functionalist view would not, since "the functional role of belief includes sensitivity to evidence" (Brown 2024, 69). There are two concerns with this judgement. First, it is unclear why belief as such—rather than justified belief—must be sensitive to evidence; beliefs can be evidentially insensitive, or sensitive to non-epistemic considerations, without ceasing to be beliefs. Second, it is not obvious why judging that "*X* is the best candidate," in light of group-level considerations (e.g., selecting a candidate who can pass administrative review or whom no member vetoes), should count as voluntary or non-sensitive to evidence. Such constraints are not always within

the group's control. Nor is it clear why the judgment that "*X is the best candidate*" fails to function as a belief *for the group*. Without a more determinate account of the relevant functional criteria, Brown's functionalist account of group belief risks generating difficulties for its proponents.

A related worry arises from Jennifer Lackey's Tobacco Company case, where all operative members are individually aware of overwhelming scientific evidence that smoking is addictive and harmful, and each privately believes so. Nevertheless, for financial and legal reasons, they jointly agree to publicly deny both claims. Lackey argues that any account treating this as group belief rather than a "group lie" permits an unacceptable voluntariness of belief (Lackey 2021, 30–32). Brown allows that the company neither believes nor possesses group evidence that smoking is harmful, but argues that this does not exonerate the company, since it *should* have had the relevant evidence (Brown 2024, 38–39; 78–79). This response, though plausible, does not address Lackey's original concern about ignoring group lies and risks mitigating blame by redescribing what appears to be blatant lying as mere culpable ignorance.

On January 8, 2020, the IRGC shot down Flight 752, killing all 176 passengers and crew on board. Although evidence soon indicated that the aircraft had been struck by missiles, the IRGC categorically denied any missile involvement for three days, dismissing the evidence as "psychological warfare by the enemy." Only after sustained international pressure and the release of conclusive evidence did it acknowledge responsibility. Public outrage followed, directed not only at the destruction of the aircraft but also at the blatant misinformation disseminated in the interim. In such cases, distinguishing between lying and culpable ignorance is crucial. After all, when someone lies to us, they aim to deceive us, which is intuitively more insulting and, consequently, more blameworthy than sincerely asserting a false statement they believe to be true, though they should not. Brown's accounts of group evidence and group blameless ignorance require further theoretical resources to adequately capture this distinction.

Finally, Brown's testimonial account of justified group belief faces two challenges. First, Brown maintains that *G* can form a justified belief that *p* if most of its members reliably testify that *p* and *G* is itself a reliable consumer of that testimony (Brown 2025, 7). Although this account remains non-summative, it appears to face the same difficulty that Brown frequently attributes to summative accounts. She criticizes individualistic accounts for arbitrarily fixing thresholds for group belief—whether 60%, 70%, or some other proportion (Brown 2024, 123; 131). If this arbitrariness is objectionable, Brown must avoid it within her own account by determining what she means by "most of the members" reliably testifying that *p*. Second, Brown's aggregative testimonial model is normatively vulnerable to the so-called "doctrinal paradox" or "discursive dilemma" (List and Pettit 2011, 44–45), in which majorities can justi-

fiably testify to p , to q , and to $\neg(p \wedge q)$. To avoid attributing incoherent beliefs to groups, Brown reminds her critics that her testimonial model is *only one* route to justified group belief, alongside others such as inference from existing group-level beliefs (Brown 2025, 6). The difficulty with this response is that without a principled hierarchy among these models, it becomes a matter of group decision which belief to adopt as justified—an outcome that is difficult to reconcile with the normative constraints governing epistemic justification. For instance, suppose a tobacco company adopts a policy of adding warning labels if it recognizes that smoking is both addictive *and* harmful. If two majorities reliably testify that smoking is harmful and addictive, the group can infer the conjunction. But if a third majority also testifies that smoking is not both addictive *and* harmful, Brown's framework appears to leave it open which belief the company justifiably holds.

Brown's book is an ambitious and valuable contribution to group epistemology and ethics. While her holistic framework offers powerful tools for understanding group epistemic and moral agency, the concerns raised here invite her to clarify the relation between group-level epistemic properties and the epistemic positions of individual members.

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