

Part one

Group Belief: Lessons from Lies and Bullshit

Jennifer Lackey
Northwestern University
j-lackey@northwestern.edu

0. Introduction

Groups and other sorts of collective entities are frequently said to believe things. For instance, in a recent article in *Daily Finance* about Borders lagging behind its competitors with respect to the e-book market, it was reported that, “Armed with data on 38 million customers, Borders *believes* it will easily capture market share” (*Daily Finance*, July 7, 2010, emphasis added). Such belief attributions are certainly not limited to corporations: we also talk about the U.S. government believing that free speech is protected, the Catholic Church believing that the Pope is infallible, and the Humane Society of the United States believing that cats and dogs should be spayed and neutered.

Various accounts of group belief have been offered in the philosophical literature, with their respective virtues and vices having been widely evaluated. But in this paper, I want to focus on such views in relation to two phenomena that have been entirely absent from these discussions; namely, group lies and group bullshit. I will show that while these phenomena have been ignored in the literature on collective epistemology, much can be learned about the nature of group belief from examining them.

1. The Paradigmatic Non-Summative View of Group Belief: The Joint Acceptance Account

Summative Account of Group Belief: A group’s believing that p can be understood in terms of the individual members of the group believing that p .

A conservative version of the summative account (CSA):

CSA: A group G believes that p if and only if all or most of the members of G believe that p .

A liberal version of the summative account (LSA):

LSA: A group G believes that p if and only if some of the members of G believe that p .

Objections to LSA:

1. A group can be properly said to believe that p , even when not a single of its members believes that p .

PHILOSOPHY DEPARTMENT: The Philosophy Department at a leading university is deliberating about the final candidate to whom they will extend admission to their graduate program. After hours of discussion, they all jointly agree that Jane Smith is the most qualified candidate from the pool of applicants. However, not a single member of the department actually believes this; instead, they all think that this is the candidate who is most likely to be approved by the administration.

2. A group can be properly said to not believe that p , even when every single one of its members believes that p .

PHILOSOPHY DEPARTMENT2: The same Philosophy Department described above also turns out to be such that every single one of its members believes that the best red pepper hummus in Chicago can be found at Whole Foods. Despite the unanimity of individual belief in such a case, it is not correct to say that the Philosophy Department believes that the best red pepper hummus in Chicago can be found at Whole Foods. This is because assessment of red pepper hummus is entirely irrelevant to the goals and purposes of the group.

Non-summative Account of Group Belief: A group's believing that p is irreducible to some or all of its members believing that p . In some very important sense, the group itself believes that p , where this is understood as over and above, or otherwise distinct from, any individual member believing that p .

- The most widely accepted non-summative view of group belief is what we may call the *joint acceptance account* (hereafter, JAA), a prominent expression of which is offered by Margaret Gilbert in the following passage:

JAA: A group G believes that p if and only if the members of G jointly accept that p .

The members of G *jointly accept* that p if and only if it is common knowledge in G that the members of G individually have intentionally and openly...expressed their willingness jointly to accept that p with the other members of G . (Gilbert 1989, p. 306)

On a joint acceptance account of a group's believing that p , then, it is neither necessary nor sufficient that some of its individual members believe that p .

Problem for JAA:

MEDICAL ASSOCIATION: The Board of Directors of the American Academy of Pediatrics convenes and decides that their official position is that there is not a causal connection between the MMR (the Measles, Mumps, Rubella vaccine) and autism, which they proceed to publish in all of their materials about immunizations. There is substantial, though not conclusive, evidence supporting this verdict, and there is agreement that the benefits of vaccines strongly outweigh the possibility that a very small percentage of children will become autistic as a result. Despite this, all of the doctors who are members of the American Academy of Pediatrics recognize that the evidence is inconclusive and so have some doubts that prevent them from individually believing that there is not a causal connection between the MMR and autism.

Tuomela proposes a different version of the joint acceptance account that is formulated to avoid exactly the worries found with the JAA:

JAA2: G believes that p in the social and normative circumstances C if and only if in C there are operative members A_1, \dots, A_m of G in respective positions P_1, \dots, P_m such that: (1') the agents A_1, \dots, A_m , when they are performing their social tasks

in their positions P_1, \dots, P_m and due to exercising the relevant authority system of G , (intensionally) jointly accept that p , and because of this exercise of authority system, they ought to continue to accept and positionally believe it;

(2') there is a mutual belief among the operative members A_1, \dots, A_m to the effect that (1');

(3') because of (1'), the (full-fledged and adequately informed) non-operative members of G tend tacitly to accept—or at least ought to accept— p , as members of G ; and

(4') there is a mutual belief in G to the effect that (3'). (Tuomela 1992, pp. 295-6)

2. Group Lies

Paradigmatic Group Lie:

TOBACCO COMPANY: Phillip 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 Phillip Morris is that smoking is neither highly addictive nor detrimental to one's health, which is then published in all of their advertising materials.

- In order for a group, G , to lie, I will assume that G must assert that p where G believes that not- p and G must have the deliberate intention to deceive.

Group Lie Desideratum: An adequate account of group belief should have the resources for distinguishing between, on the one hand, a group's asserting their belief that p and, on the other hand, paradigmatic instances of a group's lying regarding that p .

Conditions (1') through (4') are satisfied by Phillip Morris in TOBACCO COMPANY, thereby resulting in the group believing that smoking is neither highly addictive nor detrimental to one's health. Given that the scenario described in TOBACCO COMPANY is a paradigm of a group lying, yet the JAA2 regards it as a perfectly ordinary instance of a group reporting its belief, the joint acceptance account of group belief is not only incorrect, but fundamentally so.

There are other phenomena in the neighborhood of group lies that the joint acceptance account also fails to distinguish from group belief:

OIL COMPANY: After the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, BP began spraying dispersants in the clean-up process that have been widely criticized by environmental groups for their level of toxicity. In response to this outcry, the executive management team of BP convened and its members jointly accepted that the dispersants they are using are safe and pose no threat to the environment, a view that they then made public through all of the major media outlets. It turns out that BP's executive management team arrived at this view with an utter disregard for the truth—it simply served their purpose of financial and reputational preservation.

The scenario in OIL COMPANY is a classic instance of the phenomenon that Harry Frankfurt calls “bullshit,” which he describes as follows:

It is impossible for someone to lie unless he thinks he knows the truth. Producing bullshit requires no such conviction. A person who lies is thereby responding to the truth, and he is to that extent respectful of it. When an honest man speaks, he says only what he believes to be true; and for the liar, it is correspondingly indispensable that he considers his statements to be false. For the bullshitter, however, all these bets are off: he is neither on the side of the true nor on the side of the false. His eye is not on the facts at all, as the eyes of the honest man and the liar are, except insofar as they may be pertinent to his interest in getting away with what he says. He does not care whether the things he says describe reality correctly. He just picks them out, or makes them up, to suit his purpose. (Frankfurt 2005, pp. 55-6)

- Whereas the group in TOBACCO COMPANY believes that smoking is highly addictive and detrimental to one’s health, but then asserts that this is not the case with the deliberate intention to deceive, the group in OIL COMPANY simply fails to believe that the dispersants they are using are safe and pose no threat to the environment, but then asserts that this is the case solely to serve their purposes.

This motivates a second desideratum of an adequate account of group belief, which we can characterize as follows:

Group Bullshit Desideratum: An adequate account of group belief should have the resources for distinguishing between, on the one hand, a group’s asserting their belief that p , and, on the other hand, paradigmatic instances of a group’s bullshitting that p .

3. *Objections and Replies*

Objection: Why can’t a condition simply be added to the JAA2 requiring a certain kind of motivation needed for group belief?

Response:

1. What might such a condition look like? It cannot simply require that the joint acceptance not be motivated by the intention to deceive, for such an intention is lacking in instances of group bullshit and yet there is still the absence of group belief. It also cannot require that the joint acceptance not be motivated by an utter disregard for the truth, for, as Frankfurt says above, the liar *is* respectful of the truth—it is just that this respect is used to conceal the truth from the liar’s audience.

Objection: Perhaps the joint acceptance needs to be motivated by a sensitivity to the truth, or to the available evidence, or to some other epistemically proper feature.

Responses:

1. The motivation for the joint acceptance in MEDICAL ASSOCIATION is the overall health of the nation, not a sensitivity to an epistemically significant property. Given that the proponent of the joint acceptance view regards MEDICAL ASSOCIATION as a classic case of group belief, it

would hardly help her view to add a condition to group belief that the American Academy of Pediatrics would fail to satisfy.

2. Wishful thinking can certainly produce belief, both at the individual and at the group level, but clearly a positive epistemic requirement would not be satisfied here.

Objection: The proponent of the joint acceptance account might flesh out a way of allowing for group lies and group bullshit within the framework of her view. Here is how it might go for the former: suppose that when a given group deliberates about the question whether p , the members jointly accept that p , but then also jointly agree to spread it about that not- p with the deliberate intention to deceive the public. Thus, their joint acceptance of that p amounts to group belief on the JAA2. This, combined with their agreement to convey that not- p with the intention to deceive, results in both conditions of the traditional conception of lying being satisfied.

Responses:

1. Although this scenario as described is certainly possible, so, too, is it possible for the members of a group to move directly to jointly agreeing that not- p and then spreading this about to the public with the deliberate intention to deceive, as is done in TOBACCO COMPANY.

2. The situation is even worse in the case of group bullshit, where there do not seem to be any resources within the joint acceptance account for distinguishing it from group belief. For if a group jointly accepts one thing but then agrees to report another, this simply collapses into a group lie. If the group instead jointly accepts a proposition with an utter disregard for the truth, this simply turns out to be a classic case of group belief for the proponent of the JAA2. There is simply no room in between to account for group bullshit.

4. Additional Objections to the Joint Acceptance Account

Group members may jointly accept that p , not with an utter disregard for the truth—as is the case with bullshit—but with little regard for the truth. This can happen especially clearly when a view is adopted by a group for pragmatic reasons.

HISTORY DEPARTMENT: The History Department at a leading university is deliberating about the final candidate to whom they will extend admission to their graduate program. After hours of discussion, there is still widespread disagreement over whether Mary Jones or Thomas Brown is the most qualified applicant from the pool. With three minutes left to the meeting and the Chair announcing that they will need to convene again tomorrow if a decision cannot be reached, one member proposes a different applicant from their shortlist for admission, Robert Lee. Despite the fact that not a single member of the department actually believes that Lee is the most qualified candidate for the last spot, they all jointly accept this proposition so as to end the department meeting on time and to avoid having to devote another day to such matters. The History Department then proceeds to report to the Graduate School that their position is that Robert Lee is the most qualified applicant for the last spot of admission.

Group members can jointly accept a given proposition, but for different and indeed competing reasons:

ENGLISH DEPARTMENT: The English Department at a leading university is deliberating about the final candidate to whom they will extend admission to their graduate program. All of the members jointly accept that the best candidate for admission is Sarah Peters, but half of them agree to this because they believe that she is a highly qualified applicant and half of them agree to this because they believe that she is a highly unqualified applicant. The latter half of the department is made up of a contingency of disgruntled employees who wish to sabotage their own department and regard “the best candidate for admission” as the applicant who will most likely pull the program’s rankings down.

5. *Other Non-Summative Views of Group Belief*

Pettit asks us consider a case involving the employees of a company deciding whether to forgo a pay-raise in order to spend the saved money on implementing a set of workplace safety measures. The employees are supposed to make their decision on the basis of considering three separable issues: “first, how serious the danger is; second, how effective the safety measures that a pay-sacrifice would buy is likely to be; and third, whether the pay-sacrifice is bearable for members individually. If an employee thinks that the danger is sufficiently serious, the safety measure sufficiently effective, and the pay-sacrifice sufficiently bearable, he or she will vote for the sacrifice; otherwise he or she will vote against” (Pettit 2003, p. 171). Imagine now that the company’s three employees vote in the following way:

	Serious danger?	Effective measure?	Bearable loss?	Pay sacrifice?
A.	Yes	No	Yes	No
B.	No	Yes	Yes	No
C.	Yes	Yes	No	No

One such aggregation procedure that may be used to arrive at the belief of the group in this case is premise-based, whereby the group’s belief is determined by the majority of votes found in the premise columns. According to Pettit, if the group belief is determined by how the members vote on the premises, then the group conclusion is to accept the pay sacrifice since there are more “Yes”s than “No”s in each of the premise columns. In such a case, “the group will form a judgment on the question of the pay-sacrifice that is directly in conflict with the unanimous vote of its members. It will form a judgment that is in the starkest possible discontinuity with the corresponding judgments of its members” (Pettit 2003, p. 183). Because of examples such as this, Pettit concludes that groups are intentional subjects that are distinct from, and exist “over and beyond,” their individual members. He writes: “These discontinuities between collective judgments and intentions, on the one hand, and the judgments and intentions of members, on the other, make vivid the sense in which a social integrate is an intentional subject that is distinct from its members” (Pettit 2003, p. 184).

Now let us consider the following case:

JUDGMENT AGGREGATION TOBACCO COMPANY: The board members of Phillip Morris are discussing whether cigarette smoking is safe to the health of smokers. The board members are supposed to make their decision on the basis of considering three separable issues: first, whether the available evidence supports the conclusion that smoking is not connected to lung cancer; second, whether there is reason to think that

smoking does not cause emphysema; and third, whether there is data supporting that there is not a link between smoking and heart disease. If a board member thinks that the evidence supports that smoking is not connected to cancer, does not cause emphysema, and is not linked to heart disease, he or she will vote that smoking is safe to the health of smokers; otherwise he or she will vote that it is not. The board members vote in the following way:

	No lung cancer?	No emphysema?	No heart disease?	Safe to health?
A.	Yes	No	Yes	No
B.	No	Yes	Yes	No
C.	Yes	Yes	No	No

After the voting, the board members decide that, because of what is at stake financially, Phillip Morris will publish in all of their advertising materials that smoking is safe to the health of smokers.

Following Pettit, one way of determining the group's belief in JUDGMENT AGGREGATION TOBACCO COMPANY is via a premise-based aggregation procedure. On this account, there are more "Yes"s than "No"s in each of the premise columns, so the group believes that cigarette smoking is safe to the health of the smokers. Indeed, Pettit's very solution to the conflict between the individual beliefs and the group belief in the original case is to conclude that while the group believes that the company should forgo a pay-raise in order to spend the saved money on implementing a set of workplace safety measures, no single individual employee believes this. Similarly, then, the conclusion in JUDGMENT AGGREGATION TOBACCO COMPANY should be that while the group believes that cigarette smoking is safe to the health of smokers, no single individual board member of Phillip Morris believes this. When the company then reports in their advertising materials that smoking is safe, they are simply reporting the belief of the group.

- JUDGMENT AGGREGATION TOBACCO COMPANY intuitively appears to be a paradigmatic group lie, and yet the view at issue countenances it as a standard instance of reporting a group belief? To make this case even stronger, we can imagine that the individual votes of "Yes" in the premise columns were motivated at least in part by economic considerations, though not ones incompatible with belief. For instance, perhaps the board members were inclined to look for conclusive or definitive evidence linking smoking with lung cancer, emphysema, or heart disease before voting "No" in one of the premise columns. Were the economic advantages of selling cigarettes not present, we can imagine that their standards for believing negatively would have been lower. Given this, the very fact that there are more "Yes"s than "No"s in each of the premise columns in JUDGMENT AGGREGATION TOBACCO COMPANY is in large part the result of the financial gain promised by minimizing the health risks of smoking. So while each board member individually believes that smoking is detrimental to the health of smokers, the collective view of Phillip Morris is that it is safe and this group belief is explainable by the company's desire for economic benefits. When the company then publishes this view in all their advertising materials—again for financial gain—this appears to be a classic example of a group lie, and yet the judgment aggregation view regards it as a straightforward instance of reporting a group belief.

Objection: Why wouldn't we simply aggregate the judgments of the board members in JUDGMENT AGGREGATION TOBACCO COMPANY via a different procedure?

Responses:

1. There is nothing in the judgment aggregation view that rules out using the premise-based aggregation procedure or dictates the use of a conclusion-based rule in a case such as JUDGMENT AGGREGATION TOBACCO COMPANY.
2. I am arguing that non-summative accounts of group belief lack the resources for accounting for group lies and group bullshit. Out of the aggregation procedures considered in this paper, the only one that supports non-summativism is the premise-based rule. If Pettit were to respond to my challenge that non-summativism cannot accommodate group lies by proposing the use of a procedure that supports summativism, this would hardly save the account.

Bullshit:

- On the one hand, if the proponent of the judgment aggregation account countenances group belief in cases where individual members of a collective entity vote positively on an issue despite not personally holding the belief, then problematic instances of group bullshit immediately arise. For we can simply imagine JUDGMENT AGGREGATION TOBACCO COMPANY exactly as it is described, except that each of the board members votes with an utter disregard for the truth of the claims. When the judgments are then aggregated via a premise-based procedure and it is reported to the public that smoking is safe solely for financial gain, the judgment aggregation view regards this as a straightforward case of a group asserting its belief, but the intuitive verdict is that Phillip Morris is simply bullshitting the public.
- On the other hand, if a proponent of the judgment aggregation account countenances group belief only in cases where individual members of a collective entity vote on an issue because they personally hold the belief in question, then we can again imagine JUDGMENT AGGREGATION TOBACCO COMPANY exactly as it is described, except that the decisions to use a premise-based aggregation procedure and to report the result that smoking is safe are made without any regard for the truth. This appears to be a classic example of group bullshit, and yet the judgment aggregation view regards it as a straightforward instance of the report of a group belief.

6. A Summative Account of Group Belief

I will defend the following necessary condition for group belief, which I will call minimal summativism (hereafter, MS):

MS: A group G believes that p only if some of the members of G believe that p . According to MS, there cannot be an instance of a group believing that p where not a single one of its individual members believes that p .

I will not, then, be arguing that individual belief that p on the part of a group's members is sufficient for the group believing that p . It is worth mentioning, however, that my reason for this has nothing to do with the classic argument against this condition, which we might call the

Relevance Objection. We briefly discussed this objection earlier—every member of a group may believe that p , but believing that p may be entirely irrelevant to the purpose and goals of the group. So, for instance, every member of PETA may in fact believe that *Citizen Kane* is the greatest film ever made, but this may be completely disconnected from the focus and objectives of the collective entity. While traditional summativists must conclude that PETA believes that *Citizen Kane* is the greatest film of all time, the intuitive verdict is that this is not the case. Thus, individual belief that p on the part of even every member of a given group is not sufficient for the group believing that p .

Responses to Relevance Objection:

1. I grant the group belief in question. Notice, however, that there is a difference between a group having a belief, on the one hand, and a group having a relevant or important belief, on the other. There is nothing peculiar in itself in saying that PETA believes that *Citizen Kane* is the greatest film of all time. It is just that such a belief is typically of so little interest to us that we wouldn't overtly make this attribution to the group.
2. One who embraces the Relevance Objection is committed to a very counterintuitive conception of belief, group or otherwise. For on this view, PETA fails to believe that *Citizen Kane* is the greatest film of all time at T1 but then believes this at T2, when its President announces that PETA will now be extensively evaluating the depiction of animals in films. Nothing has changed about the psychology of any of the group's members or the propositions they accept, yet they now have a belief simply because of an announcement from the group's President.

Thus, my reason for not defending the sufficiency of individual belief that p on the part of a group's members for the group believing that p is not at all motivated by the Relevance Objection. Instead, I doubt that a unified view of group belief can be offered since the significant differences between deliberative and non-deliberative groups would almost surely result in an account that is disjunctive, with one disjunct capturing the former and the other the latter. But even more importantly, my central target is non-summativism with the metaphysical baggage that comes with it, and all that I need to falsify this view is a defense of MS.

Defense of MS:

Since one of the main sources of support for MS is its intuitiveness, the best way to proceed here is to consider further objections that may be raised to it and to then show that they fail.

- As we saw, the classic type of counterexample to MS is found in PHILOSOPHY DEPARTMENT, where a group decides to let a belief “stand” as their official position despite the fact that none of its members actually holds the view in question. For ease of expression, I will call these *official position cases*. While I have discussed official position cases at great length in connection with group lies and group bullshit, it may be thought that they still pose a problem for MS. For instance, if the intuitive description of PHILOSOPHY DEPARTMENT is that the group believes that Jane Smith is the most qualified candidate for admission to their graduate program despite not a single of its members believing this, then the mere fact that it is structurally identical to a group lie and group bullshit does not undermine the intuitiveness of this description. In other

words, regardless of its similarity to cases where group belief is clearly absent, PHILOSOPHY DEPARTMENT still describes a scenario where group belief seems to be present.

Response to PHILOSOPHY DEPARTMENT:

1. It is not at all clear to me that the intuitive response to this scenario is that the group believes that p , though no individual member does. In fact, there is a multitude of other plausible ways to describe the case that do not involve belief at all. For instance, we can say that the Philosophy Department's official position is that p , or that the Philosophy Department has decided to accept that p , or that its public view is that p , and so on.

- The second type of counterexample challenging MS is one in which the belief of a group is arrived at through adding up the different beliefs of the individual members. For instance, consider the following case, which gave rise to the collective knowledge doctrine in the law:

BANK OF NEW ENGLAND: In the case of the United States v. Bank of New England, the Bank of New England was charged and convicted of thirty-one violations of the Currency and Foreign Transaction Reporting Act. The details of the case are as follows: from May 1983 through June 1984, James McDonough visited the Prudential branch of the Bank of New England on thirty-one separate occasions to withdraw money from a corporate account. On one such occasion, McDonough presented the bank teller with two checks made payable to cash in the amounts of \$8500 and \$5000. The teller on duty was unaware of the Reporting Act, which requires that a Currency Transaction Report (CTR) be filed whenever a cash withdrawal is made that exceeds \$10,000. "It was a violation to willfully fail to file such a report. The teller's supervisor, the head teller, was aware of the Act, but did not know that the customer's two deposits had to be aggregated for purposes of the reporting requirement. The bank's project coordinator, who was working in the bank's main office, knew that the law required aggregation, but had no knowledge that the transaction in question occurred" (Ragozino 1995, p. 433). None of the three employees of the bank individually committed a criminal violation of the Act, then, because none, individually, willfully failed to file a CTR. However, according to the collective knowledge doctrine, the knowledge of the individual employees can be added or aggregated and then properly attributed to the bank itself. Indeed, according to the trial court's instructions to the jury considering the case: "...if Employee A knows one facet of the currency reporting requirement, B knows another facet of it, and C a third facet of it, the bank knows them all" (Hagemann and Grinstein 1997, p. 214). Given this, the knowledge of the three individual employees—that is, the teller's knowledge that two deposits exceeding \$10,000 had been made, the head teller's knowledge of the reporting requirement, and the coordinator's knowledge that multiple deposits must be aggregated—can be combined and then imputed to the bank. Hence, it was concluded that the Bank of New England satisfied the knowledge requirement needed for establishing *mens rea*, thereby

leading to a guilty verdict with respect to the violations of the Currency and Foreign Transaction Reporting Act.

Here there are three separate individuals believing different propositions without any believing their conjunction. According to the collective knowledge doctrine, this amounts to the group—in this case, the Bank of New England—believing the conjunction, where no single individual member does.

Responses to BANK OF NEW ENGLAND:

1. It is not clear that the intuitive response here is that the group believes the conjunction in question, though no individual member does. In fact, to my mind, the most plausible characterization of the scenario is not that the Bank of New England believes each of the propositions that its employees individually believe, but, rather, that the bank *is in a position* to believe or know these propositions.

2. This additive approach to group belief—where the belief of a group can be determined via adding up the different individual beliefs of its members—has some very counterintuitive results. **For instance, one classic role of belief is that, together with desire, it rationalizes action. But** surely group belief when understood in this purely additive way cannot appropriately figure in the relevant causal explanations. If we want to explain the Bank of New England's actions in relation to their failure to file Currency Transaction Reports, it would hardly do to cite their conjunctive belief that the Currency and Foreign Transaction Reporting Act existed *and* that customers' deposits need to be aggregated for purposes of the reporting requirement *and* that the transaction with McDonough occurred. For if the bank indeed believes this conjunction, then its actions—i.e., failing to file the requisite report on thirty-one separate occasions—are utterly mysterious. Indeed, were the bank's actions consistent with holding this conjunctive belief, it would be at best accidental or lucky and at worst bizarre that this is the case.

7. Conclusion

Although social epistemologists have, to this point in time, focused their attention solely on how groups may believe and know things, we have seen that the nature of group belief can be illuminated by paying attention to a broader range of phenomena. In particular, we can learn a lot from lies and bullshit.

Part two

Against the Interest-Relative Account of Belief

Baron Reed
Northwestern University
b-reed@northwestern.edu

A. *Beliefs and credences*

There are two frameworks in epistemology:

- (a) *Formal* epistemologists study *credences* (degrees of belief) and how they should be updated in the light of new evidence;
- (b) *Traditional* epistemologists study *beliefs* and how they are justified.

Various ways of reconciling these frameworks have been suggested. Of these, one of the most plausible is the Lockean picture suggested by Richard Foley (2009). Assume:

- (i) S believes that p just in case S has a sufficiently high credence that p .
- (ii) It is rational for S's credence that p to be proportionate to the strength of S's evidence supporting that p .

These two assumptions support the *Lockean thesis*: it is rational for S to believe that p just in case it is rational for S to have a credence that p above the threshold for belief.

The Lockean thesis matches up two scales. There is the scale of credence, with a threshold for belief, and there is a scale of evidence, with a threshold for rationality. To these, we can add a third scale, of justification, with a threshold for knowledge. Taken altogether, they imply that belief, rationality, and knowledge should all go together.

Reflection on how to characterize the relation between credences and belief shows what we expect from belief: it rationalizes action and allows for stability.

B. Pragmatic encroachment

A popular view in recent epistemology takes knowledge to be *interest-relative*. Support for the view is often taken to rest on scenarios like the following (Stanley 2005, Fantl and McGrath 2002):

Bank case 1

Hannah and Marie have a check that needs to be deposited at their bank, though there is no particular urgency in doing this. It is late on a Friday afternoon, and the bank is likely to be crowded. Hannah thinks the bank is open on Saturdays, having made a recent stop at the bank when she remembers having read the bank's hours. Hannah tells Marie, "I know the bank is open Saturday—let's go then."

Bank case 2

Hannah and Marie have a check that must be deposited at their bank before Monday—if it isn't deposited before then, they will be late paying their mortgage. It is late on a Friday afternoon, and the bank is likely to be crowded. Hannah recently made a stop at the bank and remembers having read the bank's hours. She seems to recall that it is open on Saturdays. Nevertheless, Hannah tells Marie, "We should go today, just in case the bank isn't open Saturday."

Defenders of the interest-relative theory of knowledge [IRK] say that Hannah's justification for thinking the bank is open on Saturday is the same in both cases. However, she (1) behaves differently, (2) makes different assertions, and (3) has different epistemic properties in the two cases—i.e., she knows the bank is open on Saturday in case 1 but not in case 2. The only explanation for these discrepancies is that her practical stakes are different in the two cases. So, practical stakes can partly determine whether a subject has knowledge. They do so by raising (when stakes are high) or lowering (when stakes are low) the epistemic standards relevant for the evaluation of a given belief.

Defenders of the IRK say that, when you know something, you should be able to put it to use (Fantl and McGrath). This means that knowledge is *sufficient* for practical rationality. (Some defenders of the interest-relative theory want to say that knowledge is both *sufficient* and *necessary* for practical rationality.)

Other philosophers have argued along similar lines for an interest-relative theory of belief [IRB]. If belief is supposed to be what rationalizes action (i.e., what features in rational deliberation and rationally explains action), then we should expect to see the same shift in belief when practical stakes change. Brian Weatherson argues that this in fact is the case:

Food Allergy case

Xavier offers Yolanda a granola bar. She tries it and enjoys its hearty flavor. Yolanda asks if it has nuts. Xavier says, “No, you are probably tasting the sesame seeds.” Yolanda then suggests serving this kind of granola bar at their son’s next birthday party. Xavier then says, “Hold on, I better check about the ingredients. Some of those kids are severely allergic to nuts.”

Weatherson takes the best explanation of Xavier’s behavior to be a shift from believing at the earlier time that the granola bar does not contain nuts to not having this belief at the later time. If the IRB is correct, it could account for the knowledge-shifts seen in the bank cases. That would mean that knowledge itself would not need to be interest-relative. So, the IRB could be taken to supersede the IRK.

Implication for the Lockean thesis: there is no single threshold on the credence scale such that, when one’s credence that p is above that threshold, it is necessarily the case that one believes that p .

C. The stability of belief

According to Weatherson, “To believe p is to take p for granted, to take it as given, to take it as a settled question.” (25)

Belief provides evidential stability: small changes in evidence do not lead to change in belief. He argues that it is not irrational to ignore mildly disconfirming evidence when one’s time or other resources are scarce and when the question isn’t important.

But, as we have seen with the Bank cases and the Food Allergy case, what we take as settled can change from one practical context to another. “To believe p , it isn’t necessary that we take it as settled in all contexts.” (26) It is not changes in evidence but rather changes in practical stakes that unsettle the subject’s belief in some contexts.

Some philosophers have objected that the IRB captures evidential stability but allows for an implausible practical instability (Ross & Schroeder). They suggest a view that accords with the Lockean thesis. According to Ross and Schroeder, belief is a core disposition to act and reason as if p . This disposition need not be operative in all contexts. In particular, it will be masked in cases where the practical stakes are so high that the risk of error is an overriding concern. The same sort of view can be defended as an alternative to the IRK.

Weatherson objects to this sort of view on the grounds that it is an intolerable failure of reasoning. The subject can believe that p is true and that acting as if p will lead to the best consequences and yet fail to act as if p . But this problem is removed if we attend to the entire set of beliefs relevant for action in this sort of case. The subject will not only believe that p is true and that acting as if p will lead to the best consequences; she will also believe that the risk of being wrong in either of these

two beliefs is too great. The overarching belief about her own fallibility puts her other beliefs into a perspective from which it is not rational to act upon them.

D. Belief, credence, and practical instability

A variation on the high stakes case can be used to support the Lockean picture and to undermine the IRB (Reed 2010):

Double Reward/Punishment case

Suppose Maria is taking part in a psychological study that measures how people assess risk. She will be asked a question and then will have the opportunity to play two games simultaneously. In the first game, she is given a jellybean for a correct answer and a severe electrical shock for an incorrect answer. In the second game, she is given \$1000 for a correct answer and a gentle slap on the wrist for an incorrect answer. In both games, there is neither penalty nor reward for abstaining from answering. Maria is asked, "What was the name of Hannibal's brother?" She takes herself to remember, from a course she took several years earlier, that his name is Hasdrubal. She gives this answer in the second game, but she abstains from answering in the first game.

Maria's strategy is the one that is rational, from an intuitive point of view. But the IRB has trouble explaining both of her simultaneous answers. Defenders of the IRB can say (1) she does not have the belief in question, (2) that she has the belief in question but cannot act on it with respect to the first game, (3) that she oscillates in her belief, or (4) that she has it relative to one game but not the other. Each of these answers is flawed.

With respect to (1): if Maria does not have the belief in question, it is hard to see why she gives an answer in the second game. The most natural explanation, if it is not because she has the relevant belief, is that she has a sufficiently high credence to make it rational to give the answer in the second case. But if the defenders of the IRB give that answer, they will have no principled reason to deny that sufficiently high credence is good enough for rational action in every case. That would make belief a theoretically unimportant phenomenon, which they do not want to accept.

With respect to (2): if Maria has the belief but cannot act on it with respect to the first game, this means that high practical stakes are compatible with belief. But then opponents of the IRB could offer the same reply in the Bank cases and the Food Allergy case: the subjects in question have the relevant beliefs, even though they cannot rationally act on them. To accept this reply, however, is to simply give up on the IRB.

With respect to (3): to say that Maria is oscillating between believing and not believing that Hasdrubal was Hannibal's brother is highly implausible. From a phenomenological point of view, she would not experience anything like this oscillation. Moreover, to accept that belief can come and go so quickly and easily is very hard to reconcile with the idea that stability is a central characteristic of belief.

With respect to (4): to say that Maria has the belief in question with respect to the second game but does not have the belief with respect to the first threatens to undermine belief's role as explanatory of rational action. If there is something common to her approach to both games (and to both Bank cases and to both the earlier and the later time in the Food Allergy case), then that common factor

will provide a superior explanation of her behavior. Having a particular credence is common to both games; it is sufficiently high for the second game, but it is not high enough for the first game. So, the same common factor—namely, credence—serves to explain the full range of her behavior.

E. Practical instability and practical irrationality

The IRB, if correct, would also allow for a kind of practical instability that would leave subjects vulnerable to a harmful form of practical irrationality (Reed 2012):

Dutch book case

Ted knows his financial adviser, Sarah, is extremely reliable. Sarah tells him that she has found a can't-miss investment opportunity: a company named BXD will double its value within six months. Sarah suggests investing a third of Ted's money in BXD. On the basis of her testimony, Ted believes that BXD will double in value and authorizes the investment. An hour later Sarah tells Ted that he can invest another third of his money in BXD. He still believes it will double in value within six months, so he approves the larger investment. An hour later Sarah again tells Ted that he can now invest another third of his money in BXD. Because this would be all of his money, the practical stakes are much higher—so high, in fact, that Ted no longer believes BXD will double in value. He asks Sarah to sell all of his shares, which she does. An hour later, when the stakes have become lower, Sarah calls to tell him that BXD will double in value within six months and invites him to invest a third of his money in it. Ted comes to believe this and makes the investment. Etc.

As described thus far, Ted is highly indecisive. What makes the case truly problematic is the fact that Sarah charges him a transaction fee every time he buys or sells shares of BXD. Given the way she can manipulate his practical stakes, Sarah can set up a Dutch book against Ted—no matter what happens with BXD, she can continue to extract money from him for as long as he regards her testimony as reliable. Because she has given him no evidence to think that she is unreliable, he has no reason to stop trusting her.

In reply, defenders of the IRB might say that no one would actually fall into the pattern of reasoning attributed to Ted. Eventually, a subject will recognize that there is something irrational about his behavior and do something to change it. Although that is true, what the subject would notice is that belief (if it behaves in the way the IRB takes it to) is a terrible guide to rational action. If belief can be practically unstable, it can lead to practically irrational behavior. For that reason, the subject should not rely upon his beliefs in deciding what to do. Because its link to explaining behavior is a central characteristic of belief, this is a compelling reason to abandon the IRB.

F. Concluding remarks

Accepting the IRB threatens to render belief theoretically uninteresting: it will not be capable of being used to explain behavior, and it will not be suited for use in rational deliberation. In its place, epistemologists would be better served by investigating the link between credence and rational behavior.

The best chance of preserving the theoretical importance of both credence and belief is to accept some form of the Lockean picture. Belief is *not* a matter of having an entirely settled view with respect to some proposition. Rather, it is to have a sufficiently strong disposition to act on the basis of that proposition and to engage in practical reasoning that makes use of that proposition.

The IRB adopts a relatively simple view of belief as a state that has only one slot, for a content. When the subject has the belief, the content may be used as a premise in practical reasoning. But a more adequate account would take belief to have two slots: one is for the belief's content, and the other is for the degree of belief or for the belief's epistemic profile (given assumption (ii) of the Lockean picture, these will go together). When the belief is held to a sufficiently strong degree, given the subject's practical purposes and stakes, the content of the belief can be straightforwardly used as a premise in practical reasoning. When the stakes are too high, though, the subject may prefer to use the content only in conditional reasoning or may refrain from using the belief at all.

Recognizing that belief has this second slot provides a better understanding of what is happening in the above cases. The subject continues to have the belief in question but comes to think that she is not sufficiently confident to act on the belief in her current practical context. For example, in the Dutch book case, Ted will recognize that his belief is not sufficiently strong to warrant investing all of his money in the company. But this is compatible with recognizing *at the same time* that his belief is sufficiently strong to warrant investing a smaller amount of his money. So, he will find a point of equilibrium, where his confidence is appropriate to a particular level of risk. He will not continue paying transaction fees to his financial adviser.

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